

Descartes on the unity of mind and body¹

Substance dualism holds that there are two fundamentally different types of substances. In traditional dualism, these two types of substances are physical substances ('bodies', physical objects) and mental substances (minds). Minds are distinct from bodies - they are not bodies, they are not parts of bodies, and because they are substances, they are not properties of bodies either. Cartesian dualism - the form of substance dualism defended by Descartes - also claims that minds do not depend on bodies in order to exist, i.e. minds can exist separated from any body. But if the mind and body are two distinct things, how are they related?

THE UNITY OF MIND AND BODY

In the *Meditations*, Descartes says that

Nature also teaches me, through these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I (a thinking thing) am not merely *in* my body as a sailor is in a ship. Rather, I am *closely joined to it - intermingled* with it, so to speak - so that it and I form a unit.

Because 'a unit' doesn't sound like 'two separate things', this claim and its implications are puzzling.

Reflecting on perception, sensation and feeling, we notice that we perceive that we have bodies, and that our bodies - this particular physical object that we have a close and unique relationship with - can be affected in many beneficial and harmful ways. This is brought to our attention through our bodily appetites, like hunger and thirst, through emotions, such as anger, sadness, love, and through sensations, like pain, pleasure, colours, sound and so on. All these experiences have their origins in the body.

However, this doesn't mean that mind and body are united as one and the same thing. Descartes carefully considers what the idea of the mind really involves. He argues that we can still conceive of ourselves existing complete without imagination or feeling, i.e. without those ways of thinking that are informed by the body.

Nevertheless, our experiences of our bodies through bodily sensations and emotions show that the connection between the mind and body is very close: 'These sensations are confused mental events that arise from the union - the intermingling, as it were - of the mind with the body'. If mind and body were not intermingled, then 'I wouldn't feel pain when the body was hurt but would

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2015) *Philosophy for A2* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 204-7

perceive the damage in an intellectual way, like a sailor seeing that his ship needs repairs’.

Furthermore, this union of mind and body is a union between the mind (the whole mind - it doesn't have parts) and the *whole* body. We feel pain in the various parts of our body. The mind does have a privileged link with the brain (a point of causal connection in the pineal gland), but the mind does not feel all pains to be in the brain! So Descartes argues that the mind is joined to all parts of the body - the point about the pineal gland is really just a physiological observation about causal pathways.

BEYOND DUALISM?

If you find this talk of ‘intermingling’ is confusing, you are in good company! Descartes himself found it difficult to understand how it is that the mind and body are distinct substances, yet form a ‘unit’. In a letter to Princess Elisabeth, 28 June 1643, he wrote

it seems to me that the human mind can't conceive the soul's distinctness from the body and its union with the body, conceiving them very clearly and both at the same time. That is because this requires one to conceive them as one single thing and at the same time as two things, which is contradictory.

He offers a suggestion as puzzling as it is illuminating: the idea of the union between mind and body is a third ‘basic notion’ alongside the ideas of mind and body. The idea of mind is known by the intellect, the idea of body is known by the intellect aided by the imagination, but the union of mind and body is known most clearly through the senses. It is the ordinary experience of life that gives us an understanding of this union, rather than philosophical reflection.

Given that the union of mind and body is a third ‘basic notion’, is it a notion of a *third* type of *substance*? Is there one new type of thing here, created from the unification of two distinct types of thing? Descartes says, in a letter to Regius, December 1641, that ‘since the body has all the dispositions necessary to receive the soul, and without which it is not strictly a human body, it could not come about without a miracle, that a soul should not be joined to it’. The comment that, unless united to a soul, a body is not a *human body*, suggests (but not conclusively) that the ‘human body’, body and soul together, can be considered as a substance in its own right, a substance created from the union of body and soul. However, philosophers don't agree on whether or not this is the implication we should draw from his union theory.

To the question, ‘What am I?’, Descartes' first answer is ‘a thing that thinks’, and he repeats in *Meditation VI* that we can imagine ourselves existing ‘whole’ without feeling or imagination. But is it any less true to say ‘I am a human being, a union of mind and body, an *embodied* mind’ than ‘I am a mind’? The mind takes on the body's experiences as its own, i.e. we refer our sensations, emotions, etc., to our *selves*. We ‘own’ these states just as much as we ‘own’ our thoughts. We experience ourselves as embodied minds, not just minds.

Descartes accepts all this, but his argument that minds can exist without bodies leads him to say that to lose the experiences that depend on the body would not be to lose our identities.