

'I am not in my body like a pilot in a ship.'

Really?

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The relevant question is that of Descartes' *intermingling thesis*, his conception of a strong union between the mind and the body. But we must first discuss the alternative context of *substance dualism*, the basic doctrine which Descartes attempts to build his interactionism (that is, that mind and body interact in both directions) on top of. This doctrine, then, is the claim that mind and body are distinct *substances*, where substances for Descartes are things that are capable of existing independently, notwithstanding the fact that the existence of anything depends on the will of god.

Descartes argument is present in the *Discourse* but it is much refined by Meditation 6, and bringing out this refinement will help us to understand Descartes' case. Descartes has shown in Meditation 2 that we cannot doubt our own existence as a thinking thing, and in Meditation 1 that we can doubt the existence of the material world. We can reinterpret this as a conception of the mind existing without the body (for if we have one, it will be part of the material world), and having such a conception means for Descartes that they do exist apart.

There is an obvious logical fallacy here, oft referred to as the *masked man fallacy*, which in its most common form has a masked man with an axe entering my room at night. It is clearly possible that this man is my father. If we argue fallaciously we might say that I know my father, I do not know the man that just walked into my room, and so this man cannot be my father. Descartes is doing a similar thing because what he has in essentiality is an argument from ignorance. He hasn't been able to show, it seems to us on a first reading, that the fact that we don't know has any bearing on how things are.

In shoehorning Descartes' argument into the form of this fallacy we miss its key element, and this is made much more prominent in Meditation 6. The key is that the mind is conceived as being distinct from the body clearly and distinctly, as shown by the clarity which Descartes achieves in Meditation 2. And Meditations 3 to 5 establish, provided Descartes' arguments for the existence of god work, that what we perceive clearly and distinctly is known to be true. What we perceive

clearly and distinctly in this case is that our essence is that of a thinking thing that is not-extended, and the essence of bodies are to be extended and non-thinking. These two pairs of properties are clearly incompatible and thus there is a real distinction between the two substances of mind and of body.

Hatfield¹ puts the improvement of the argument down to the progress the meditator has made when he moves from Meditation 2 to Meditation 6. In Meditation 2 Descartes has merely established that he has two very separate concepts of mind and body, clearly and distinctly perceived, but it takes him until Meditation 6 to establish that this clear and distinct perception is exactly what he needs to make the conceptual distinction material (so to speak!).

So the distinction between substances is that they are capable of existing apart. From our work in Meditations 3 through 5 we have that clear and distinct ideas are our way of accessing truth about matters such as whether or not two substances are capable of existing apart. Finally from Meditation 2 we have that we have a clear and distinct idea of the separateness of mind and body. Substance dualism is established.

We now consider Descartes' intermingling thesis of mind-body union and interaction:

Nature also teaches me by means of the sensations of pain, hunger, thirst etc., that I am not present to my body only in the way that a pilot is present to a ship, but that I am very closely joined to it and almost merged with it to such an extent that, together with it, I compose a single entity.²

Descartes primary argument for the position immediately follows this passage:

Otherwise, when my body is injured I ... would not feel pain as a result; instead I would perceive such an injury as a pilot perceives by sight if some part of the ship is damaged.³

When we assume that Descartes arguments so far are largely successful and the mind and the body are separate because one is mental substance and one is extended substance, it is natural to consider how the mind controls and directs the body about its business. Our initial thought might be of the mind sitting in a position of command or control over the body, metaphorically punching commands into a keyboard connected to the brain, which then gets has the rest of the body do its bidding. But our conscious experience of an embodied mind is very, very different to this, and Descartes has hit upon the difference here. If the body sustained

¹G. HATFIELD, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Descartes* (London: Routledge 2003), pp. 247–8

²R. DESCARTES, *Meditations and Other Metaphysical Writings* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 64

³*Ibid.*

a leg injury then this might pop up on a screen in the mind's control room, in the way that a ship's captain sees the ship is damaged. But our actual experience is that the pain is *in us*, not merely *observed by us*. So Descartes takes the embodied experience as evidence for a strong union between the mind and the body; a relation much more intimate than that of a pilot to his ship.

Correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elizabeth⁴ shows up just how difficult Descartes finds it to make the intellectual assent he grants to the intermingling thesis anything like as convincing as that he grants to the likes of the *cogito*. It seems impossible to conceive of mental substance, as Descartes has discussed it, as being capable of moving physical substance. Physical substance moves when it is pushed or channelled or upset from equilibrium in some other way and yet the non-extended mind doesn't seem to have any comprehensible way of doing this. Elizabeth feels that the weakness of Descartes' position is shown up by just how much easier it is to ascribe extension to the mental and place it in the physical realm than it is to explain how the mental can move the physical.

This is probably the biggest objection substance dualism faces. We see this in the desperation shown by philosophers in getting round it, expressed in bizarre doctrines such as occasionalism and parallelism.

Hatfield concludes that Descartes response shows that he has conceded that he is never going to get anything like the *cogito* on this question of mind-body unity. This is shown by Descartes claim that the senses learn of the union through the experience of being embodied; that the senses *know* of the union, which taken strictly is contradictory to many of the statements of Meditation 2. With substance dualism established, though, it is not so problematic for Descartes to argue in this way. He has established that mind and body are separate, but since he knows that the ideas he has of the external world cannot originate from his limited, finite self from arguments in Meditations 3 and 6, the senses tell him that there is a strong union between his mind and body because he experiences something that could not be described as anything other than such a union. Similar thoughts establish that the mind must be capable of influencing the body as well.

But we may respond to Descartes, as Elizabeth does, by again noting that the possibility that the mind is part of the extended world and operates in similar ways has not gone away. Descartes might have shown in Meditation 2 that thought does not require an extended substance but he doesn't seem to have shown that thought cannot go on within an extended substance. So the whole argument relies upon the Descartes' substance dualism in the strongest sense: we need that mind and body are so very fundamentally different in terms of being extended and doing thinking.

I shall now present a strong argument from Williams⁵ that convincingly shows

⁴Quoted in G. HATFIELD, *op. cit.*, pp. 266–9

⁵B.A.O. WILLIAMS, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005), pp. 274–8

that this isn't something we can have. Williams introduces the term *psychokinesis* to mean the mental causing the physical to move. Descartes holds that the mind influences the body and the body influences the mind through the pineal gland, a part of the brain, and Williams assumes that his argument will work equally well for any similar theory, perhaps more in tune with modern Science than Descartes.

Williams asks us to consider what our will is in fact capable of doing. We may will that our arm moves in the most straightforward of cases, and then Williams also notes that we are able to cause another element in the causal chain to move by moving our arm: by moving our arm we can make the muscles in our arm move about. *[whoops. I'm not sure I actually understand this argument as I'm not sure where to go from here. I hope that I have shown how I think it fits in with everything else, though]*

Princess Elizabeth's correspondence argues that in order for Descartes' intermingling thesis concerning our lack of similarity to a pilot and his ship to work, Descartes needs the strongest form of his substance dualism: mind and body need to be so different that neither can have the most essential features of the other. But by considering Descartes' thesis very directly, Williams shows that substance dualism doesn't work, and as a consequence it would seem that Descartes account of dualism needs fundamental revision if it is to make sense as a metaphysical theory ■