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Descartes: Mind and Body

Throughout this course, we covered Classical Philosophy, where pre-Socratic philosophers searched for an origin in the most simplistic way. Though this became troublesome, philosophy advanced to the next stage: Hellenistic Philosophy. At this point, we see that instead of the origin as the center of thought, human nature and the way we as humans view this world became the topic of discussion, more specifically exploring the ideas of such classical thought but applying it towards religion, like Augustine. The conundrum faced in this period geared towards evil: what is evil, the origin of evil, the problem of evil, and so forth. From these ethical viewpoints, new views emerged, including existentialism, which continues to play a vital role in contemporary philosophy. From this, philosophy transitioned into the current age of philosophy known as Modern Philosophy; this period covers the last 500 years, including now. In this period, the crème of the crop historical events that played a vital role in the progression of Modern Philosophy were the Renaissance, Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution, in chronological order of course. What these events share is where Rene Descartes gets into the picture: question of authority. Descartes did not agree with Aristotle, especially in his scientific views. Moreover, he thought Aristotle’s method was incredibly flawed. In his book *Meditations*, Descartes explores what it takes to be certain, more specifically, discussing mind and matter. In my paper, I will present Descartes’ argument to why he believes mind and matter are two separate entities. Then I will share my thoughts in regards to whether I support or disagree to his argument.

In order to understand where Descartes is coming from, we have to know how exactly he developed these thoughts. As stated earlier, Descartes’ main goal was to search for certainty, meaning the ongoing quest of doubting all beliefs in order to acquire knowledge. Descartes was adamant about humans being in a constant dream, that is to say, all perceptions are false. This conjecture was brought up due to his belief that an “evil demon” deceives us. From the method of doubt, we advance to Meditation 2 where the argument of mind and matter originates. Let’s begin with his actual argument:

1. It is possible that all knowledge of external objects, including my body, could be false as the result of the actions of an evil demon. It is now, however, possible that I could be deceived about my existence or my nature as a thinking thing.
2. Even Corporeal objects, such as my body, are known much more distinctively through the mind than through the body.

∴ 3. Therefore, our mind is more clearly and distinctly known to us than our body.

Though this argument seems very bias in terms of validity, Descartes supported the second premise by providing its very own argument, using wax as an example. As the wax melts, we change the way we perceive the wax, in respect to its shape, size, etc. However, the wax remains the same piece of wax as started before. Thus, it is appropriate to say through our mind and faculty of judgment, not through our senses or imagination. This argument became a hallmark to philosophy due to the renowned quote: “Cogito Ergo Sum,” meaning I think, therefore I am.

Now that the argument has been developed, we advance to Meditation 6, where Descartes attempts to identify the essential properties of mind and body to show that they must be distinct from one another. There are several arguments in this regard, so I will separate the overall argument in sections. Let’s begin with the distinction of mind and body:

1. If I clearly and distinctly understood one thing as distinct from another it is so.
2. I am certain that I exist as a thinking being, while I am not certain of the existence of my body.

∴ 3. I am a thinking thing and nothing else. My mind is distinct from my body.

Though it may seem like Descartes has already developed such a notion in Meditation 2, he goes more in depth with his argument. Descartes believes there are two substances: material and mental. For material substances, the body is fully extended in space, but for mental substances mind is thought. From that, Descartes shows that the body and mind are not equal. He believes there are two qualities: primary and secondary, where primary qualities are measureable and quantifiable (size, shape, speed, location, etc.). For secondary qualities consists of colors, sounds, taste, smells, the traits associated with our senses.

For me personally, I do not believe his overall argument was persuasive, that the body and mind are two separate, distinct entities. Though Descartes is associated with dualism, that is, there are two kinds of things, not reducible to each other, I feel Descartes went too radical on this overall conjecture. I feel when associating with dualism, in addition to rational thought, mind and matter have to work together, that there not entirely distinct from one another. Furthermore, although the wax argument seems logically valid, I would have used something that didn’t encounter a physical change, but something that changed its chemical properties. Innately, I reject most of what Descartes believes. My Aristotelian self cannot grasp where exactly he is coming from.