

Lecture Five: Mind and Body

1. Recap

Descartes has broken everything down: every piece of common sense that he took for granted. He doubts mathematics, the existence of the external world, and even the existence of his own body. He wants to get back to a new, firm foundation for knowledge of all of these things. How does he do this?

Last time we saw that he thinks he can be sure of one thing: that he exists. He is a thinking substance. But what is this thing that exists? And what is its relationship to Descartes' body?

2. What Does Descartes Know About Himself?

Using the cogito argument (I think, therefore I am), Descartes has proven to his own satisfaction that he exists. But what is this thing? A *res cogitans* – a thinking substance. The line of thought: he knows he is a thing that thinks – he uses thinking to prove his existence. Everything else that he thought he knew about himself is doubtful. So thinking must be his essence.

What is an essence? Let's start with the idea of an essential property. An **essential property** is a property that a thing has which it could not exist without. E.g. an essential property of a vixen is being a fox. A member of the species *homo sapiens* is essentially an animal. An **essence** is the bundle of something's essential properties. Descartes claims his essence is thought.

Problem: Descartes does not think that he is pure thought. Rather, he is **a thinking substance**. He is an entity that thinks – not the thoughts that are thought. We then need to know what a **substance** is: a substance is 'a thing which so exists that it needs no other in order to exist'. Substances are **independent** things.

This is sometimes called a Spinozist conception of substance. But it's probably not right: lots of things depend on others for their existence – you depend on your parents in order to exist, but aren't you an independent substance? Descartes has a much better **implicit** definition: a substance is a thing which persists through time and change, and can be counted and individuated.

However, what about **sleep**: Do we cease to exist, since consciousness ceases? If the essence of Descartes is to be the thing that thinks, this seems to be the case.

3. The Nature of Physical Bodies

What about everything else in the world, aside from thinking things? What are they like?

The **essential properties** of a physical body: having a shape, a location, and occupying space in such a way as to exclude other objects. Importantly matter does not *think*. Bodies are entirely characterised by extension. This is a conclusion we reach not through observation, but by thought (see the **wax example**).

Descartes' general picture is **dualist**: we have two different types of substance - **immaterial thinking things**, and **material extended things**. It's also **anti-Aristotelian**: material things don't have real qualities like taste, smell, colour etc. They are just extended bits of stuff. They can be understood entirely in terms of physical magnitudes.

4. The Conceivability Argument

Why think that minds and bodies are utterly distinct in this way? Why believe **dualism**? He wants to establish that minds and bodies are different types of stuff. Think back to the subtitle of the meditations: "In which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are demonstrated" Physical bodies die, come apart. Our physical bodies perish. So if we are physical things then it's not looking too good for the immortality of the soul.

He argues using what's come to be known as a conceivability argument. Updated versions of this argument are still used today. People like Chalmers, Kripke, inspired by Descartes:

1. I can conceive of my body not existing.
2. I cannot conceive of me not existing.
3. Therefore I am not my body, I am distinct from it.

This relies on Leibniz's law. Things are identical only when they have all their properties in common. Descartes notes that his body has a property (being doubtful) that his mind does not.

However, Leibniz's law is not universally true: it fails in **intensional contexts** (where we are dealing with what people believe, know or doubt).

5. The Interaction Problem

Mind is pure thought, matter is pure extension: how do they interact with each other (Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia)? **Descartes answer**: The pineal gland is the seat of the interaction. 'Animal spirits' surround the gland and interact with the nerves and muscles to produce bodily movement. This does not really help explain the interaction.

Descartes: Mind is not related to his body like the captain of a ship but 'closely joined', 'intermingled' with it, or 'united'. True, but unhelpful.

In addition we have a very good reason to suspect that the physical and non-physical can't interact: we have inductive evidence for the **causal closure of the physical world** – any physical event, if it has a cause, has a complete physical cause.

Descartes wants to separate mind and body in order to 1) account for how we seem to perceive real qualities like colour and smell in a materialistic world (the **anti-Aristotelianism**) and 2) to make space for the hope of **immortality**. But if you separate these two realms too sharply then you will get something like the interaction problem.

Again though, we see Descartes attempting to construct a scientifically respectable theory of the world using the resources available to him at the time.