DESCARTES’ ARGUMENTS FOR THE REAL DISTINCTION OF MIND AND BODY

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Illustration: Tom Andre Håland
The perhaps most central feature of the Cartesian worldview is Descartes’ dualism – the thesis that there are two and only two really distinct substances, minds conceived as thinking substance and bodies conceived as extended substance, which jointly make up all that there is in the created world. The image is a familiar one, but the exact structure and contents of the arguments Descartes purportedly advances in favour of this thesis remain subject to differing and contested interpretations and so too, consequently, does scholarly and popular evaluations as to their validity and soundness. A proper appreciation of these arguments will, among other things, tell us to what extent Descartes’ dualism rests on his proofs of the existence of a benevolent God, and, on the basis of their argumentative validity and the plausibility of their premises, provide good grounds for assessing not only his arguments in light of contemporary discoveries, but also the extent to which Descartes’ dualism was well-founded in his own day.

Mind and body are really distinct, Descartes argues, firstly because they can be clearly and distinctly apprehended apart from one another in a complete manner, secondly because they have contradictory properties, and thirdly because certain empirical features of human psychology and the nature of human and animal brains can best be explained by this postulation. I shall refer to these as the ”Separability” argument, the ”Divisibility” argument and the empirical argument respectively, and consider their merits in turn. We should note that the first of these is generally the most emphasized and that it, if logically valid, rests entirely on Descartes’ purported proofs for God’s existence. I shall argue that while the second is wholly unconvincing and the first not unproblematic, the third argument – all too often overlooked – provides sufficient additional weight such that Descartes on the whole does have a good case for the real distinction between mind and body, given the state of the psychological and biological sciences of his day.

**The Separability Argument**

Descartes’ two first arguments for the real distinction of mind and body rely on his previously argued thesis of the existence of a benevolent God who guarantees the truth of clear and distinct (henceforth CD) apprehension. By ”clear” Descartes means that which is ”present and apparent to an attentive eye” and by distinct he means ”that which is so precise and different from all other objects that it contains within itself nothing but what is clear” (Descartes 1997d:1.45). Briefly put, he seems to be saying that something is clear iff one is able to instantaneously and with little cognitive work recognize something with no uncertainty as to its nature and characteristics, and distinct iff it is clearly distinguishable from all other things in such a way that nothing unclear is contained. An object can be clear without being distinct, but not vice versa. For example our apprehension of the concept ”heap” may be perfectly clear with regard to a central range of exemplars; however, it is definitely not distinct because by its nature as a vague concept its remaining range of exemplars remains unclear.

The first argument that mind and body are really distinct – the ”Separability” argument – first appears in the Sixth Meditation. In addition to the knowledge of his mind and essence established in the Second Meditation, he now has a proof of God to ground CD apprehension, a more developed conception of body as extended substance, and further avails himself of a notion of completeness which I shall discuss below. These three points distinguish it from a very similar argument employed in the Discourse on Method. The separability argument can be summarized as follows:

1. If A can exist apart from B, and vice versa, A is really distinct from B, and B from A.
2. Whatever I CD apprehend to be possible can be brought about by God.
3. If I CD understand the possibility that A exists apart from B, and B apart from A, then God can bring about that A and B do actually exist in separation.
4. If God can bring it about that A and B exists in separation then A and B can exist apart and, by 1), they are really distinct.
5. I can CD understand the possibility of A and B existing apart from each other, iff: there are attributes a and b, such that I CD understand that a belongs to the nature of A, and that b belongs to the nature of B (and that a≠b), and I CD understand that something can be a complete thing if it has a even if it lacks b, or has b and lacks a.
6. Where A is myself (or my mind) and B is a body, thought and extension satisfy the conditions on a and b respectively.
7. Hence, I am really distinct from body and can exist without it.5

Importantly, Descartes only holds his reasoning in 5) to be acceptable for ”complete” things.4 He defines a ”complete thing” as ”a substance endowed with those forms or
attributes which suffice to let me recognize that it is a substance.” (Descartes 1997b:234). He also distinguishes between three kinds of distinctions: real, modal and formal. Real distinction takes place only where two substances are distinguished (e.g. between mind and body), modal distinctions are distinctions either between modes and a substance or between two modes (e.g. between body and shape, or shape and motion), and formal distinctions are distinctions made by reason between a substance and one of its attributes “without which it is not possible that we should have distinct knowledge of it” (e.g. between body and extension) (Descartes 1997d:I.60-2).

Whereas we might distinguish, say, figure from motion, we can do so only by abstraction, and the distinction is modal rather than real. In reality figure and motion are both "modes" which "cannot be conceived... apart from some substance to which they are attached [a body], and [they] consequently cannot exist without it.” (Descartes 1997b:181). As such, they cannot be apprehended apart in a complete manner. Put in a different way, properties such as shape, motion etc. are really modes of a principal attribute, extension, which comprises the essence of a kind of substance, body, apart from which they cannot exist (and likewise for beliefs, thinking and mind). Mind and body by contrast, can be CD apprehended completely and with no use of abstraction, hence they are really distinct, not just modally or formally.

In short, assuming the proof of a benevolent God to guarantee the truth of CD perception, an adequate notion of modes, principal attributes/essences and their accompanying substances in conjunction with satisfactory notions of thinking and extended substance, as well as of completeness, the above-reconstructed separability argument is supposed to give us conclusive grounds to believe that mind and body are two really distinct substances and can (at least by the power of God) exist apart from one another. We could follow the route of challenging this argument’s soundness by undermining the premise of his proof of God. However, I believe it would be both more fruitful and interesting to consider old and new arguments aiming to challenge its validity instead (largely because metaphysical arguments purporting to prove the existence of God are by now thoroughly – and rightfully – discredited).

To begin, Caterus’ objects that since Descartes says that "simple natures" like figure or motion can be CD conceived in themselves they should, by the above line of argumentation, count as distinct substances. Descartes’ completeness-proviso answers this objection because such "simple natures" like figure and motion cannot be conceived apart in a complete fashion – that is, they cannot be properly conceived in the absence of other modes of (in this example) extended substance and thus in the absence of extension and extended substance itself, except by the use of abstraction. For example, one cannot think of motion without abstraction without there being something moving, and this something must have a determinate shape, size, and so on. Consequently such "simple natures" cannot be really distinct from one another, only formally or modally.

We should note that "complete" in Descartes’ sense does not mean exhaustive. Based on this, Arnauld’s objects that since we don’t have exhaustive knowledge of the mind, it might be the case that body is a necessary condition for mind without our knowing that it is, and that mind is related to body like a species to its genus. In other words where body is x and mind is y, even though we have correct CD apprehension of y which does not involve x, it may nevertheless be the case that x is a necessary condition for y, and therefore that minded bodies are just a subset of bodies in general. Such is the case according to materialist approaches to the mind, variants of which are dominant today.

However, if we accept Descartes’ above line of argumentation that thought can be CD apprehended as a complete thing, then it follows that it must be a substance. As substance is defined as "that which can exist by itself, without the aid of any other substance” (Descartes 1997b:237), there can, logically, be no "hidden" or "unapprehended" dependence of thought on anything else. Had there in fact been any such dependence it would preclude CD apprehension of mind as a complete thing. Now it is perfectly acceptable to question the truth of the premise that we have a complete CD apprehension of mind/thinking substance. However, in order to do so we require some further argument as to why we should in fact doubt this premise. Arnauld fails to provide such an argument, most likely because he believes his argument to be sufficient to challenge the internal coherence of Descartes’ line of argumentation. In this however, he is wrong, and in lieu of further argumentation to undercut the premise of complete CD apprehension of mind/thinking substance, his objection fails to be forceful.

Finally, Rozemon (Rozemond 1998:33) argues that the above reading does not entail that thinking cannot require extension because the argument as reconstructed above (in 1 through 7) simply fails to entail such a conclusion. As a result of this, it is at least possible that thinking requires extension and minds bodies, and thus Descartes’...
separability argument for the real distinction of mind and body at least fails to be logically valid because it would not have established that the two kinds of substance are necessarily able to exist apart from one another. We can see that this argument falters once Descartes’ completeness-proviso is included in the argument above. The inclusion of this proviso ensures that as our apprehension of mind and body as thinking and extended things is complete in Descartes’ technical sense, we know they are sufficient for qualifying as substances, and as such are necessarily capable of independent existence.

One last thing worth mentioning is that by strengthening the internal coherence of the separability argument, more weight is put on the premises – in particular the attempted proof of the existence of a benevolent God – and it is not at all clear that they can in fact bear this weight.

**The Divisibility Argument**

Moving on, the second argument, the ”Divisibility” argument, appears later in the Sixth Meditation and can best be reconstructed as follows:

1. If two properties are contradictory, they cannot both inhere in the same thing.
2. The properties of divisibility and indivisibility, x and y respectively, are contradictory.
3. Properties x and y are features of extended things (bodies) and thinking things (minds) respectively, by their (minds’ and bodies’) very natures. As such x and y are part of minds’ and bodies’ respective essences.
4. A property is essential iff without it the bearer would cease to exist.
5. By 3 and 4 every body is necessarily divisible and every mind necessarily indivisible.
6. Therefore mind and body can never be the same thing.
7. Hence mind and body must be really distinct.  

We might doubt premise 1) and ask why some sort of limited parallelism should not be possible. Nevertheless that premise does have a great deal of intuitive plausibility. As such, and following our previously outlined route of focusing on internal rather than external issues with Descartes’ argumentation, I will not pursue this further.

Descartes says that this argument establishes that “the mind or soul of man is entirely different from the body” and that had it not already been established by the separability argument, it [the divisibility argument] would be “sufficient to teach me” this (Descartes 1997b:187). It lacks any mention or use of his notion of substance, limiting his thesis to minds and bodies being different things – leaving it unclear what exactly he means by ”thing” in this context. This has the effect of weakening the force of the argument because it cannot reject the possibility of Arnauldian ”hidden” dependencies whereby body remains an unapprehended necessary condition for the existence of mind.

If, on the other hand, we replace ”thing” with ”substance” in the relevant premises above, and add a premise that minds and bodies are substances, the argument becomes strong enough to avoid this objection. But this would also make it viciously circular, because it would follow from the premise that minds and bodies were both substances that they were indeed really distinct. If however, ”substance” is substituted for ”thing” where relevant but the premise stating that minds and bodies were both substances were not included, the argument would not be valid because it would remain perfectly possible that neither minds nor bodies (or indeed anything) qualify as substances. This argument then is far weaker than the separability argument, and hardly able to convince us as the separability argument does, that mind and body are really distinct, as Descartes holds that it should (Descartes 1997b:187).

The factual premise 3), which Descartes leaves wholly unsupported and which does not seem intuitively certain, is also problematic. It seems perfectly possible that I should be able to exist as myself yet for example bereft of my capacity to understand e.g. grammar or language. The problem is not whether or not I can exist without particular thoughts or modes, or without any kind of thinking at all. The problem is whether or not the mind can exist lacking some entire capacity while retaining others, and this does seem intuitively plausible. It seems clear that Descartes identifies divisibility with *spatial* divisibility, but this is not his argument, nor is it what his argument needs in order to get the conclusion he desires.

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**A Problem for Both of the Above Arguments**

Crucially, Descartes has given us little reason to accept a key premise of both his arguments, namely that our conception of mind is in fact complete. *God only guarantees...*
the truth of CD apprehension, not its completeness. Nor does God guarantee that any apprehension that seems complete really is complete. Mind may be unrelated to any "modes" of extension CD apprehended, and given our limited knowledge of mind it may seem to us that it qualifies as a substance – i.e. as something capable of independent existence. But it seems at least plausible that further empirical study might provide us with good reasons to believe that mind is somehow dependent on a body (as many now believe it is). Even for the limited Cartesian conception of mind as the pure intellect examples of drastic personality changes or the loss of linguistic competence only, as the result of brain trauma, would seem quite capable of challenging the conception of their real distinctness. It is not just a manner of losing individual thoughts or the potential to realize certain capacities – this Descartes could easily reply to – it is the matter of losing an entire aspect or component of the mind yet retaining all others as the result of something happening to the body (brain).

Supposing this to be the case, the very fact that that additional information can challenge our beliefs about the essence, independence and hence substantiality of mind indicates that the apprehension Descartes refers to is not in fact complete in the sense he requires it to be because it alone is not sufficient to let us "recognize that it is a substance" (Descartes 1997b:234). If we can no longer be certain that mind is an independent substance, the divisibility argument falls apart immediately, and the separability argument becomes vulnerable again to both Caterus’ and Arnauld’s objections.

The Empirical Argument(s)
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Third, in his psychological works – most prominently the Passions of the Soul – Descartes develops a complex psychological typology on the basis of his dualist metaphysics which is considerable in scope and explanatory efficacy. The fact that the dualist hypothesis provides (at least part of) the basis for a fruitful line of empirical research provides further support.9

Unlike the two preceding arguments, the empirical case Descartes offers in support of dualism is not intended as a knock-down argument for dualism or against other options (such as different forms of monism). Rather, it attempts to give us good reasons to believe that dualism is in fact the most plausible option available in light of its explanatory powers.

Conclusion
In sum, Descartes has three main justifications for dualism: the separability argument, the divisibility argument, and the empirical argument. Whereas the second has been shown to be structurally fallacious, and the first to be stronger than commonly believed but nevertheless not wholly satisfactory, the third has been shown to be empirically convincing given the state of the psychological and biological sciences of his day. Thus, while the separability and divisibility arguments aim and fail at deductive validity (where the premises are true, the conclusion must, logically, also be true)10, the empirical argument aims and succeeds at inductive soundness (the premises are true and provide inductive support for the conclusion), and is consequently the only one of the three which was forceful and should have been convincing at the time. We thus
find that whereas Descartes believed his most important
grounds for dualism were the foundationalist ones he de-
rives in the Meditations from inter alia his purported proof
of the existence of God, it was in fact the case that his
strongest arguments for this thesis were instead the na-
turalistic empirical ones he presented elsewhere. The con-
vincing part of the Cartesian case for dualism was, thus,
entirely secular and naturalistic in origin.

Unfortunately for dualism today, much of this support
is contingent on historical context and no longer obtains.
For example there is no progressive or competitive rese-
arch program in psychology that has or needs dualism as a
central component. Furthermore, as the cognitive sciences
advance, mental capacities are increasingly explained in
terms of bodily (brain) processes.

What is worth noting, however, is that the first two
components of Descartes’ empirical case for dualism still
hold, and whereas they do not give us good reasons to
prefer a dualist over a monist psychology, they do point
to important features of human vis-a-vis animal psycho-
logy which remain to be adequately explained. The dif-
fences between human and animal cognitive powers for
example – including our powers of grammatical language
and mind reading – are still the subject of considerable
research and debate, and a complete and fully satisfactory
account remains outstanding. Thus, whereas many of his
theses and conclusions do not, the key psychological pro-
blematics that Descartes worked so hard on, remain with
us to this day.

NOTES
1 Actually three, as God is a kind of substance all to Himself. In fact since all substances are created and only God is sufficient in and for himself,
Descartes at one point concedes that, strictly speaking, God is the only real substance, as he is a necessary condition for all created substances (i.e. all
minds and bodies). This point would later be developed by others, inter alia and most notably by Spinoza.
2 If and only if
3 I here lean considerably on Wilson (Wilson 1978:197-8) and Descartes (Descartes 1997b:181-2)
4 Williams’ reconstruction (Williams 1978:116-7) misses this crucial point.
5 Caterus was a French theologian and logician who was invited by Descartes to offer queries and counter-arguments to the Meditations. These were
then printed, together with Descartes’ replies, in the «Objections and Replies».
6 Arnauld was a Dutch theologian who was likewise invited to offer queries and objections in the «Objections and Replies».
7 Rozemond is a contemporary historian of philosophy who has written extensively on Descartes’ dualism.
8 Here I rely primarily on Descartes (Descartes 1997b:187)
9 This section relies primarily on Descartes (Descartes 1997c) and Chomsky (Chomsky 2009)
10 Their soundness additionally relies on the truth of their premises, including the proof of the existence of a benevolent God, which are not examined
here.
11 To lend weight to a dualist over e.g. a monist metaphysics, these arguments must be accompanied by a genuinely progressive and competitive research
program which on some level can be shown to fill the explanatory gap they pinpoint. In the absence of such company they are reduced to no more than
«God of the gaps»-type arguments where an ad hoc and otherwise unfounded and unrelated postulation is introduced for a range of explananda where a
given research program has yet to provide a satisfactory explanation.
12 «Mind reading» is a technical term referring to humans’ (and some other animals’) abilities at inferring mental states from behavior.

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