

# A Look at Cartesian Dualism

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Dualism is the claim that there are two, essentially different kinds or types of objects or categories in the world. In the setting of a dualistic theory all objects that exist, or can exist, in the ontology of the world, fall under one of the two categories. The two forms of reality are said to be essential different because they are mutually exclusive and are often defined by opposite characteristics. Although these two states of existence are fundamentally different in most ways, both are needed to give a complete description of reality. Perhaps the best and most apparent example of dualism is that which Descartes is led to through his metaphysical investigations in his *Meditations*. One of the conclusions reached by Descartes in the *Meditations* is that all entities that exist in the world fall under one of two categories, minds or bodies. Minds, according to Descartes are intangible, un-extended, and metaphysically prior to bodies. They are thinking things, entities capable of affirming, denying, judging, willing, unwilling, and having sense perceptions. Bodies on the other hand are tangible physical objects in the external world, have extension, and in some sense are seen to be reliant on minds for their existence. In Descartes' philosophy we can see the characteristic signature of dualism. The entire universe is composed only of things falling into one of two categories. Everything is either a mind or a body, with no room for overlap. The essential features defining the two categories of substances are opposites, extension and tangibility of bodies on the one hand and non-extension and intangibility of minds on the other. And lastly, we find the need for both types of reality. The world cannot be cast into a theory containing only bodies or minds, but rather must be seen as a conglomerate of the two.

Simply having two different aspects of reality does not pose a problem in itself. Modern science holds that everything in the universe is made of two fundamentally different particles, fermions and bosons. A problem may arise however, when considering if and how these different states of existence can interact. For modern science this is not a problem because we know that these particles interact via the fundamental forces. For Descartes' conception of the world, on the other hand, there is a big problem. Known to philosophers as the mind-body problem, Descartes' theory's shortcoming is its inability to explain how things belonging in the mind category can interact with things in the body category. The problem would simply disappear if the two substances did not interact. If mind and body did not communicate with one another it would be meaningless and ridiculous to ask how they were able to do so. However, for Descartes, mind and body are intimately connected and intertwined through their interactions. One example is motion. Descartes holds that all bodies are incapable of motion and that the only way that things in nature can come about moving is through the influence of a particular mind acting as an agent. Another example of mind-body interaction is in material objects relation to God. In the Cartesian philosophy all physical bodies gain their reality through the existence of an omniscient God, yet at the same time this god is seen as the ultimate thinking thing, and hence a mind. Human beings are in fact another example of this combination of mind and body. We are obviously thinking things and nevertheless we would tend to think that we take up space and are composed of tangible material. Descartes is left with the problem of explaining and describing the mechanism behind, how these completely distinct substances can interact in these basic ways. How are the motions of objects, evident in every day life, possible conceptually? How can a mind be seen to somehow support the very existence of all material bodies? How is it that the thinking part of a human "tells" the body where and how to move? And how is it that events interacting physically with the body can tell the mind about what is going on? To get a better handle on this issue of mind-body interaction it will be beneficial to see how and where dualism enters into Descartes' description of the world.

This dualism, which is found first and most prominently in his first and second *Meditations*, is a direct result of the radical doubt employed by Descartes. Descartes uses this radical doubt to call everything into question with the hope of determining what, if anything, in the sciences can be trusted. He begins by eliminating the reliability of all sensory perception. The claim is that in the past his senses have deceived him, and something that has been known to be a deceiver even once should never be trusted. Judgments concerning objects which are small or distant are often unreliable. Towers that are circular appear rectangle from a distance, and smaller objects in the foreground often appear larger than bigger

objects in the background. Going beyond perceptions of the distant or small, Descartes casts everyday sense perception into doubt by considering madmen or the state of someone who is dreaming. Descartes uses the example of someone sitting by a fire, wearing a sweater and holding a piece of paper in their hand. To this person they feel the warmth of the fire and the corporal body of the paper. They can judge that they are wearing a sweater and have a conscious control over their body. However someone having these perceptions may really be dreaming or in a state of mental illness, they think they have a realistic sense of their presence and activities in the room, wherein actuality they are asleep in bed or confined to a psychiatric hospital. Through this argument, Descartes finds that even the common sense perceptions of everyday life can, on occasion, be deceiving and must therefore never be trusted. Descartes' next attack on all that he holds to be true and to exist in the world is on what he calls "the real colours from which we form all the images of things . . . that occur in thought". By this he means all the elemental, simple, and most general things that occur in mathematics and geometry. Truths about these sorts of entities survive the collapse of the knowledge based on sense perception simply because these truths do not stem from sense perception. The fact that two and three are five has nothing to do with whether you are sleeping or awake. To call assertions of these kinds into question Descartes must go beyond what he has done previously and hypothesize the existence of a being that is able to constantly deceive him into thinking the claims of mathematics and geometry apply when in reality they do not. Under these extreme conditions it must be admitted that even judgments of this third sort must be deemed as unreliable.

After going to such lengths to question all that can be questioned, Descartes surveys what is left as certain and unquestionable. It is at this point in which he is able to argue for his existence and conclude that his being, as a thinking thing, is beyond question. Descartes begins by explaining that he thinks that he exists. Now, one of two things may be the case. Either Descartes is correct in thinking that he exists, in which case he exists, or he is being deceived into thinking that he exists, in which case he still exists because the deceiver must be deceiving him, and therefore he must exist. Descartes has now proven that he exists, but it is not the Descartes sitting by the fire finishing the second meditation, it is a much narrower conception of himself. Descartes can only hold that he exists insofar as he is a thinking thing. His argument can say nothing about any properties that might be ascribed to the nature of his body or even its existence. All that can be concluded is that a mind, a thinking thing, exists.

Now that his proof of the existence of the thinking thing has been established we are in a position to see how and where dualism enters into Descartes' philosophy. Employing the radical doubt used before and examining the nature of the thinking thing, Descartes is able to say that his mind is not the same as a body. Descartes is able to doubt the fact that his body exists. Although he may believe he has a body and that he has control over it, we have seen earlier that he may merely be asleep or temporally insane. In light of the critical doubt, there is nothing that guarantees Descartes the existence of his body. On the other hand, he has already proven the existence of his mind, in midst of the most far-reaching doubt. Descartes is thus left in a position in which he can conceive of himself as existing without a body, but not without a mind. The conclusion to be drawn is that Descartes, as the thinking thing or mind, is not the same as a body, and therefore the mind and body must actually be different entities.

Despite the fact that we have still not addressed the mind-body interaction problem in explicating the appearance of dualism in the Meditations, we are now able to see why this dualism might be necessary. The initial source of the separation between mind and body, that Descartes is led to conclude, stems from his appeal to the radical doubt. His strict requirement that all knowledge be in the firmest of groundings is what leads Descartes to doubt the existence of material bodies and, as we have seen, his own body. As soon as radical doubt is exercised, objects in the world become polarized into one of the two categories, with dualism appearing as an unavoidable side effect. But if dualism leads to problems, and radical doubt leads to dualism, why does Descartes invoke this seemingly impractical and unrealistic level of doubt? Descartes explains that his reason for calling everything that he has previously believed to be true is to put science, geometry for Descartes, onto a stronger footing. For Descartes finding and setting these stronger foundations of science delivers us from the deceptions of our senses and allows us a more direct access to truth. This act of legitimating geometry and all other bodies of knowledge, which are based on it, amounts to doing metaphysics, and is seen by Descartes as being fundamental to all of mathematics and the empirical investigations of the sciences. It is through this distinction, and at this level that Cartesian dualism has its roots. Because he holds that metaphysics must be prior to geometry and supply its foundations, Descartes applies radical doubt, which causes dualism to appear in his description of the world.

Nowhere in the Meditations does Descartes address the problems created by dualism. Although he holds that direct interaction between the two essential elements exists, motion, human beings ect. depend on it, Descartes fails to provide a mechanism for this to take place. Faulting Descartes based on this fact alone seems premature and a bit unwarranted. As we have seen dualism is a necessary outcome of his philosophy, not an input Descartes has read in. Instead of taking the point of view that dualism is something deep and underlying found when doing Cartesian philosophy that leads to problems, perhaps we should consider the fact that there are deep and underlying problems found when doing Cartesian philosophy that leads to dualism. Problems addressing the boundary or possible overlap of metaphysics and physics might possibly be the source of Descartes' dualism. In the end we find that although dualism plays an essential role in Descartes' philosophy and appears to be necessary in an endeavor of this nature, it cannot be certain whether dualism is the cause of fundamental problems or if fundamental problems are the cause of dualism.