

# Doubting the Doubt

## An Analysis of the Internal Tensions of Cartesian Substance Dualism

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### Ryle's Attack on Cartesian Substance Dualism

Through his influential essay "Descartes' Myth" from *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle transformed Cartesian substance dualism from a major force in philosophy of mind to almost an historical footnote. Ryle's essay did not so much offer a thorough critique of Cartesian premises and methodology as simply paint a convincing—and rather ugly—portrait of substance dualism as "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine" (Ryle 2002, 34). According to this dogma, a human being lives a "double life" in which the human mind is a separate "complex organised unit" from the body, composed of "a different sort of stuff with a different sort of structure" and subject to a different sort of causality than that body (Ryle 2002, 35-6). According to Ryle, such is the unpalatable and unscientific view Cartesian substance dualism offers us.

Despite the wide influence of this attack on substance dualism, Ryle's significant philosophical arguments in this particular essay are meager, mostly consisting of the suggestion that to speak of mind and body as separate and comparable things is to fall into the "big mistake" of a category error (Ryle 2002, 34; Wilson 1982, 216).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless if Ryle's portrait of Cartesian substance dualism is at least plausible, we ought to examine Descartes' own writings to discover what methodological and substantial errors give rise to this alleged "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine."

The most fundamental problem with Descartes' arguments for substance dualism is embedded in the Evil Demon Hypothesis of the First Meditation, for by accepting the hypothesis, Descartes is implicitly committing himself to the view that the mind must be capable of existence independent of anything physical. But Descartes' problems do not end there. The arguments for the self as essentially a thinking thing conceal at least two dubious premises. The Cartesian understanding of mind seems to be simply a vacuous negation of body. These problems, among others, make explanation of the unity and causal interaction of mind and body basically unintelligible without mysterious help from God.

### The Necessary Existence of the Self

In the First Meditation, Descartes offers three justifications for his radical skeptical methodology. The first two, the possibility of deceptive senses and the possibility of dreaming, are merely prelude to the far-reaching Evil Demon Hypothesis (Descartes AT VII, 18-19). In this third skeptical argument, Descartes postulates the existence of "some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning who has employed all his energies in order to deceive me" (Descartes AT VII, 22). Under this Evil Demon Hypothesis, Descartes seems to be able to doubt everything. Two plus two might equal five rather than four (Descartes AT VII, 20). "The sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things" might merely be "the delusions of dreams" created by the demon (Descartes AT VII, 22). The same doubt falls upon our own

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<sup>1</sup> The more weighty arguments against substance dualism Ryle offers in later chapters of *The Concept of Mind* are premised upon his behaviorist commitments. But we need not accept behaviorism to agree with his basic analysis of substance dualism.

bodies, upon our convictions that we have “hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses” (Descartes AT VII, 23).

In the Second Meditation, Descartes then searches for some glimmer of truth and certainty within the limits imposed by the Evil Demon Hypothesis. Though enveloped by doubts, Descartes finds that he cannot doubt his own existence. After all, to doubt, to think, and to be deceived all require the existence of a doubter, a thinker, and a deceived (Descartes AT VII, 25). Thus, concludes Descartes, “this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind” (Descartes AT VII, 25).

This basic argument for the necessary existence of the self seems plausible, in that Descartes looks to be working carefully and methodically from a clean philosophical slate. However, as commentators on Descartes have pointed out, the *cogito* does involve unarticulated base assumptions. For example, Richard Schacht notes that Descartes presumes without argument that “activity without an agent” is impossible (Schacht 1984, 17, 15). On a Humean theme, Jorge Secada argues that “introspection yields no distinct object to serve as the term of Cartesian self-awareness” (Secada 2000, 256). The point is not that Descartes’ base assumptions here are false, but rather that he fails to identify or justify them.

### **Those Troublesome Evil Demons**

But such minor assumptions seem beside the point when we consider the questionable view of consciousness to which Descartes earlier commits himself by accepting the Evil Demon Hypothesis in the First Meditation. As David Kelley argues in *The Evidence of the Senses*, the Evil Demon Hypothesis presumes that “the mind, and everything it has or contains, could exist without any material substance whatever” (Kelley 1986, 11). This “independence of mind” presumption taints all of Descartes’ reasoning about body and mind. But how does this work?

In the Evil Demon Hypothesis, Descartes allows for the possibility that nothing but his mind exists, that all the apparent objects of awareness out in the world are nothing but the malicious fictions of the demon. Accepting this possibility, Kelley argues, has far-reaching effects for Descartes:

[T]he argument of the *cogito* presupposes that consciousness can be the object of awareness, and be identified as conscious, prior to any awareness of the existence of other things. For this to be true, consciousness would have to *be* something independent of other things...” (Kelley 1986, 12)

In other words, for the mind to be genuinely capable of existence independent of any external, physical world *logically requires* the mind to be something fundamentally separate and distinct from that physical world—to be a substance of its own. Thus substance dualism seems to be presumed in and required by the First Meditation, rather than being a consequence of Descartes’ reasoning about mind and body in the Sixth Meditation.

Given this early dualistic presumption, it is no wonder Descartes fails to even consider a more integrated view of mind and body, such as that mind is an action or attribute of the body or the organism as a whole. Such an integrated view would be impossible given the strict limits of the Evil Demon Hypothesis in which Descartes is obliged to doubt the existence of his body. And Descartes cannot doubt the existence of that body if his mind existentially depends upon it.

As a point of contrast, if we accept Kelley’s view of the mind as inherently related to the external world, then Descartes’ knowledge of his own consciousness could not be logically prior to his knowledge of the external world (Kelley 1986, 29). Rather, knowledge of the external

world would have to precede any self-awareness (Kelley 1986, 29).<sup>2</sup> On such a view of the relationship between consciousness and the external world, the mind could very well be an action or attribute of the physical body or the organism as a whole, rather than necessarily a wholly separate substance.

In sum, Descartes' apparent conclusion in *Meditations on First Philosophy* that mind is a separate substance from the substance of body is not really a conclusion at all. It is presupposed in the very opening pages with the acceptance of the Evil Demon Hypothesis.

### **More Hidden Premises About the Essence of the Self**

As we continue with Descartes' argument for his essential nature as a thinking thing, we find more concealed premises that cast doubts upon his conclusions. After the *cogito*, Descartes turns his attention to his own nature, to the question of what the "I" of the *cogito* refers to. Continuing in the skepticism necessitated by the Evil Demon Hypothesis, Descartes argues that although he could be deceived about his body, thinking is "inseparable" from him (Descartes AT VII, 27). He concludes, "I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks... I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of a thing? As I have just said – a thinking thing" (Descartes AT VII, 27). Thus for Descartes, "body is only something I *have*, whereas the mind and soul ... alone is what I *am*" (Schacht 1984, 17).

Descartes' argument, as presented, thus appears to be:

P1. I can doubt the existence of my body.

P2. I cannot doubt the existence of my mind.

C: I am essentially mind.

Both Premise 1 and Premise 2 are clearly epistemological premises about Descartes' own states of certainty with respect to metaphysical claims. The conclusion, in contrast, is itself a metaphysical claim. Such movement from epistemological premises to metaphysical conclusions seems strange. Indeed, the only valid conclusion from P1 and P2 is "I am more doubtful about the existence of my body than about the existence of my mind." But we can fill in the gaps for Descartes by adding two additional premises<sup>3</sup>:

P3. Something necessarily exists if and only if I cannot doubt its existence.

P4. The essence of something is identical with its necessarily existing elements.

Both of these premises are problematic for Descartes. Premise 3 seems to presume an unrealistic infallibility about what can and cannot be rationally doubted. Premise 4 transforms essence into a foreign and unwieldy concept.

By claiming a strong relationship between indubitability and necessary existence, Premise 3 serves as the link between the epistemological premises and the metaphysical conclusions of

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<sup>2</sup> While Kelley rejects the argument for the *cogito*, he does not dispute the conclusion. He argues that "I am conscious" is "self-evident," "implicit in all knowledge," and "cannot be coherently denied" (Kelley 1986, 30).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Schacht claims that the argument that the "I" of the *cogito* is "essentially mind and mind alone" is valid if we grant three assumptions:

1. That activity is impossible without an agent
2. That "mere matter, or extended substance, is incapable of thought"
3. That "if [two things] can be conceived independently of each other, then *they are* different from each other" (Schacht 1984, 17).

While I wouldn't deny these premises to be integral to Descartes' overall argument in the Second Meditation, Premises Three and Four do seem equally necessary. Premise 3 seems to be a part of Schacht's third assumption, while Premise 4 seems to be omitted from Schacht's reconstruction altogether.

Descartes' argument. In short, this premise allows Descartes to infer that minds necessarily exist, while bodies do not.

However, our reasoning about what is and is not doubtable is subject to error, particularly when we lack knowledge of critical facts. For example, someone unfamiliar with basic geometry might doubt the necessarily true proposition "The three interior angles of a triangle always add up to 180 degrees." And conversely, after learning Euclidean geometry, that same person might regard the proposition "For every line and a point not on the line, there is only one parallel line through the point" as necessarily true, although it is false in non-Euclidean systems. In other words, people can be quite mistaken about what is and is not dubitable (even about "purely intellectual" subjects like mathematics). Thus the underlying problem with this premise is that it ties metaphysical necessity to our limited powers of imagination. Oddly enough, Descartes regards those powers of imagination as inherently untrustworthy due to their connection with the body (Descartes AT VII, 73). Thus Premise 3 seems untenable for Descartes.

Additionally, this premise contradicts Descartes' own commentary on the existence of God. In the Third Meditation, Descartes concludes that "God necessarily exists" (Descartes AT VII, 45).<sup>4</sup> Yet in the First Meditation, Descartes is clearly able to doubt the existence of God in writing,

Perhaps there may be some who would prefer to deny the existence of so powerful a God rather than believe that everything else is uncertain. Let us not argue with them, but grant them that everything said about God is a fiction (Descartes AT VII, 21).

Clearly, the existence of God cannot be both doubtable and necessary if Premise 3 is true.<sup>5</sup>

Moving on, Premise 4 identifies the essence of things with their necessarily existing elements. This premise, required to exclude body from the essence of the self, threatens to make essence into a laundry list of necessary facts, as something may have all sorts of necessary elements that are not "essential" to understanding the basic nature of the thing. For example, we might define a triangle as "a closed figure of three straight line segments." This is the essence of triangles, in that it tells us what sorts of things triangles are. Yet necessary truths about triangles abound. They have three angles. Their interior angles add up to 180 degrees. Their area is  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the base multiplied by the height. To include all such necessary facts in the essence is to stretch that concept beyond recognition.

The converse objection to this premise is found in the "Objections and Replies" to *Meditations on First Philosophy* in the question "How does it follow, from the fact that [Descartes] is aware of nothing else belonging to his essence, that nothing else does in fact belong to it?" (Descartes AT VII, 199). After all, knowledge of the mind may not be "complete and adequate," in which case we cannot be certain of the rightness of "excluding body from [the] essence" of the self (Descartes AT VII, 201). In the reply, Descartes reasons that "if something can exist without some attribute, then it seems to me that that attribute is not included in its essence" (Descartes AT VII, 219). However reasonable this principle may be, a "seems to me" justification cannot meet Cartesian standards of knowledge and certainty!

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<sup>4</sup> In the Fifth Meditation, Descartes also argues for the necessary existence of God in a variety of the ontological argument (Descartes AT VII, 66).

<sup>5</sup> In the Third Meditation, Descartes does draw a distinction between "imagin[ing] that [God] does not exist" and "suppos[ing] that the idea of [God] represents something unreal," such that we might be able to do the former but not the latter with God (Descartes AT VII, 46). However, even if the distinction is meaningful, merely a capacity to coherently doubt the existence of something should indicate that its existence cannot be necessary on Premise Three.

Thus with both Premise 3 and 4 in considerable doubt, we cannot accept Descartes' inferences from epistemological premises to the metaphysical conclusions in his attempt to prove himself to be essentially a thinking thing.

### **The Mind as What Body Is Not**

In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes turns his attention again to the issue of mind and body, discussing their differences, unity, and causality. The basic problem with Descartes' arguments in this Meditation is that he creates such a wide gulf between mind and body that the claims of mind-body unity and two-way causal interaction seem absurd.

Throughout *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes offers his readers various hints as to what minds and bodies are. Minds are indubitable and necessary; bodies are dubitable and contingent (Descartes AT VII, 27). Knowledge of minds is "truer and more certain" as well as "much more distinct and evident" than knowledge of bodies (Descartes AT VII, 33). Minds are connected with "pure thinking" while bodies are connected to "imagining" (Descartes AT VII, 73). Body is "always divisible" while mind is "utterly indivisible" (Descartes AT VII, 86). These considerations demonstrate to Descartes that "the mind is completely different from the body" (Descartes AT VII, 86).

But the essence of Descartes' distinction between mind and body is the distinction between thinking and extension. A mind is "a thinking, non-extended thing," whereas a body is "an extended, non-thinking thing" (Descartes AT VII, 78). Descartes validates these conceptions of mind and body by arguing that:

1. "Everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it" (Descartes AT VII, 78).
2. "God [would be] a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things" (Descartes AT VII, 80).
3. "[God] cannot be a deceiver" (Descartes AT VII, 52).

So for Descartes, the essence of mind is thinking, while the essence of body is extension, with thinking and extension being mutually exclusive properties because they can be "thought clearly and distinctly" separate (Secada 2000, 240). However, because these claims ultimately rest upon Descartes' untenable arguments for the existence of God, his intuitions about the essential nature of mind and body have no philosophical force.

More interestingly, Gilbert Ryle argues in "Descartes' Myth" that the Cartesian conception of mind seems to simply be the negation of body. Thus Ryle writes,

"The working of minds had to be described by the mere negatives of the specific descriptions given to bodies; they are not in space, they are not motions, they are not modifications or matter, they are not accessible to public observation. Minds are not bits of clockwork, they are just bits of not-clockwork" (Ryle 2002, 36).

The Cartesian conception of mind would indeed offer us little insight if it were merely the opposite of body. However Ryle's critique may be too harsh on Descartes, as the essence of mind is not merely the negation of the essence of body; it is not simply non-extension, but rather *thinking* non-extension. Then again perhaps Ryle is right after all, as Descartes is committed to the idea that thinking and extension are fundamentally mutually exclusive opposites. Additionally, in the discussions of causal interaction, mind seems to be so ontologically opposed to body as to make such causal interactions incomprehensible.

### **The Incoherence of Mind-Body Unity and Causality**

Descartes' discussions of mind-body unity and causality are painfully sketchy in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, as Descartes offers us little substantial explanation of how

substance dualism can give rise to unity and causality. Yet his detailed discussions of these subjects in *Passions of the Soul* are no less painful, due to their implausibility and strangeness.

In order to speak of mind-body unity and causality, Descartes must first reject his skeptical doubts so as to allow the testimony of his own previously suspect sensory experiences of mind and body. To do this, Descartes appeals again to the truthfulness of God, then comments,

There is nothing that my own nature teaches me more vividly than that I have a body, and that when I feel pain there is something wrong with the body, and that when I am hungry or thirsty the body needs food and drink, and so on. So I should not doubt that there is some truth in this (Descartes AT VII, 80).

Such experiences, Descartes reasons, show that he (as “nothing but a thinking thing”) is “very closely joined and ... intermingled with” the body, so that the mind and the body “form a unit” (Descartes AT VII, 81). This line of reasoning is suspect for two reasons.

First, Descartes seems to set aside his skeptical worries about such sensory judgments far too quickly, in that he does not seriously consider whether these ideas may be the result of his “habit of making ill-considered judgments” (Descartes AT VII, 82). Yet just a few paragraphs before, Descartes warns us that while we may be certain of the existence of corporeal things based on sensory evidence, we ought to be careful about “drawing conclusions about the *nature* of bodies from the content of sensory evidence” (Descartes AT VII, 80; Sorell 89). After all, “in many cases the grasp of the sense is very obscure and confused” (Descartes AT VII, 80). Descartes could argue that he “clearly and distinctly” comprehends mind-body unity, but he never makes such an argument (Descartes AT VII, 80). As a result, we are left wondering why these inferences about mind-body unity are beyond doubt.

Second and more importantly, the claim of mind-body unity is essentially incoherent, as a non-extended thing could never be “joined” or “intermingled” with body or any other extended thing. Such descriptions presuppose that both objects are extended in space after all. Descartes’ commentary on this subject in *Passions of the Soul* is of no help, as the analogies to spatial location continue. For example, Descartes speaks of the soul having “its principal seat” in the pineal gland (Descartes AT XI, 354). More blatantly contradictory is Descartes’ comments on the relationship of soul to body. After affirming that the soul is “really joined to the whole body” not just “any one part,” Descartes says “the soul is of such a nature that it has no relation to extension, or to the dimensions of other properties of the matter of which the body is composed” (Descartes AT XI, 351). How a soul could possibly be unrelated to extension in general but related to the extension of the whole body is quite a mystery. Thus Descartes seems to be unable to explain mind-body unity without appealing to a mind that is like body in the basic sense of being extended and located in space.

Turning now to the arguments for causal interaction between mind and body, we find that Descartes faces similar difficulties. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes focuses on the survival value of causal interaction. He boldly claims that “any given movement occurring in the part of the brain that immediately affects the mind produces just one corresponding sensation” (Descartes AT VII, 87). Descartes then generalizes in asserting that “experience shows that the sensations which nature has given us are all of this kind” thus they “bear witness to the power and goodness of God” (Descartes AT VII, 87-8). But such correspondence is not necessary, in that “God could have made the nature of man such this particular motion in the brain indicated something else to the mind” (Descartes AT VII, 88). But of course, this benevolent God has set up things for us in the most “useful” way for us (Descartes AT VII, 88). Thus the causal interactions of mind and body are contingent upon “Divine fiat,” but nonetheless real (Wilson 1982, 214). Overall, this account of casual interaction seems too sketchy to justify much of anything.

Once again, the more detailed theory of causality through the pineal gland that Descartes lays out in *Passions of the Soul* offers no help, only highlighting the great incompatibility of substance dualism and causal interactionism. According to this theory, the soul “particularly” exercises its functions in pineal gland, which in turn affects the “animal spirits” (the “most active and finest” parts of our blood which surround the brain), which in turn affect the body and muscles—and the reverse occurs such that the body affects the soul as well (Descartes AT XI, 334-6, 351-7). Descartes then reasons that, as “the principal seat of the soul,”

“the slightest movements on the part of this gland may alter very greatly the source of these spirits, and conversely any change, however slight, taking place in the course of the spirits may do much to change the movements of the gland” (Descartes AT XI, 352).

But Descartes’ appeal to merely small movements does not help him explain away the apparent contradiction of extended matter moving non-extended mind and non-extended mind moving extended matter at all (Schacht 1984, 21).

As a result of these problems in Descartes’ account of the unity and causal interaction of mind and body, Cartesian substance dualism seems impossible to reconcile with these basic empirical facts about the relationship of mind to body.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In some ways, Descartes can be seen as taking our everyday notions of mind and body to their philosophically consistent end. After all, we think and speak of ourselves “as having bodies and as having minds” (Schacht 1984, 16). Yet we also regard ourselves as integrated metaphysical and causal units. So perhaps the failure of Descartes’ arguments show us that something in these ways of thinking and speaking about mind and body is deeply wrong and misleading.

Gilbert Ryle may well have identified that wrong in “Descartes’ Myth.” On his account, the statement “minds exist” means something substantially different than “bodies exist” because the two propositions use “two different senses of ‘exist’” (Ryle 2002, 38). Thankfully, we need not accept Ryle’s behaviorism to adopt this viewpoint, for any notion of the mind as an attribute or action of the physical body or the organism as a whole would seem to indicate two such meanings of “exist.”

Thus we may thank Descartes for the service he has rendered to philosophy of mind and grant him a place in history—but we must discard his theory as untenable.

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