

Why does Descartes maintain that “thinking substance” is entirely distinct from extended, material substance? Is he right?

In this essay, I will first describe the term “substance” as used by Descartes, and explain why he distinguishes “thinking” from “extended” substance, before exploring some of the questions and problems that this approach raises.

The extracts labelled “PP” are taken from “Principals of Philosophy”, and those labelled “M” from “Meditations”, both translated by John Veitch (see <http://www.classicalibrary.org/descartes/index.htm>)

Descartes' argument

For Descartes, a substance is “a thing which exists in such a way as to stand in need of nothing beyond itself in order to its existence” [PP1:51]. This strict definition allows for no substance other than God, but Descartes qualifies the description by saying that God is responsible for created substance (which therefore depends only on God for its continued existence).

So how many types of created substance are there? Descartes claims that there are only:

two highest kinds of things; the first of intellectual things, or such as have the power of thinking, including mind or *thinking substance* and its properties; the second, of material things, embracing *extended substance*, or body and its properties.
[PP1:48; my italics]

Extended (or what Descartes calls “corporeal”) substance exists in only one

form, but, by virtue the way it is arranged and how it moves, it is perceived by us to exhibit various properties. It is not quite analogous to what we nowadays refer to as "matter" – for example, Descartes did not believe a vacuum could exist where there is no substance at all [PP2:16] - perhaps the nearest modern-day notion that encapsulates "corporeal substance" is what we might call "the physical world".

This description of corporeal substance provides a way for Descartes to be able to explain our varied experience of it: in fact all the sensual impressions we have of the world can be seen as a result of the way that bits of corporeal substance are bumping into us in one way or another. At the macro level, we have the impression of hardness if we feel something that does not "give" when we touch it, and at the micro level, we may have the impression of flavour if we allow a piece of food to touch the taste buds on our tongue.

Descartes justification for his position that "thinking substance" or mind, is distinct from corporeal substance begins with his writings in Meditations, where he considers that even though all of the experiences he has of the world may be illusory, and caused by a "malignant demon", he can at least be sure that his mind exists, if only because he is able to use it to consider his own existence. There is therefore, according to Descartes, a fundamental difference between corporeal substance (whose existence can be doubted), and thinking substance (whose existence cannot be doubted): mind must therefore be distinct, and independent, from body: "it is certain that I, [that is, my mind, by which I am what I am], is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it.." [M6:9].

Descartes regards the principal property of corporeal substance as extension. One aspect of extension is location, or “place”: an extended object must be positioned somewhere, and occupy some amount of space. However, to quote Hofstadter & Dennett (1982:387): “the stuff our minds are made of has no mass, no physical energy, perhaps not even a location in space” , and so does not seem to fit into this category, which bolsters Descartes claim that mind is in some way fundamentally different. Similarly, while matter can be divided (indefinitely, according to Descartes), mind would appear to be indivisible [M6:19].

Issues

Cottingham (1997) takes issue with Descartes' initial premise that mind is distinct from body simply because one can't be doubted and the other can, saying that this argument could be used to demonstrate that potatoes could exist independently of carbohydrate (assuming I am confident of the existence of potatoes but harbour suspicions about the suggestion that there's such a thing as carbohydrate). In fact, I think this analogy is not entirely fair, and since so much of Descartes' metaphysics rests on it, it is worth challenging: Descartes demonstrates that it is logically possible to doubt the body, but logically impossible to doubt the mind, which is not equivalent to saying “suppose for sake of argument that I doubt that carbohydrate exists but have no doubt in potatoes”. (It might also be said that both potatoes and carbohydrate are forms of extended substance, and so,

according to Descartes's original position, I can't be confident of the existence of either.)

I think it would be more reasonable to say that a weak point in Descartes' argument is that it does not follow that my thoughts about something (my doubt or confidence in a thing's existence) necessarily has any bearing on its intrinsic nature: just because I, an imperfect being, can doubt something exists, cannot make any difference at all to the thing concerned. But it does seem that this train of thought does in some way support the idea that mind and body are in some fundamental way distinct: if I can't affect the material world purely through effort of my mind, then that does suggest there is something fundamentally different between mind and body. [There is a distinction here between material bodies that are separate from me and my own body, which I do appear to be able to manipulate through effort of my mind: this raises the problem of mind-body interaction, which I will talk about later.]

Many scientists nowadays would argue that consciousness is not so detached from the material world as Descartes appears to believe. Neuroscientists such as Vilayanur Ramachandran contend that all mental phenomena are ultimately explicable in terms of physical processes. And there is an increasing amount of evidence to suggest that many of the aspects of thought which Descartes discusses not only correlate, but can be caused by, electrical or chemical activity in specific regions of the brain. However, it seems to me that there is still a gap to be explained between the physical, measurable phenomena that it may be possible to

observe or cause in my brain, and the subjective qualia of experiences which go with them. In other words, it somehow seems inadequate to try and explain consciousness in purely mechanical terms.

One criticism of the dualist view is that there are things which don't appear to be extended substance *or* thinking substance. For example, how should we classify "information"? It seems to have aspects both of thinking and non-thinking substance. For example, a story can exist as a set of ideas in the mind, but we could also write it down, and then forget all about it, before someone else reads what we wrote and is able to re-experience the story we were thinking of. A story cannot be an extended substance, because it can exist only as a set of thoughts in my mind. But it cannot be a mental substance either, since it can survive on the page in the absence of anyone to think about it.

I think that the main problem for the dualist is to explain how mind and body interact: it is obvious that our mental states can be affected by things that happen in the material world, and equally that we can make changes in the physical world, via our own bodies, if we choose to do so. Descartes does acknowledge that there is a special kind of relationship between our minds and bodies: "I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am besides so intimately conjoined, and as it were intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity" [M6:13]. Cottingham (1997) suggests that Descartes regards the mind-body union as a "primitive notion", which is irreducible in the same way as the notions of extended and thinking substance. This does not seem to be to be

an entirely satisfactory answer though.

Conclusion

It does seem that Descartes' picture of the world has much which we can agree and identify with (with the possible exception of God). Even if some of his arguments can be challenged, the division of reality into physical and mental still appears to have something going for it. The real problem for dualists though, is how to explain how such different substances as mind and body can ever interact with one another.

REFERENCES

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