

Some strengths and weaknesses of the Cartesian theory of the mind

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There are few philosophers who would now support substance dualism in its Cartesian form.¹ In this essay, however, I will explore the notion that there are strengths as well as weaknesses in Descartes' philosophy of mind, and that analysing those strengths and weaknesses can help us to at least point in the direction of an effective approach to the understanding of the mind. I will argue that there are several core components of an adequate understanding of mind which emerge from an evaluation of Descartes. One is the ontological significance that needs to be accorded to the first person perspective. Second, that an understanding of human subjects and their minds requires an appreciation of the role of bodies in the constitution of mind. Third, it also requires an understanding of mind as socially constituted. Fourth, it will also be argued here that we are better placed by abandoning the language of 'mind' and 'body' and talking, rather, of 'persons' and their capacities. Fifth, it follows from a consideration of the above points that persons with minds cannot be accounted for through scientific investigation alone.

Central to Descartes' view is his claim that there are two kinds of substances: the natural and the mental. In the case of human beings that means that bodies and minds exist as substances each with their distinctive properties. Key to Descartes' concept of substance is the notion that substances are independent entities. As Descartes expresses it: 'The notion of a substance is just this—that it can exist by itself, that is without the aid of any other substance' (quoted in Kim 2011 p.33). Or to put it another way, there are possible worlds in which, for example, the computer on my desk can exist without the accompanying printer also existing. There are only contingent rather than necessary relationships holding between substances.

For Descartes, each substance instantiates a set of properties. In the case of bodies which are extended in space, the properties of spatial location, size and mass are key. Minds, on the other hand, are not extended in space. My thought that I must complete this essay on time does not occupy a spatial location, and it does not have a size and a mass. Minds, in contrast with bodies, are not extended in space; their key property is thought.

¹ For a defence of non-Cartesian substance dualism see E.J. Lowe *Subjects of Experience*, Cambridge University Press 1996

The problems of mind/body interaction have been well documented and were first raised directly with Descartes by Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (See Kim 2011 pp.46-50). I will not discuss the now well known concerns about how in a causally closed physical universe an immaterial substance can somehow mysteriously interact with a material substance and the issues this raises for explaining mental causation.² I will, rather, focus first on one of Descartes' specific arguments in support of dualism, namely the conceivability argument as set out in the Sixth Meditation. This takes us to the heart of Descartes' view that the mind is essentially non-extended and disembodied.

Descartes' conceivability argument can be expressed as follows:

1. I am defined by my capacity for thought.
2. My body is constituted by something other than thought and is defined by its extension in space.
3. Because it is possible to conceive of myself independently of my body it is the case that my mind and my body are not identical.

As Descartes expresses it, 'Therefore from the fact alone that I exist and that, at the same time, I notice absolutely nothing else that belongs to my nature apart from the single fact that I am a thinking thing, I correctly conclude that my essence consists in this alone, that I am a thinking thing' (Descartes 2003 p,62).

The crucial link in Descartes' argument is from the premise that I can conceive of myself as distinct from my body to the conclusion that my mind and my body *are* distinct. There are reasons for disputing the validity of this linkage. There is the point made by Kim that 'from the fact that something is *conceivable*, however clearly and vividly, it does not follow that it is *really possible*' (Kim 2011 p.39)³. This is as true of Descartes' 'clear and distinct' ideas as it is of any casual imaginings. The key point is that whether or not something is possible is not a function of our internal mental processes but of how the world is. It is conceivable that in Europe, America and elsewhere there will be increasing instances of authoritarian leadership, but this is not the case because I think that but because of what is happening in the world. The notion that there are possible worlds in which *p* does not help us in establishing what is or is not conceivable in the real world.

We can see how this line of argument against Descartes works by running the conceivability idea in the opposite direction. Far from claiming that it is possible to conceive of the mind as independent of the body, it can more plausibly be claimed that it is

² See Kim 2011 chapter 2 for a summary of the key objections.

³ See also Lowe 2000 p.11.

inconceivable that the mind could exist independently of the body. That the mind cannot exist independently of the body is, arguably, an a posteriori necessity of a Kripkean kind. That is, there is no possible world in which minds can exist without bodies. We cannot think without a body which connects us to the wider environment by way of sensory organs and which provides us with the neural capacity to perceive and have intentions.

The disassociation between mind and body has been strongly challenged from within philosophy and cognitive science. For example, Samuel Todes in his seminal *Body and World* (Todes 2001) argued - influenced by Merleau-Ponty-that Descartes' separation of mind and body misconstrues the relationship between human subjects and the world. 'For the human subject to be in the world, the human body must be essential to him' (Todes 2001, p.15), The relationship between human subjects and the world should be seen as necessarily involving the body. Writing about the phenomenological tradition, Gallagher and Zahavi put the matter in the following way. For Merleau-Ponty and the phenomenologists 'the body is considered a constitutive or transcendental principle, precisely because it is involved in the very possibility of experience' (Gallagher and Zahavi 2012, p.153). The same basic point has become increasingly influential in recent cognitive research. Lawrence Shapiro, writing about the philosophical bases of cognitive science, has claimed 'that psychological processes are *incomplete* without the body's contributions' (Schapiro 2004). And as Esther Thelen has put it: 'To say that cognition is embodied means that it arises from bodily interactions with the world. From this point of view, cognition depends on the kinds of experiences that come from having a body with particular perceptual and motor capacities that are inseparably linked and that together form the matrix within which memory, emotion, language, and all other aspects of life are meshed'. ([http://www.iep.utm.edu/embodcog/section 2](http://www.iep.utm.edu/embodcog/section%202)).⁴

This is a much stronger argument than Descartes' own argument that body and mind causally interact. It is to say that mind and body are constitutively related in the sense that we cannot intelligibly talk about the mind without also invoking the body. As John Haugeland has put it, 'If we are to understand mind as the locus of intelligence, we cannot follow Descartes in regarding it as separable in principle from the body and the world' (Haugeland 1998, p.236). This is a line of thought which arguably has its roots in Aristotle's conceptualisation of the relationship between body and soul. Aristotle denies that body and soul are distinct and separable components of a person. As he expresses it in *De Anima*: 'We should not then inquire whether the soul and the body are one

⁴ See also Rowlands 2010

thing, any more than whether the wax and its imprint are...'
(Aristotle 1986, p.157).

This brings us to a further weakness in Descartes' view, namely its abstraction from historically produced social contexts. Not only is the mind for Descartes abstracted from its physical embodiment, but also from the context of communication which other philosophers have deemed essential to the understanding of human thought and consciousness. For example, Lynne Rudder Baker has put the matter as follows: 'I want to show that persons, who are subjects of experience and agents responsible for what they do, cannot exist in isolation. Even if Descartes could have had the thought that he was the only thing that existed in the world, that thought could not have been true.'⁵ This is a line of thought which has a long standing and diverse history. It is to be found in, for example, Wittgenstein's notion of 'forms of life', rule following, and his account of the relationship between thought, language and shared social practices.⁶ It can also be found in various of the writings of Charles Taylor and his bridging of analytic and continental philosophy.⁷ And Tyler Burge in developing a robustly anti-individualistic and pro-externalist account of thought and language commits himself to stressing 'social factors in descriptions of an individual's mental phenomena' (Burge 2007 p.101). Here I follow Burge's claim that 'the natures of individuals' thoughts...constitutively depend on the social environment' (Burge 2007, p.151). This amounts to more than the self-evident claim that individuals' thoughts are influenced by the social context. It is, rather, to claim that there is a constitutive relationship between those thoughts and the social context. That is, there can be no description of individuals' thoughts which does not make reference to the social context within which they arise.

What, then, should we conclude about Descartes? Is his position absolutely hopeless? Should we support Descartes if and only if we are prepared to subscribe to the existence of some mystical spirit which in some indefinable way interacts with our bodies? I shall suggest that there are some compelling reasons for believing that key aspects of Descartes' thought should be accepted.

First, and fundamentally, there is the importance of Descartes' focus on the first person perspective. His starting point is the thinking ego which experiences itself and the world from its own point of view. For Descartes, the subjective experience of the ego is one of the key components of reality, and in her sympathetic

⁵ <http://people.umass.edu/lrb/files/bak11cart.pdf>. For a historical perspective on Descartes' internalism see Taylor 1992 ch.8.

⁶ For a useful summary of Wittgenstein's account of rules and social practices see Coulter 1989, chapter 3.

⁷ See Taylor 1985 and Dreyfus and Taylor 2015

reading of Descartes, Katalin Farkas has expressed this point as follows: 'To be a subject is to possess a point of view. For a minded being, things do not just surround one, but they appear to one in a certain way, they are enjoyed or they fill one with despair, things are desired or doubted or believed' (Farkas 2008 p.30-31). The significance of the first person perspective is examined in detail in Lynne Rudder Baker's 'Naturalism and the First Person Perspective' (Baker 2013) where it is argued that 'there are ineliminable and irreducible first-person properties' which are part of 'the inventory of reality' (Baker 2013 p.102). The identification of the importance of the first person perspective owes much to Descartes' original formulation.

A second strength of Descartes' position is his uncompromising claim that mind is not amenable to naturalistic explanation. This connects with one of the largest areas of debate within the philosophy of mind and psychology, namely whether or not first person accounts are reducible to third person- scientific- accounts. There is no space here to pursue this issue in detail or to outline the various approaches that have been adopted in relation to it.⁸ However, what can be claimed with some confidence is that Descartes' focus on the fundamental importance of the first person perspective presents great challenges to the naturalist's view that first person accounts are reducible to third person- scientific- accounts.⁹ The implication of Descartes' view is that we need a language and a set of concepts with which to make sense of first person experience, and that language cannot be supplied by science. Descartes thus provides the basis for rejecting the views of scientific reductionists and eliminativists. As Hilary Putnam has expressed it: 'A view of knowledge that acknowledges that the sphere of knowledge is wider than the sphere of "science" seems to me to be a cultural necessity if we are to arrive at a sane and human view of ourselves and science'¹⁰

The above leaves us in the following position. From the critique of Descartes we have to conclude that we need a concept of the mind

⁸ Donald Davidson's 'anomalous monism' and the focus on reasons as constitutive of human thought and action is one example of a philosopher arguing that the methods of the natural sciences do not apply to the understanding of psychological and social phenomena.

⁹ See Baker (2013) for a sustained critique of ontological naturalism. See Papineau (2002) for an account of the need for 'conceptual dualism' in order to make sense of phenomenal concepts. Papineau, however, writes from a robustly naturalistic perspective in contrast with Baker.

¹⁰ Quoted in Critchley 2001, p.121-2. See also Taylor 1985 where the anti-naturalist theme is pursued in a range of essays on mind and language.

which is physically embodied and socially embedded. We also, however, need a concept of the mind in which the first person perspective has a key ontological role. This suggests the need for an approach which brings together these two claims. Such a view holds that it is not the body (specifically the brain) which is the source of mind as the naturalists claim; neither is there something which we can (according to Cartesian dualism) call 'the mind'. The mind is not a *thing*, some entity, but rather a set of capacities which *persons* have. It is neither the body nor the mind which thinks. It is human beings as persons who think and act in the world. Persons, on this view, are irreducible ontological entities.

The view expressed above is set out in a range of different ways by, for example, Lynne Rudder Baker in 'Persons and Bodies: A Constitution View' (Baker 2000), and Bennett and Hacker in 'Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience' (Bennett and Hacker 2003). And as Wittgenstein put it: 'Only of a human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees, is blind; hears is deaf; is conscious or unconscious' (Quoted in Bennett and Hacker 2003 p.71).

It is at this point that the now familiar position of property dualism might be thought to be an attractive way of formulating the relationship between mind and body. This is the view that- contrary to Descartes' substance dualism- holds that while there is one material substance there are nevertheless both material and mental properties. On the face of it this is an attractive position to adopt because it gets round the awkwardness of Descartes' substance dualism but at the same time recognises that there are distinctively mental states which, while supervening on physical states, are not reducible to them. This is, however, a line of approach to the mind and body issue that needs to be resisted if the above account of the nature of persons has any plausibility. Property dualism leaves us with a bifurcated account of persons as having distinct physical and mental properties. We need, in contrast, a much more integrated view of mind and body of the kind gestured to above. We are not beings with physical bodies who also have minds. Rather we are persons whose first person perspective is necessarily integrated with our bodies. In this respect, there is much for philosophy to do to further conceptualise how this is the case.

In conclusion we can say that there is much in Descartes that is important. While his substance dualism is hard to defend, the underlying conception of the mind with properties that cannot be captured by third person scientific accounts remains important and needs to be incorporated into an effective account of the mind and, arguably, be granted an independent place in our ontology. The concept of persons developed by a number of philosophers points

the way to how to incorporate Descartes' insights into an account of the mind as essentially physically and socially embedded. As Charles Taylor and Hubert Dreyfus have put it, we need a 're-embedding of thought and knowledge in the bodily and social-cultural contexts in which it takes place....and to show how this is inseparable from our activity as the kind of embodied, social and cultural beings we are' (Taylor and Dreyfus 2015 p.18). That is to say, Descartes' correct focus on the importance of the first person perspective needs to be integrated within a broader account of the bodily and social conditions necessary for the realisation of a first person perspective.

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