

Descartes, Mechanism, Materialism and Dualism

Descartes rejected Mechanism for human beings on the grounds that deliberate human actions cannot be explained mechanistically. Many of our actions are not determined by any bodily passion such as hunger, thirst, lust, fear or anger. Our actions depend in part on what we believe or think and we often form our beliefs by freely using our Reason. Descartes' view of Reason is captured in the following two paragraphs.

I. Reason is a power that may serve as a universal instrument for acting appropriately in innumerable many kinds of (novel) circumstance (...all the contingencies of life"....) (*Discourse*, vol I, p.140, Cottingham trans.) However many reflex arcs ("particular dispositions of their organs") may be built into the structure of a mechanical device, there will not be enough of them to make such a mechanical device capable of such a degree of flexibility, adaptiveness and creativity.

II. The best sign of the presence of reason in a creature is its use of language. No mechanical device would be capable of genuine linguistic behavior. No automaton could "... arrange its speech in various ways in order to give an appropriately meaningful reply to whatever is said in its presence, as even the dullest of men can do." (*Discourse*, pg. 140)

We will come back to these claims about Reason and Language after some discussion of Materialism and Mechanism.

Descartes also maintained that Mechanism is false for human beings because Materialism is false for human beings. Materialism is the view that the only things that actually exist are material things and processes or material forces.

Some of his arguments against Materialism are distinct from his arguments against Mechanism because these arguments against Materialism are based directly on his arguments for Dualism, which is logically incompatible with all forms of Materialism. Mechanism implies Materialism but not conversely. Even if we could show Descartes that there are non-mechanistic forms of Materialism (such as Social Learning Theory or Information Processing Models of Cognition) and that refuting Mechanism does not necessarily refute all forms of Materialism, he would still insist on the soundness of his rejection of any form of Materialism on the grounds that Dualism is correct and, thus, Materialism is ruled out. What are his

arguments for Dualism that do not directly depend on his arguments against (reflex) Mechanism for human beings? Flanagan discusses three such arguments.

First Argument For Dualism

Our minds are essential to our existence, but our bodies are not essential to our existence because we can doubt the existence of all bodies but we cannot doubt our own existence as thinking things.

Consequences for science if Dualism is correct: We know the nature of mental phenomena better than, and independently of, the nature of any physical phenomena.

So, no materialistic analysis of mental phenomena is possible.

The argument presupposes at least two unstated assumptions: either

a) When an entity is known for certain to have a property X but this entity is not known for certain to have property Y, then X is essential to the entity but Y is not essential to the entity.

OR

b) When an agent knows for certain that it has property X but does not know for certain that it has property Y then X is essential to the agent and Y is not essential to the agent.

But (a) is too strong. It implies that three-sided figures are not essentially figures with interior angles equalling 180 degrees.

And (b) begs the question by asserting that an agent's self-knowledge is of a special or privileged kind, i.e. that an agent's self-knowledge is infallible. This assumption is just as controversial, strong and disputable as dualism itself. In fact, doesn't this implicit assumption that agents have infallible self-knowledge presuppose dualism? One reason to think that it does presuppose mind-body dualism is that Descartes argued that there is no infallible knowledge of any material things. Why, then would there be infallible knowledge of anything? My knowledge that I am a thinking thing may be infallible, but how does this show that I have infallible knowledge of what thinking is?

Second Argument For Dualism

We know by direct, intuitive insight that the attributes of thinking and extension are distinct and incompatible properties. So, Descartes argued, the very same thing cannot have both properties at the same time, any more than the very same line could be curved and straight at the same time. So, whatever thinks is not extended and whatever is extended does not think.

But what if a materialist simply denies that he or she intuitively perceives him/herself to be an unextended, thinking thing or simply denies that he/she intuitively perceives that extended bodies lack the power of thought? What if it is claimed that the nature of bodies cannot be known except by experimental reasoning? If this point is granted, how can pure, unaided intuition be relied upon for anything outside of areas like mathematics?

Third Argument for Dualism

All bodies are divisible into parts.
No minds are divisible into parts
So, no minds are bodies.

But why is it impossible to divide a thinking thing into parts?
We know that different parts of the body perform different functions.
We know that the mind performs a variety of functions (perceiving, remembering, reasoning, etc) so why is it impossible that the mind also has parts which are specialized for different functions?

The fact that my personal identity is not affected by losing some of my body's parts does not guarantee that my identity would be unaffected by the loss of any (or all) of my body's parts, including my brain.

Dualism may be one way of accounting for one's ordinary sense of self and personal continuity. But the fact that we have this sense of self does not by itself constitute proof of dualism until all materialistic ways of accounting for it have been found to be inadequate.

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