

Philosophy 1320: Theories of the Mind, Stern College - Yeshiva University, Spring 2007
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Lecture Notes, February 5

I. Administrative matters.

We discussed the paper assignment.

I mentioned that I would be happy to read some drafts, and make comments, if you send them to me in advance.

You should give me at least a few days to find time to read them.

Also, I mentioned that I have updated the syllabus.

Generally, I will keep the [on-line version of the syllabus](#) pretty up-to-date.

II. Descartes' rule, redux

At the end of class last Wednesday, I mentioned that Descartes' rule is the difference between the argument for the mind/body distinction in the second meditation, and his fuller exposition in the sixth meditation.

The success of Descartes' project rests on the legitimacy of this rule.

For, if there is no infallible way to distinguish truth from falsity, the whole project is pointless.

Unfortunately for Descartes, there is a problem with any such rule.

Given any mark, or rule, for certainty, how do we know that we have the correct mark?

Appeal to the mark itself is circular.

Similarly, how do we know that we are correctly applying the rule, in any particular circumstance?

We can not, without begging the question, say that we clearly and distinctly perceive that clarity and distinctness is the right criterion, or that we can clearly and distinctly see that we are using the rule correctly.

This problem is called the problem of Cartesian circularity.

Some philosophers argue that the circle at issue is virtuous, rather than vicious, but we will not consider this view.

More often, the moral is taken to be that any project such as Descartes', any foundationalist project, is doomed to fail.

While the Cogito does seem to contain some kind of undoubtable truth, allegations that this property of immunity extends to other beliefs seem destined to fail.

But, this is a topic for an epistemology class, and we will set it aside.

II. The sixth meditation

So, let us look directly at Descartes' sixth meditation arguments for the existence of the material world and the distinction between mind and body.

To argue that the material world really does exist, he shows first that bodies could exist, since God can make anything that does not create a contradiction.

Then, he argues that I seem to sense objects, and if I seem to sense objects, while there are none, then God is a deceiver; but God is no deceiver, so material objects exist. Only the mathematical properties of material objects are clear and distinct; their sensory properties are in doubt, as we have seen, in earlier readings.

Our concern is with the latter arguments, for the mind/body distinction.

In service to the arguments for the existence of the material world, Descartes starts the sixth meditation without the assumption that there is a material world, or even our bodies.

We can ignore this rhetorical device.

For example, when Descartes argues how the imagination would work if there are bodies, we can take that as an argument for how the imagination actually works: external bodies come into contact with my sense organs, which transmit information to my brain, which then communicate that information (somehow!) to my mind.

III. Descartes' central argument that the mind is distinct from the body:

1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my mind, independent of my body.
2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my body, independent of my mind.
3. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, can be separated by God, and so are really distinct.

So, my mind is distinct from my body.

Note how Descartes relies on his criterion of clarity and distinctness, p 83, and p 83-4.

We call Descartes' position substance dualism, for its insistence that there are two distinct kinds of substances.

It is subtly different from Plato's view.

For Plato, the body is merely a vessel for the soul.

For Descartes, we are tied to our bodies in a remarkable way, unlike a sailor and ship.

We do not merely observe injury to the body, but have a special relationship to it.

Philosophers call this relationship privileged access.

See Arnauld's objection that Descartes has returned to Plato's view, p 107, and Descartes' reply to Arnauld, p 111-2.

IV. The major premise and conceptual dualism

The third premise, which can be called the major premise, is currently thought especially contentious.

In no small part, the problem with the major premise traces back to the problem of Cartesian circularity.

If we weaken the third premise to remove reference to God, substance dualism does not follow.

Another form of dualism, which one might call conceptual dualism, does follow from the argument with a weakened third premise.

Conceptual dualism just says that we have distinct concepts for the mind and the body.

Conceptual dualism is, essentially, a semantic thesis, and not a metaphysical one.

Thus, we can express Descartes' original third premise as saying that conceptual dualism entails substance dualism.

But, as we put aside worries about Cartesian circularity, let us put aside worries about the third premise.