

Philosophy 1320: Theories of the Mind, Stern College - Yeshiva University, Spring 2007
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Lecture Notes, February 7

I. The minor premises of Descartes' argument for the mind/body distinction

We are considering Descartes' argument for substance dualism:

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.

The first two premises rely on characterizations of the mind and body.

Descartes characterizes the mind as that which thinks.

In the *Principles*, he says that every substance has one essential characteristic.

The mind is essentially a thinking thing, and bodies are essentially extended, pp 113-4.

The characterization of extended things is meant to be consistent with the new science, which claims that the primary qualities are real, though there may be some tension between mere extension, and the other primary qualities.

Descartes characterizes the thinking thing in the second meditation, p 77: doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, refusing, imagining, and sensing.

Note that these are all conscious states.

Essentially, the core characteristic of thought, for Descartes, is consciousness.

Bodies, on the other hand, are mere machines.

In fact, our bodies are no different in kind from those of the higher animals.

We have similar sense organs, and brain structures, for example.

Cartesians were convinced of the absence of animal souls, and some were notorious vivisectionists.

(Morton mentions that Descartes' writings on animal souls are in themselves ambiguous.)

The most obvious distinction between humans and animals is our ability to reason, our mental qualities.

In the *Discourse*, Descartes further characterizes the distinction between bodies/machines and minds on the basis of language use and behavioral plasticity, pp 102-3.

No machine, he says, including an animal, can use language, or solve a wide range of problems.

Descartes' observations remain salient, today, and are central in debates over artificial intelligence.

Machines have made great strides in language use, but plasticity remains a problem.

While some machines can be trained to do a particular task even better than humans, no machine has the ability to adapt, change, and apply its intelligence to a variety of tasks.

If the mind is essentially thinking, and the body is essentially extended, the mind and the body are clearly distinct things.

Descartes claims that we may confuse the nature of mind and body because of the union of our minds with our bodies.

For example, consider our faculty of imagination, the mind's ability to receive images from the senses.

It seems that we first receive images, and then reason about them, p 82.

Descartes argues that this Aristotelian picture is misleading.

We can even exist, and think, without imagination, p 83.

Descartes has separated thought from sensation, where Aristotle had wed the two.

On Cartesian dualism, the senses have been demoted from their lofty position as the origin of all knowledge.

For Descartes, the senses just provide natural protection of our bodies.

This is just the best structure for humans.

Since the body must have a method for transmitting information to the brain, it is bound to be imperfect.

It is better to be deceived once in a while, than not to have any information for the protection of the body.

II. Arnauld's objection - Is our knowledge of the mind complete?

Consider the following objection, in the spirit of Arnauld's worries, to Descartes' argument.

If Descartes' argument is valid, then this argument is valid:

1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of Clark Kent, as someone who can not fly.
2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of Superman, as someone who can fly.
3. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, can be separated by God, and so are really distinct.

So, Clark Kent is not Superman.

The conclusion of the Superman argument is clearly false.

But, the form of the argument is the same as the form of Descartes' argument.

In Arnauld's favor, if we determine the problem with the Superman argument, maybe we can find a problem with Descartes' argument.

Descartes has to respond by finding a difference between the two arguments such that the Superman argument can be unsound while the mind/body argument remains sound.

Arnauld suggests a possible response for Descartes, one which undermines the first two premises of the Superman argument, p 105.

Descartes can say that there is a formal distinction between Clark Kent and Superman, but not a real one. For example, we can say that there is a formal distinction between Laura Bush's husband, and the current president of the United States.

But, there is no real difference between the two people.

They are different only in name.

Applied to the Superman argument, Descartes could insist that we do not have a clear and distinct understanding of Clark Kent.

Instead, our knowledge of him is inadequate.

Denigrating our knowledge of Clark Kent solves the problem with the Superman argument.

But, does that solution undermine the first premise of Descartes' original argument?

We have to wonder whether our knowledge of the body is also inadequate.

Perhaps, as Arnauld urges, if our knowledge of the mind were adequate, then we would understand that the mind is the body, and not distinct from it.

Descartes, in his response, defines adequate knowledge as knowledge of every attribute of an object. He points out that while we can have adequate knowledge, we can never know that God has not put more properties in an object than we know, so that we can never know that we have adequate knowledge. But, this is a semantic, perhaps scholastic, quibble.

The point here is that Descartes says that we can know, just by introspection, that the body is inessential to the mind, since I can understand, in some special way, the mind, without the body.

Descartes' definition of adequate knowledge does not solve the problem.

Arnauld's point is that we must wonder if the way that we know the mind is insufficient to rule out an essential link to the body.

We can settle on the term 'completeness' to describe the disagreement.

Descartes argues that our knowledge of Clark Kent is incomplete, so that the Superman argument fails.

But, he thinks that our knowledge of the mind is complete, so that his argument for the mind/body distinction succeeds.

Arnauld wonders if our knowledge of the mind is incomplete, in the same way that our knowledge of Clark Kent is incomplete.

Late in his objection, Arnauld mentions that we can think of a line in abstract, without attributing breadth or depth to it, even though in the material world every extension has breadth and depth.

Similarly, we might think of the mind as independent of the body, while in reality every mind must have a body.

Arnauld's point is that if our knowledge of the mind as independent of the body is not complete, then Descartes' argument fails.

III. The genus/species analogy

Arnauld suggests that the body could be to the mind as a genus is to a species.

On the genus/species suggestion, not all bodies are minds, but some are.

If the genus/species analogy is apt, it would explain, how we can understand the mind as separate from the body, in the way that I can understand, say, lions apart from other panthera (big cats).

Descartes agrees that we can understand a genus without understanding all of its particular species.

So, the discovery of a new big cat would not denigrate our prior knowledge of panthera.

Further, we can understand one species, say lions, without understanding others, like jaguars.

But, Descartes correctly responds, we can not understand a particular species without understanding the genus of which it is a subclass.

We can not understand lions without understanding panthera.

If minds were a subclass of bodies, we would have to understand that fact in order to understand the mind, p 110.

Descartes claims that since we do not understand that minds are just bodies, and we have a complete knowledge of the mind, then minds are distinct from bodies.

Descartes' response to the genus/species analogy is correct, but it relies on the presumption that we have a complete understanding of the mind, as independent from the body.

The question of whether the mind is separate from the body is what is at issue.

The argument has gone in a circle.

IV. Descartes' argument for the completeness of our understanding of the mind

Arnauld thinks that Descartes' argument for the completeness of his knowledge of the mind comes from the second meditation, where Descartes argues that he knows he exists, and knows about himself, without knowing that bodies exist.

Indeed, Descartes' argument about the wax concludes with an observation that even incomplete and dubitable beliefs about the body lead to knowledge of the mind.

As Arnauld interprets it, Descartes' argument thus rests on the fact that I can doubt that my body exists, but I can not doubt that I exist.

Descartes argues:

We can be certain, not only of the existence of our minds, but also of many of its properties.

The certainty of our knowledge of our minds persists, even if we doubt the existence of our bodies.

Further, we know so much of our minds, even without any knowledge of bodies, that our knowledge of minds must be taken to be complete.

Thus, the body must not be an essential for our minds.

Arnauld counters Descartes' argument with an example from mathematics.

Consider a triangle inscribed in a semi-circle.

We can be certain that it is right-angled, that it is a right triangle.

The certainty of our knowledge of our right triangle persists, even if we doubt, or fail to recognize, that the sum of the squares of the legs is equal to the square of the hypotenuse.

Thus, if Descartes' reasoning about the mind and body is sound, it follows that the Pythagorean theorem must not be essential to the triangle.

But, we can prove that the Pythagorean theorem holds necessarily of the triangle.

Descartes' reasoning must be unsound.

Thus, he has not established that the body is not essential to the self.

Descartes provides four direct responses to Arnauld's triangle example.

He first distinguishes between substances and attributes.

Descartes claims to have understanding of two complete substances.

Arnauld presents one substance (a triangle) and one property (that the Pythagorean theorem holds of it).

Still, Arnauld can hold that Descartes is claiming that the substance mind lacks any bodily properties.

So, this distinction will not help Descartes.

We will return to Descartes' other three responses to Arnauld on Monday.

Make sure to finish Reading Guide #2, and be prepared to ask about anything you do not understand.