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Descartes: Cartesian Dualism

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What is *Cartesian Dualism*? Cartesian Dualism is the principle of two different substances, mind and body, and is accredited to Rene Descartes, a philosopher whose idea of dualism is to find in the *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Since the Mediator knows from Meditation II that he has a mind and is a thinking thing, in Meditation VI he finally discovers that he has a body also. The possibility of a body is like the existence of material things, clear and distinct through knowledge and sensations. Senses can be trusted to a certain extent now and the Mediator can make a difference between illusion and reality because of the interaction of mind and body. The Dream Argument in Meditation I is an example to show how doubt, if something really exists or is it just an illusion, turns in Meditation VI to certainty. Mind-Body Dualism is in my opinion a very important chapter and leads to modern psychology because for the first time the simple mind played a role in philosophy.

The Mediator's knowledge that he has a mind and therefore he exist comes from doubting everything which he thought was true. "Anything which admits of the slightest doubt I will set aside just as if I had found it to be wholly false; and I will proceed in this way until I recognize something certain, or, if nothing else, until I at least recognize for certain that there is no certainty" (Descartes, 1986). Doubting everything is a way to start fresh and develop a simple mind where influences from outside sources are not existing. The Mediator has to cut every tie with sensations which could manipulate him to put false thoughts into his mind and start from the beginning like a newborn child who starts to exist in the world. The realization of that can bring him to the point where he can start analyzing things the way he thinks is right without any forces from outside and then come to an conclusion or no conclusion at all.

If there is no certainty how do I know if I'm on the right path or I just follow the wrong direction, the Mediator might ask himself. Trust would be one way to accomplish this task and would require trust in oneself, means the senses or in a higher being, God. Trusting in God or the senses is still doubtful and takes a lot of thinking and researching to come to an conclusion. But one thing the Mediator realizes that he has a mind which is using the attributes of thinking and doubting, so he

knows he is a thinking thing and exists. Existence of the mind and doubting the attributes and features of the body as a conclusion.

“Evidently none of the features which I arrived at by means of the senses; for whatever came under taste, smell, sight, touch or hearing has now altered – yet the wax remains” (Descartes, 1986). The Mediator's argument is based on the physical features of wax which have a distinguish smell, touch, sound and look when fresh cut from a honey comb. But when the same wax is held into a fire, it starts melting and turns into liquid. The question remains, is it still wax or something else? The answer should be relatively simple to answer and yes, it is still wax, even after its physical transformation from solid to liquid. The point is that changing the body doesn't change what it is. As a human being, even if change occurs with one's physical nature, the mind stays the same and keeps existing. One can trust the mind, but be careful with the bodily senses because they might be deceiving.

Cogito, ergo sum or I know, therefore I am, ends Meditation II. The Mediator can ask himself, what about material things or is my body important, too? All what he has discovered so far is the mind and that one can trust it and is the main part of his existence. The body and material things are still in a developmental stage which calls on the Mediator to discover them.

What are material things? Material things are clear and distinct from mental faculties and are quantifiable. They are matter, and properties of matter are shape, size, duration, and motion just like a human body. The faculties of a human body are visible or touchable because they made out of physical properties which again made out of matter. The mental faculties of humans is not made, like one might think, out of the brain which is a physical matter, it is made out of the mind. The mind is clearly not touchable or visible and is not made out of matter, instead it is something which the Mediator discovers as his place of existence.

The Mediator might ask, why do we have a body? The existence of a body is to keep us safe from physical harm which can be explained through our senses. The senses alarm us and sent signals to our brain which immediately takes action to avoid the danger or minimize the harm like putting your hand

to long on a hot stove. The Mediator points out this attribute of the body in Meditation VI, “For I know that in matters regarding the well-being of the body, all my senses report the truth much more frequently than not” (Descartes, 1986).

Sometimes, it is difficult for the general audience to distinguish between the mind and the brain when it comes to your senses, because the brain is seen as the center of thinking and existence. The brain is the physical part with your senses in “mind” and the mind is the soul which acknowledges your existence.

“But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended thing, non-thinking thing and I can exist without it” (Descartes, 1986). The Mediator clearly distinguishes now between the mind and the body and sees the mind as the more important part of being a rational thinking human. The mind gives us the essence to make decisions and decides our whole existence who we want to be. Maybe our mind is simple, but it is reliable and is the center of our thinking process which transforms us in a human being who is capable of imagination and knowledge. The Mediator sees the body independent from the mind and thinks it is actually not necessary to have a body, which can be confusing and goes into the area of Metaphysics, beyond our physical reality and understanding.

On the end of Meditation VI, the Mediator goes back to the Dream Argument and his response to it seems to be according to the research he did through the Meditations. In Meditation I, the Mediator is sitting by the fire place and he doesn't know, if he is actually awake or asleep. He cannot make a clear difference between reality and illusion. After this discovery, he leaves the problem alone and moves on to the next thing, the mind, until he gets to Meditation VI. There he knows finally that he has a body with senses which can be more and more trusted, and he also distinguishes between the mind and the body. The Mediator's response to the Dream Argument seems to get clearer and more understandable than in Meditation I. If he can see a person clear and distinct, he knows he is awake, and if the person appears and disappears quick like a ghost, he must be asleep. The Dream Argument is an example that

we can trust our senses to a certain extent without doubt.

The idea of *Cartesian Dualism* matters because it is an important part in the field of modern psychology. Psychology in general comes from philosophy and would be in the category of the Philosophy of Mind. The mind is something which was mentioned by Descartes for the first time and that human beings could think for themselves in a manner that didn't happen before. Freedom to have their own thoughts was restricted in a way which was very common in medieval times, where the area of philosophy was narrowed to Christian belief and most philosophers were seen as atheists. Christian authorities were not to be questioned and the topic of religion was the ultimate dogma in this time where being different was a matter for suspicion which continued well into Descartes's time.

Psychology followed a similar path and was considered first an extension of medicine where the mind and the physical body were connected to each other and mental issues were seen as pure physical. Most mental ill patients were treated with suspicion because doctors believed the body was invaded by some sort of evil spirit, if the physical explanation was not satisfactory enough or they just locked them away. Those methods were practice way into the 1800's, until doctors started to remember philosophers like Descartes and made their conclusions from there that there is a separation between mind and body. The mind, a complex but actually simple construction, was rediscovered again.

Separation of mind and body or Mind-Body Dualism is one of the greatest discoveries for science because people started to realize that there two different entities which have to be researched, the mental and the physical part of a human. Research in both helped the field of psychology find its own place in scientific studies which are mostly done observation and empirical studies. Psychological assessments can be led back to Descartes also, because in the *Meditations* the Mediator basically assessed his own mind to find out that he exist and so discovered his own existence. He knows on the end, he has a body too, but this body has different functions and is made out of physical matter. The matter which has distinguished itself from the mind, and this fact is one of the most important

advancements in medicine and psychology.

“My next observation is that the mind is not immediately affected by all parts of the body, but only by the brain, or perhaps just by one small part of the brain, namely the part which is said to contain the common sense” (Descartes, 1986). Dualism, two separate things, mind and body, which interact together when it comes to the brain's sensory components. Those sensory components send messages to our brain where our mind processes them, and we act according to it with reason and rational thinking. Of course, Descartes was still new to a discovery like this and didn't understand the scientific part of it like we would understand it now. But apparently, he knew which meaning the common sense had what is also called our conscious mind where we think logically. Logic, a field in today's philosophy, seems to awaking Descartes's interest a great deal when he did his observation of the mind and body.

Let's talk more about common sense which without a doubt can be credited to an individual with a mind of sound nature and rationality, a thinking thing what relies on pure logic. Since we are not machines, so our senses become a very vital part of our daily life and interaction with other human beings. Descartes still emphasis the mind more than the body, even that the trust in the senses becomes more certain like already mentioned in the Dream Argument.

“And I ought not to have even the slightest doubt of their reality if, after calling upon all the senses as well as my memory and my intellect in order to check them, I receive no conflicting reports from any of these sources” (Descartes, 1986).

Work Cited

Descartes, R. (1986). *Meditations on First Philosophy*. (J. Cottingham, Trans.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1641).