

Philosophy of Mind > Rene Descartes

Outline Descartes' views on the topic of Philosophy of Mind

Descartes has indeed made some notable contributions towards the philosophy of mind. It is the aim of this essay to discuss these contributions.

Descartes is well known for being an avid dualist. This is the view that the mind and body are understood to be separate and distinct from each other, but in some way causally connected. Descartes was no exception and believed the mind and body to be two completely different substances. He defines the body as an extended, non-thinking substance and the mind as a non-extended, thinking substance. But it not just these definitions that allow Descartes to adopt a dualistic point of view. Descartes came to the conclusion in meditation I of his discourse of method that any data received from the senses could be doubted and therefore unreliable. As the body is known only through the senses, Descartes was able to doubt the existence of such a body and all other bodies for that. In meditation II however he arrives at the knowledge that doubting the mind is incoherent, as a mind is needed in order to proceed with such doubts. Because the body can be doubted and the mind can indubitably not Descartes concludes that they are distinct. This is known as Cartesian Dualism. However in concluding that the mind and body are distinct Descartes is left with the problem of explaining how they interact. The problem starts with his conception of the mind, which as stated earlier is a thinking, non-extended substance, that Descartes believes isn't actually located in the body but in a non-physical realm. How then does this non-physical substance interact with a physical substance and vice versa? Descartes fails to give an account of how they interact, suggesting only that there is a place in the brain whereby they interact known as the Pineal Gland. However this is all Descartes says on the subject concluding that there must be some way in which they are connected (which god knows).

With Descartes being a dualist, he fundamentally thought that the mind was more important than the body. After all the mind cannot be doubted whereas the body can. In fact for Descartes the mind is primary and if a question of identity should arise the mind should be associated as the 'self'. He argues that even if he didn't have a body he would essentially be the same as long as he had his mind with all the correct faculties intact. But Descartes went further than this and defined the fundamental element of the mind and his existence as the ability to think. As long as Descartes continued to think he would continue to exist. It is in meditation II that this line of thinking emerges and lead Descartes to his famous maxim, "cogito ergo sum" or in English "I think therefore I am." This maxim is free from universal doubt and is always necessarily true whenever the thought is conceived. Its truth depends not on any sensory data but rather a cognitive process of the mind and therefore expresses the indubitability of one's own reality. With the certainty of his existence established Descartes continues to question his identity (eg: what exactly this 'I' is that exists). He concludes in meditation II that "sum res cogitans" or in English "I am a thing that thinks." In fact Descartes so closely associates the self with his conscious awareness, that if he

were to stop thinking it would follow that he would no longer exist.

Another topic under the philosophy of mind which needs discussion is the existence of other bodies and minds. Descartes initially starts his meditations by arguing that sensory appearances actually provide no reliable knowledge of the external world. In meditation II he uses a piece of wax, which he places by a fire (whereby its sensible properties change), to demonstrate that the impressions of the senses are an unreliable guide to the nature of other bodies. However he does conclude that the identity of the piece of wax depends solely upon its spatial location. During the course of his meditations Descartes convinces himself of firstly the existence of God (through the trademark argument), and that the essence of material substance is simply extension. This is an important point as it means if we go beyond what the senses supply (ie: underneath the colour, smell etc) what remains is a geometrical shape which fills up space. For Descartes this geometrical shape is the subject of mathematics. And as mathematics is known a priori through the mind alone, it follows these geometrical shapes are also known by the mind alone. Here the true nature of bodies is understood by pure thought alone. It is in meditation VI where Descartes is able to convince himself of the existence of other bodies. Firstly he concludes that it is coherent enough for such bodies to exist as they are in a geometrical form. Second, the fact that our imagination is directed towards the ideas of bodies, means it is possible that such bodies exist. Finally, the faculty of sense perception is an entirely passive ability to receive ideas of physical objects. As one does not have any control over such ideas, it follows that the ideas must be produced by some external source (ie: a body itself). Descartes also suggests that other bodies must exist if a non-deceiving God exists. For a non-deceiving god wouldn't allow Descartes to believe that something exists if in fact it wasn't real. As to whether Descartes believes other minds exist is a question left unanswered. This is probably due to the fact that one can only ever have direct access to one mind (their own), and therefore can only be sure of the existence of one mind.