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Topic no. 3

On the search for the steering wheel in the body machine

Developing a philosophical system and a coherent understanding of yourself and the world is hard. But developing a flexible philosophical system that can take new ideas and scientific developments into account without breaking together just as a house of cards, is even harder.

One could say, that Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia wanted to test the flexibility of Descartes' philosophical system, especially of his body-soul-dualism. How can two absolutely different substances- a mental and a material one- interact, how can a mental will be realized in a material world? The aim of the following essay is firstly to point out which ontological assumptions of Descartes Body-Soul-Dualism lead to the problem addressed by Elisabeth and secondly to discuss several possible ways of solving the problem.

Firstly, one must clarify the concepts of the soul and the body the Dualism is based upon to avoid misunderstandings.

Descartes based his whole metaphysical concept on the undeniable certainty of self-existence- identifying his self not with his material body, whose existence was in his view not self-evident, but with the thinking substance, who could state: *cogito, ergo sum*. That is how he establishes the existence of the soul defined as the substance, which thinks, memorizes, imagines and- forms the will. It is important to note that in his conception the soul is an immaterial, thinking substance without any material attributes. Moreover in the realm of the soul nothing happens in the pattern of cause-effect, but every thought and will is the result of an spontaneous and free act of the soul. With the help of his proof of god, Descartes wants to demonstrate the existence of the body and the material-physical things in the outer world. As a child of his time he is deeply influenced by a mechanistic worldview, every motion is caused by another, the whole material world is created as a perfectly harmonized machine, where every small wheel engages in one another. Nothing happens without cause. In order to affect another body even the smallest parts in the material world have a certain volume, a certain mass and a certain impulse in a three-dimensional room.

And here is the point, where Elisabeth spots the inconsistency: given an immaterial soul and a material body and given that the soul can realize its will in the material world (and one does not favor a two-clocks-model in the manner of Leibniz), the way, how they might interact, seems to be at least a doubtful matter. The soul, which is immaterial and therefore has no volume, no mass, no impulse, cannot play the role of a cause for the "bodily spirits", but to start a voluntary action in the material world exactly such a cause is required. Descartes argued that there is a place somewhere in the brain, where soul and body interact, but that did not really solve the incompatibility of the two substances. Maybe one can illustrate this problem with a very simple example of a possible formation of the will: let's assume somebody has the decision between an ice cream with chocolate-flavour and another one with strawberry-flavour. Descartes would describe the process of the decision like this: firstly a spontaneous act of the soul, such as memorizing a nice experience in the past, will lead to a free decision and secondly your soul will set your mechanical body in motion, who will order, pay and take the wafer with you. But the transition from the mental sphere to the realization of the voluntary act in the material sphere cannot be explained coherently. To put it metaphorically: the homunculus has no steering wheel for the body-machine.

Since we have now elaborated the problematic conception of a body-soul-dualism and their interaction, we can now turn to different approaches to a solution and discuss their plausibility.

A materialistic monist would now argue: when Elisabeth starts with "given that the soul" she commits the first mistake. The whole problem is only a result of the false premise that there are more than one, more than just a material substance. If we just remove this first "given", the whole problem would expose itself as a pseudo-problem, because the concept of the soul was just a philosophical hoax and the implications of a dualism lead in to contradictions. Only the physical world, which is the object of scientific research, can be counted as real, the stream of consciousness is not an evidence for the existence of a soul, but just an illusion created by the emergence of neurons. One has to admit that the materialistic monist solves the question of the interaction between body and soul by just erasing it. Even the human will is nothing but a set of neurons integrated in the great cause-effect-connection dominating the material world, a steering wheel for the homunculus is not required, because there is nobody inside the body machine. A monist would reduce the process of choosing the right flavour for your ice cream to electric impulses in your nerves and deny the role of you memorizing the former nice experiences.

But on closer examination, one might notice that this conception, which solves the problem of interaction by simply denying it, produces more complications than it solves. Not only our soul is not real, but also our thoughts, emotions are not, what they seem to be- their qualia- not their physical basis, but how one perceives these phenomena from the inside- cannot be explained by such a theory. Furthermore, if everything what our brain produces is simply an illusionous construction of our world and not the world itself, that would also count for our sciences of nature. And in the following one had to deny the certain reality of a physical world because it could be an illusion and in the end even the fact that we have a brain as the source of our illusions would become doubtful. You see: Monism ends in a dizzy thought-roundabout and not in a satisfying solution.

Let's come to a quick interim-resume: the conception of body and soul as two fundamentally different, but nonetheless interacting substances leads undeniably into a paradox. To solve that, one might approach the basic assumption of the existence of two substances and deny one of it. But as I have tried to show: one cannot expect a coherent theory of the formation and realization of the will from this conception either.

Now I will try to make clear, what in my view the crucial mistake is, that cannot only be found in Dualism and Monism, but also in the letter of Elisabeth. It is a typical philosopher's mistake, whose pattern Wittgenstein has illustrated with the metaphora of the fly trap/glass: often philosophers are just like flees by sweet honey- tempted by nice-smelling categories and conceptions to make themselves comfortable in a particular philosophical worldview. What they do not realize: this system is in fact an invisible prison, which does not allow further adaptations and lead into inevitable contradictions, one cannot escape from.

In this case the nice-smelling, but misleading category is the speech of substances. Why do they speak of substances? Because they want to explain the basis for our interior experiences (thoughts, emotions, will etc..) on the one hand and the basis for the exterior surrounding world (material things) on the other. That is why they introduce this category, which leads as we have seen into a paradox concerning their interaction. In my view a possible solution would be: substances are not ontologically real entities, but simply a confusion by our language. But how do we explain the difference between the interior experience and the exterior world then? I would argue, that the difference does not exist in the nature of the reality itself, but in the perspectives from which we perceive it. There is the exterior perspective, from which we perceive the material world and which is the perspective of the science of nature, and there is the interior perspective, from which we can perceive the qualia of events and which is essential to psychology and especially literature. (that is a more than simplified description: among the two perspectives one could make further distinctions and probably characterize an infinite number of perspectives).

Now we can relate this conception to the presented problem of the formation of the will by referring to our example of the ice-cream-decision: our conception denies that the decision in the mental sphere to prefer strawberry-flavour has caused the action in the material sphere, but it also does not reduce the process to a material substance. Both events: the memory and the conscious decisions on the one hand, and the impulses in your neurons, which set the physical actions in motion, are in fact the same events from two different angles. Reality does not split up into different spheres, but a process can be described out of many perspectives. An explanation for the interaction between the material and the mental sphere is not needed, because they actually refer to identical events in different lights and do not cause each other or relate to each other in any form- that would mean mixing up perspectives. A philosopher should only examine the different perspectives when talking about reality, and not speculate about unknown substances reality is "actually" based on. Only then we can avoid the unsolvable problems concerning interaction between substances such as the formation of will, which Elisabeth from Bohemia has pointed out.

To resume: given a thinking, mental substance and a material-physical substance (such as in Descartes`Dualism) one can convincingly argue that an interaction and a cause-effect-relationship between these two leads inevitably into contradictions. However, simply erasing one of this substances (such as the materialistic monist does) is an unsatisfying solutions, because it raises questions concerning the illusory quality of even the other substance. I strongly plead for not arguing about ominous substances, but for describing reality from at least two different perspectives, whereas both are valid descriptions of the same process. I am the opinion that this conception avoids the sysiphus-task of finding out relationships between different substances and therefore can offer a satisfying solution by getting rid of confusing categories

If we talk about the homunculus or about the bodymachine depends on the perspective, but a steering wheel in between, which would offer a whole picture and the relationship between these two cannot be found.