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Topic 3:

“Given that the soul of a human being is only a thinking substance, how can it affect the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions.”

Letter from Princess Elisabeth to Descartes, May 6/16 1643. – In: The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes (The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe), Transl. and ed. by Lisa Shapiro, Chicago University Press 2007, p. 62.

Cartesian Dualism

The Mind-Body Problem is a staple of Western philosophy. Cartesian Dualism, the position that the mind and the body are two things entirely independent of one another, is also a staple and has been the subject of great debate and controversy since it was put forward by the early modern French philosopher René Descartes -after whom it is named. The quote in question can be interpreted as stating a very common objection to Cartesian Dualism. Namely, the objection that if the mind and body were completely separate, the mind would not be able to interact with the body. Initially, I would like to state that if the quote is interpreted as such, the question of free will and the question of the existence of the soul are irrelevant to the topic at hand. I will demonstrate this at a further point. That aside, my position is that the objection raised in the quote does in fact defeat Cartesian Dualism. In order to demonstrate this, I will first define the terms of the argument and weigh the stakes and hand. Then, I will provide two lines of argument in support of my position: firstly, that the mind is demonstrably material within Descartes' own framework and secondly, that the approach taken by him to reach this conclusion is, in itself, flawed. In other words, I will attack both his conclusion and the means by which he reached it.

Definitions and Clarifications

I am willing to admit that by demonstrating what I have set out to, I will not achieve much in practical terms. The question of whether or not the mind and the body are separate is not relevant to our day-to-day functioning. However, as I have stated in my introduction, it is philosophically a big deal. Just because a debate does not carry high stakes, does not mean we should not have it.

As with all questions philosophical, the terms have to be defined. "Matter" can be defined very easily: anything which occupies space, i.e. has mass. "Mind," however, is a term that is hard to define. Intuitively, most people would come up with a working definition close to "The mind is the part of the body that is immaterial." This, obviously, begs the question in favour of the position that the mind is immaterial. To define the term in a *useful* way, I will start from how philosophers *use* the term. In his work *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, American philosopher Richard Rorty describes the enterprise of philosophy, at least that of modernist philosophy, as an attempt

to "clean the mirror." This refers to the common conception within philosophy of how the mind and the material world interact. According to this, subjects perceive a world of objects. However, they do not perceive the objects themselves. Objects in nature create representations in their minds, and they perceive merely those. Philosophy then, is an attempt to "clean the mirror," i.e. to make sure that the representations we perceive are as similar to the objects they represent as possible. Rorty himself holds that this approach is misguided and wants to get rid of it. I disagree but will not object to remain within scope. I cite him only for a definition. Thus, the mind is the thing which allows us to perceive objects by representing them in perceivable ways. The question is, then, whether or not this "thing" is material.

Finally, before moving on, I will prove my aforementioned assertions. Namely, that the question of free will and the question of the soul are not relevant to this discussion. When it comes to free will, in this framing, the mind is assumed to be in control of the body. Free will would mean that the orders transmitted by the mind to the body are voluntary, and determinism would mean they are not. We, however, are asking if the mind itself is immaterial. Meaning we are asking if a material thing is giving orders to a material thing, or an immaterial thing is doing that. We are not asking if such orders are predetermined or not. When it comes to the soul, since the soul is not conceived to interact with our material bodies in any way, it is even more irrelevant! It could be that the mind and body are both material and that we also have an immaterial soul. This would only be false if one were to claim that the mind must be material because materialism is true and only material things exist, and thus if the mind exists, it must be material. In that case and that case only, would an argument for the materiality of the mind concern the existence of the soul. With these clarifications and definitions, I will now move on to the arguments themselves.

Demonstration That the Mind is Material

Given those definitions of "mind" and "matter," it can be demonstrated that the mind is material. I have shown above that both for the hard determinist and the libertarian (and the compatibilist for that matter), the mind is in control of the body. To me, "the mind" is simply the name we give to a number of the functions of the human brain. This is because the mind has been defined as what allows us to perceive, and perception is done by the brain. If I am able to demonstrate this, demonstrate that perception can be explained start-to-finish in material terms only, I will have demonstrated that the mind must be material, or at least, that there is no sufficient reason to say it is not. To do this, I will present the following argument:

- (1) For perception to happen, there must be matter to be perceived.
- (2) Only the material properties of matter can be perceived.
- (3) The perception of the material properties of matter can be explained in fully material terms.
- (4) Perception must be done by matter, so in humans, the brain and related organs.
- (5) Therefore, the mind must be material.

To defend this argument both on its own merits and against possible objections, I will go through it proposition by proposition and show that each is true and follows from the one(s) before.

(1), is almost an analytic proposition. The Prussian philosopher Immanuel Kant defined analytic propositions as opposed to synthetic propositions as, paraphrased, propositions whose truth can be known simply by knowing the definitions of the terms used in them. The textbook example is: "All bachelors are unmarried." Since a bachelor is an unmarried man, by definition, there can be no married bachelors and thus all bachelors must be unmarried. Similarly, since perception is a relation between two things: something perceiving and something being

perceived, for something to be perceived, there must be something *to* perceive. However, (1) does not only state that for there to be perception, there must be something to perceive. It makes the additional claim that the said "something" must be material. I will admit that I cannot prove this logically or empirically. However, I am not aware of anyone who holds that the soul, or the mind, or God, or anything that purports to be immaterial can be perceived by our sense. On the contrary, such people always emphasize that they cannot be perceived.

(2) is an auxiliary proposition that follows from (1): if only material things can be perceived, immaterial parts of material things cannot be; therefore, only the material parts of material things are subject to perception. This means that the possible existence of a soul, for instance, would not impare my argument. Some hypothetical objector could argue that humans have souls and we perceive humans, so we must be perceiving souls and therefore, immaterial things can be perceived. By virtue of the truth of (2), I can deflect such an objection by stating that we perceive only the material parts of a human.

The 20th century British philosopher Alfred Jules Ayer would disagree that (1) is true. In his magnum opus *Language, Truth and Logic*; he objects to the view held by some Logical Positivists, namely Moritz Schlick, that "ostensive propositions" are certain truths. This objection is a strong one, so I will counter it in detail. First, definitions: an ostensive proposition is a proposition which records the perception of a single sense-datum. For instance, "This apple is green." This proposition refers to a single sense-datum that is the colour green and to a single instance of that sense-datum being perceived. This is a synthetic proposition, not an analytic one, as it communicates information that cannot be known only by knowing the definitions of the terms in it. Philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment David Hume is credited with showing that inductive synthetic propositions are not certain truths. The most common example of this is: "All men are mortal." After observing n number of men dying, we may utter this proposition. However, there is no reason why man number $n+1$ will not turn out to be immortal and thus falsify the proposition. Ayer believes the same is true for ostensive propositions. Consider the following syllogism:

- (1) There is an apple.
- (2) I perceive this apple to be green.
- (3) This apple is green.

According to Ayer, (1) is not necessary for (3) to be true. For him, when we say "This apple is green," we are merely communicating the fact that we perceive it to be green. Since this is a subjective experience, it does not require the existence of an object. To show that this is false, I simply need to show that (2) cannot be true without (1) also being true. In other words, that (1) follows from (2). I will do this as such: since colour is simply a result of a property of matter, namely the property of reflecting only a portion of the light that falls upon it, the subjective experience of the perception of colour cannot occur without the corresponding existence of a material object. The same argument applies to the other senses as well.

Now that I have defeated Ayer's objection, I can continue with the main syllogism. There, (3) is an empirical truth regarding human physiology. In the present day, science provides a satisfactory explanation for the nature of perception that does not involve any immaterial aspect. This is not a particularly creative or impressive argument but it is a statement of a scientific finding which there is no reason to contradict, at least as of now.

It is then very apparentl that from (1), (2) and (3) follows (4); and with the given definition of the mind, from (4) follows (5). This argument, of course, is a positive one. In the quote, the negative argument is raised that if one were to grant that the mind is not material, how the mind comes to interact with the material body cannot be explained. Here, the burden of proof is on the Dualist to explain how that may happen. In place of such an explanation, I will passingly

mention another positive counterargument belonging to Descartes' contemporary, Margaret Cavendish who raised the persuasive point that thoughts are subject to the limits of space and time which are the same limits that matter is subject to. Consider this: if I never go to Russia, never read or listen to anything about it, can I have thoughts about the Kremlin? Of course no, I have to materially be there or be transmitted information that originated within people who are. This means either matter has to think, so the mind is material, or that the immaterial mind has to be given information by the material body; which again, is not adequately explained by the Dualist.

Was Descartes Wrong From the Beginning?

Descartes' philosophy is perhaps the best example of a system of philosophical thought that starts from first premises. This is similar to how mathematics works where theorem are proven based on trivially true axioms analogous to first premises. Akin to this, Descartes famously employed methodic doubt to let go of each of his beliefs to the point where he believed only the things which he could not doubt, i.e. things he knew for sure. Upon those, he built the rest of his thought, making sure that each step followed from the last. This is not a proper approach to building a system of philosophical thought. Through my first argument, I have falsified Descartes' conclusion from within his own framework. Now, I will take a more macro approach and attack the framework itself.

My argument is that meaningful knowledge cannot be derived from first premises. When attempting such a thing, a philosopher will make sure that their first premises are certain truths. It would be quite foolish to build an entire philosophy based on propositions which could be false. So, then, what are certain truths? As I demonstrated above, ostensive propositions are certain truths. However, it is not plausible to derive a system of thought from ostensive propositions because they are too atomized. Could you construct a whole system of thought from these propositions: "This apple is green," "This coffee is hot," "This table is hard," et cetera? Of course not. Pushing ostensive propositions aside, what other certain truths are there? Analytic propositions are certain truths. So, what are analytic propositions? Analytic propositions can be either definitions, or propositions that follow from definitions, or tautologies. A definition is not knowledge, it is a function that we use to make knowledge come about. I could not know how many fridges there are in my kitchen, if I did not know what a fridge meant. However; I know that there is only one fridge in my kitchen, not because I know the definition of a fridge, but because I counted. Counting is what gave me that knowledge. The definition of a fridge did not give me that knowledge, it was merely a prerequisite of my getting it. Therefore, in addition to ostensive propositions, definitions are also disqualified. Then, we could turn to propositions that follow from definitions, such as "All bachelors are unmarried." These propositions do not, however, give us knowledge as we already knew their truth the moment we defined "bachelor." So we are left with tautologies, which are propositions true by virtue of their logical form. Examples of such propositions are "Plato is Plato" and "Plato was either Greek or he was not Greek." The truth of these are known a priori, but they also do not convey knowledge. "A is A" and "A is either B or not-B" are so trivially and obviously true that they cannot give us any knowledge we did not already possess. Since from just a tautology we can only infer another tautology, we also cannot rely on propositions that follow from tautologies to give us knowledge. We would have to conjugate a tautology with at least one non-ostensive synthetic proposition which would make the concluding proposition an uncertain truth, meaning we cannot use it as a first premise. Therefore, there are no propositions suitable to be first premises and thus a system of philosophical thought that provides meaningful knowledge

cannot be derived from first premises.

There are two objections that can be raised against this argument. The first is done via *reductio ad absurdum*. I have stated that from tautologies, only other tautologies can follow and such tautologies do not provide meaningful knowledge. Furthermore, by my own admission, mathematics does exactly that. Therefore; if I am correct, all of mathematics, geometry and logic provides nothing but meaningless knowledge that is all trivial. My response is to bite the bullet and say: "Yes, the propositions of mathematics, geometry and logic are all trivialities which do not provide meaningful knowledge." To this, one would presumably reply that is sure does look like they do provide knowledge. The answer to this, is that discoveries in mathematics seem like actual discoveries because we did not previously know them, not because they are actually synthetic a priori propositions. Andrew Wiles was happy when he proved Fermat's Last Theorem because he himself and the mathematics community generally did not know it. This does not mean it is knowledge in the proper sense of the term.

The second objection comes from the 19th century British philosopher John Stuart Mill. He thought that the propositions of mathematics, geometry and logic were actually inductive, just like the propositions of the natural sciences. The reason why they appear to be certain truths unlike natural scientific propositions is because the number of experiments confirming them is significantly higher. Think of the logical proposition "A is A." Every time I observe something, anything, I confirm this proposition with an experiment. So the difference between the mathematical, geometrical or logical propositions and natural scientific propositions is one of *quantity*, not *quality*. To refute this, I will demonstrate positively that such propositions are certain truths. To this end, I will define a certain truth as a truth that leads to a contradiction when denied. That is; a proposition that cannot be, since contradictions are impossible, false and thus must be true. I will attempt the first formulation first. Is it self-contradictory to deny that A is A, in other words, to say that A is not A. Well, no. Because for that to be the case, A must be A, and so we must beg the question in my favour. Notice that this does not falsify my claim, it just doesn't prove it. But I succeed in proving it by the second formulation: is it true that the proposition "A is A" cannot be false? Yes. Notice again that I do not mean it cannot be *falsified* in the way Popper used that term. I mean that there can be no occurrence of this proposition not being true. By this; I also don't mean that there has never been, in practice, an such an occurrence. We have also never sent a man to Mars, but it is obviously possible for that to happen. However it is impossible for A not to be A, not because it has always been that way; but because we cannot even conceive of such a thing happening. This is in analogy to physical versus logical impossibility. It is impossible for me to lift my home off the ground, but it is physically impossible *only*, and so you can conceive of that happening. However it is logically impossible for a square circle to exist, and so you cannot even picture it in your head. Similarly, you cannot even picture in your head a situation in which something is not identical to itself and therefore, propositions such as that one are certain truths unlike what Mill claims.

The final possible objection I will confront before concluding my essay is an objection to the general approach I took in *this section* of the essay. What I have done here is attack how Descartes reached his conclusions, but I have not (in this section) attacked the conclusions themselves. One could object to this by saying that just because the reason that someone believes something is an invalid reason, does not mean their belief is false. This is true, it does not mean that and they may indeed have just gotten lucky and randomly held a true belief for the wrong reasons. This, I will concede. However, in retaliation, I will end by paraphrasing Russell and say that if there is no reason for supposing the truth of a propositions; we should not believe it.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have stood in opposition to Cartesian Dualism, the position that the mind and the body are separate and the former is immaterial whilst the latter isn't. To this end, I have both affirmed the negative counter-argument in the quote and provided my own positive counter-argument. Furthermore, I have shown the misguidance of Descartes in attempting to reach his conclusions based on first premises and in doing so, have attacked both his view on the Mind-Body Problem specifically, and his philosophy more generally. Therefore, I have argued that both within and outside the paradigms of Descartes' thought, his position does not hold water.