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Mind-Body Problem in Philosophy of Mind

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Abstract: *This paper investigates mind-body problem in contemporary philosophy of mind and it also explores foundations of mind-body problem in Cartesian dualist ontology. By doing so, I shed light on the nature of mind and nature of body in the writings of Descartes. Descartes argues the mind is capable of thinking and it is essentially a non-corporeal entity. By contrast to mind, body is essential corporeal and it lacks the ability of being conscious. But Descartes also raises the question of interaction between mind and body. He admits the essence of mind and body is entirely different but mind and body interacts in humans through pineal gland. This classical solution of mind-body problem in philosophy of mind is called interactionism. The thrust of this paper is that dualist ontological framework creates the space for asking metaphysical question about mind-body relations. Moreover this paper sheds light on nondualist ontological alternatives for solving or denying mind-body problem.*

Keywords: Dualism, Ontology, Mind-body Problem, Interactionism, Cartesian Philosophy.

In contrast with spiritual substance, mind, matter is extended in three dimensional spaces. This does not possess consciousness and it is simply dead inert. Thus it is extended-and-inert. This is a fundamental difference between matter and mind in framework of Cartesian dualist ontology.

A man has mind and physical body as if man is composition of the two substances. I shall turn towards the secondary attributes of the substances. Matter is determined; it is bounded in cause and effect. All movement in material bodies is mechanical. There is no free will in material bodies. Greek philosopher atomist Lucipus teaches us about determinism. “Nothing happens at random; whatever comes about is by rational necessity.”¹

Mind is free. It is not bounded in causal chain and it works freely. We can jump from thinking about philosophy of Hegel to memories of our childhood. This reveals a major difference between two substances. Matter is determined and mind is free. These are opposite attributes.

Every human being possesses mind as well as body. On the one hand mind can be known directly. We can know it for certain. We have no deception regarding knowledge of mental events. But we have knowledge of our bodies indirectly. We cannot know it directly by any mean. Additionally we may be deceived regarding knowledge of the body. This is another difference in two substances.

Matter is extended in space; therefore, it is infinitely divisible. We cannot reach it indivisible part of matter, according to Descartes. Mind is thinking and indivisible. Nobody says that s/he has a little bit mind. Either you have a mind or you cannot have it.

¹ Wheelright, *The Presocratics* (Indianapolis: The Odyssey Press, 1960), 178.

By this attribute we can observe another difference between two substances. We explore the more differences in mind and body, the dualism becomes the sharper.

I shall come to second last contrast between the attributes of both substances. We can have reliable knowledge of matter by observation. Matter can be apprehended by sense perception. Mind is of incorporeal nature. It cannot be observed and experience cannot become its source of knowledge one's own mind and other minds. This is the difference between mind and body regarding knowledge of them. At the end we may see that mind being incorporeal is indestructible and cannot be touched or caught. It cannot be harmed. Matter is destructible in the sense that it can be broken and it can be caught. We can mould it as we want. This is the last but not least contrast between the properties of mind and body.

These fundamental as well as secondary contrasts between mind and body constitute the substantial dualism. They were created independently and these can survive independent of each other. Arguments for the exclusive existence of mind and body and investigation into their natures stretch out at the heart of Cartesian dualism.

In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes gives the following arguments for the existence of mind. First three arguments are from subjective perspective. The first argument was developed through methodic doubt. When Descartes starts to doubt he knows that everything could be doubted. But doubter 'I' cannot be doubted. The 'I' is out of doubting realm. Body can be doubted. It entail body has exclusive existence from mind.

The second argument can be called the transparency argument. Every event in my mind is clear for me. I, so to speak, know

whatever happens in my mind. But I am not aware of my body so. There are many happenings in my body with which I am not aware e.g. digestion. It follows that my mind has separate existence from my body in that I do not have knowledge of all happenings in my body. But I know everything about my mental states. The third argument is very convincing. According to Descartes every man has privilege access to the content of his mind. And no one else can access my mental states. My body is under access of me as well as others. Therefore mind is separate from my body.

I shall come to the arguments for the separate existence of mind and body from ontological standpoint. For Descartes mind and body are ontologically different substances. The first ontological argument for the separate existence of mind and body runs as: the essence of mind is *res cogitans* and the essence of body is *res extensa*. The essence of body is beyond the essence of mind. Hence mind and body are separate substances.

The second ontological argument for the existence of mind is very significant. My body is divisible being a physical object. It can be cut into pieces. For instance when my arm is cut down from my body, no piece of mind is broken. This entails body is divisible but mind is not divisible. Hence mind has independent existence.

The above arguments are major arguments proceeded by Descartes for the mind-body dualism. Descartes has two tests for the presence of mind in humans He deemed animal cannot pass test because they are living machines and do not have mind.

The first test is language test. Descartes says that man can learn and use language. This is the reason that man has a mind. Animals cannot learn and use language because of lack of mind. Man has innate capacity to learn language; this is possible because of mind. The ability of learning and using language demonstrates

that man has passed the test for possessing mind but animals cannot have mind in that they cannot pass this test.

The second test is less important and it is, you may say, similar to the first test. This may be called behavioral test for the presence of mind in human beings. Humans have adaptability and creativity in response to changing environment. But animals cannot change their behavior in a strange environment. They have to suffer because lack of creativity. But humans have sharp creativity in their changing atmosphere. This is possible because of possession of a mind.

Descartes proved in a convincing manner that man has a mind which is entirely different from his body, through this he reaches at the destination of dualism. He now has to face a problem of mind-body relation. This is the central problem in the classical metaphysics and this is also starting point of modern philosophy of mind. Descartes formulated this problem in the last chapter of *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

Before going into any detail of Descartes solution for mind-body dualism, I would like to elucidate the mind-body problem in some detail and I shall tell briefly about its place in contemporary philosophy of mind.

As we know that Descartes believed man is composed of mind, a spiritual substance, and body, a material substance, but the problem is that who is in charge? Who does dominate other? What is the causal relation between both? How does body tell to mind to feel pain when it is injured? How does mind tell to the body to move? It is obvious for everyone mind and body interacts but the explanation of this causal relation drags us into trouble. Simply speaking when my finger is cut my mind feels pain. The bodily event of cutting finger causes the mental feeling of pain. It is

evident that a physical event is becoming the cause of mental event. Likewise my mental event of the decision of going outside becomes the cause of a physical event. When I intend I should go outside then my body moves to outside. This makes it clear that my mental events are the cause of my physical movement. It follows that there is causal relation between mind and body but it seems very perplexed that how body can instruct to mind and vice versa. Mind is of spiritual nature and body is extended in space. Mind is conscious but body is not conscious. Both substances being possessor of different natures cannot interact. If this is so than how can we explain that why we feel specific feeling in a correlation with specific physical change. For instance feeling of pain is associated when my finger is cut off or movement of body is attached when I move.

The problem in philosophy of mind is still unsolved. Since Descartes many solution have been presented by philosophers but none of them got complete acceptance among philosophers. John Searle, American philosopher of mind and language, says that this problem has changed its formulation. For him it is the neuroscientifically informed version of mind-body problem.

Today new discipline of cognitive science has emerged to solve the problem.² But no satisfactory progress has been made. Philosophy of mind is study of all aspects of mind. Mind-body problem is central to philosophy of mind. There are very few philosophers of mind who defends Descartes' substantial dualism. Majority of philosophers of mind has adopted the position of physicalism. There are so many varieties of physicalism:

i) Reductive Physicalism

² See *What is Cognitive Science?* By Barbara Von Eckardt.

- ii) Non-Reductive Physicalism
- iii) Eliminativism
- iv) Functionalism
- v) Biological Naturalism

And some schools of thought are alternative names of the above schools of thoughts.

Descartes introduced interactionism as the solution of mind body problem. (Descartes attempted to resolve this problem in various writings.) His theory was in accordance with common sense (*Sensus Communis*). He thinks mind, though a spiritual substance, is in charge of body and it instructs our body. The body also influences the mind. There is interaction between mind and body. Both are independent but both do interact with each other. Descartes pointed out the location of interaction between mind and body. The point of interaction was pineal gland in our brain. According to Descartes mind and body are place of stay for human soul. Through pineal gland mind and body can interact. This was a *big mistake* to locate mental substance into the material substance. *He was aware of it.* After receiving objections Descartes made his position clearer on interactionism. “Nature likewise teaches me by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., that I am not only lodged in my body as a pilot in a vessel, but that I am besides so intimately conjoined, and as it were intermixed with it, that my mind and body compose a certain unity. For if this were not the case, I should not feel pain when my body is hurt, seeing I am merely a thinking thing, but should perceive the wound by the understanding alone, just as a pilot perceives by sight when any part of his vessel is damaged; and when my body has need of food or drink, I should have a clear knowledge of this, and not be made aware of it by the confused sensations of hunger and thirst: for, in truth, all these sensations of hunger, thirst, pain, etc., are nothing

more than certain confused modes of thinking, arising from the union and apparent fusion of mind and body.”³

Furthermore Descartes apparently suspends his substantial dualism and he claims of the union of mind and body. “Human beings are made up of body and soul, not by mere presence or proximity of one to another, but by a true substantial union..... it is an essential union, because the union which joins a human body and a soul to each other is not accidental to a human being but essential.”⁴

The above passage shows that Descartes believes in the unity of body and soul in man. They have no exclusive existence in man at least. This unity indicates a contradiction in substance dualism. For Descartes body cannot feel⁵ or it is not conscious because it always requires some mind to produce feeling and consciousness⁶. There is abyss between mind and body and it makes interaction impossible. Descartes had to affirm that he could not solve the problem.

In conclusion, I can say that Cartesian philosophy has a defining role in modern philosophy in general and mind-body problem in Cartesian ontology played a significant role in emergence of contemporary philosophy of mind. Descartes explore essences of mind and body and he finds that mind and body are

³ Rene Descartes, *The Method, Meditations and Philosophy* (London: M Walter Dunne Publisher, 1901), 230-1

⁴ K. T. Maslin, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 43.

⁵ Descartes critic, Leibnitz, do not agree with this point of view. Leibnitz argues for panpsychism i.e., the presence of mind in every object as if there are degrees of mind.

⁶ Consciousness is awareness or awakening. When Descartes investigated nature of mind, he was mostly talking about nature of conscious experience. Nowadays problem of consciousness is considered central problem of philosophy of mind.

essentially different. He also argues that mind and body interacts with one another. This is called interactionism in Cartesian philosophy. There were many critics of interactionism in history of philosophy of mind. Many philosopher presented their own solution to mind-body problem but contemporary philosophers of mind are more interested to replace dualist ontology with monist ontology (like physicalism, eliminativism or functionalism etc.) rather to solve mind-body problem. In light of this survey of debates among philosophers of mind, I am of the opinion that mind-body problem is unique to substance dualism of Descartes and this problem cannot be solved outside of Cartesianism. This is a fact that mind-body problem has been part of metaphysics for centuries but mind-body problem was eventually left the domain of metaphysics. Mind-body problem, nowadays, is considered central problem of philosophy of mind and mostly philosophers of mind are critic of substantial dualism. Contemporary philosophers of mind are embracing some form of materialism or any position closer to materialism. Therefore, they are not interested in problem of causation or traditionally speaking mind-body problem. They explain mental phenomena in physicalist jargons. Philosophical problems slowly disappear for history of philosophy and that is the final solution of the problems.

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