



Philosophy of Mind

Historical background: Elisabeth

Chapman University. PHIL340. Lecture 4. 9/9/2021.
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Reminder: discussion board posts due 9/11

- ▶ **Post 1:** In your own words, explain a point of disagreement between Descartes and Elisabeth (please be specific -- your explanation should demonstrate your understanding of the readings). Then, identify which point of view you agree with (or lean towards) and explain why. 200-300 words.
- ▶ **Post 2:** Provide constructive feedback to a post on another student's thread. 150-250 words.

Assignment Rubric Details

Discussion Board Posts				
Criteria	Ratings			Pts
Post 1 Response to prompt	5.0 pts Excellent The post clearly answers the prompt, demonstrates understanding of the reading, and illustrates independent thinking.	3.0 pts Adequate The post attempts to answer the prompt, demonstrates partial understanding of the reading, but lacks independent thinking.	1.0 pts Inadequate Does not provide clear answer to the prompt and does not demonstrate understanding of the reading.	5.0 pts
Post 2 Constructive feedback	5.0 pts Excellent The post responds clearly to another student's post, offers constructive ideas, and is respectful.	3.0 pts Adequate The post attempts to respond to another student's post, but lacks either constructive ideas or respectful language.	1.0 pts Inadequate Does not respond to another student's post in way that demonstrates thoughtfulness.	5.0 pts
				Total Points: 10.0

Recap: Descartes 1st argument for mind-body dualism

(1) Body is essentially an extended thing.

A body cannot exist without being extended.

However, a body can exist without thought.

(2) Mind is essentially a thinking thing.

A mind cannot exist without thought.

However, a mind can exist without being extended.

(3) Therefore, mind and body are distinct.

Recap: Descartes 2nd argument for mind-body dualism

(1) Body is always divisible.

“I cannot imagine any [extended thing] which I cannot easily sunder in thought.”

(2) Mind is entirely indivisible.

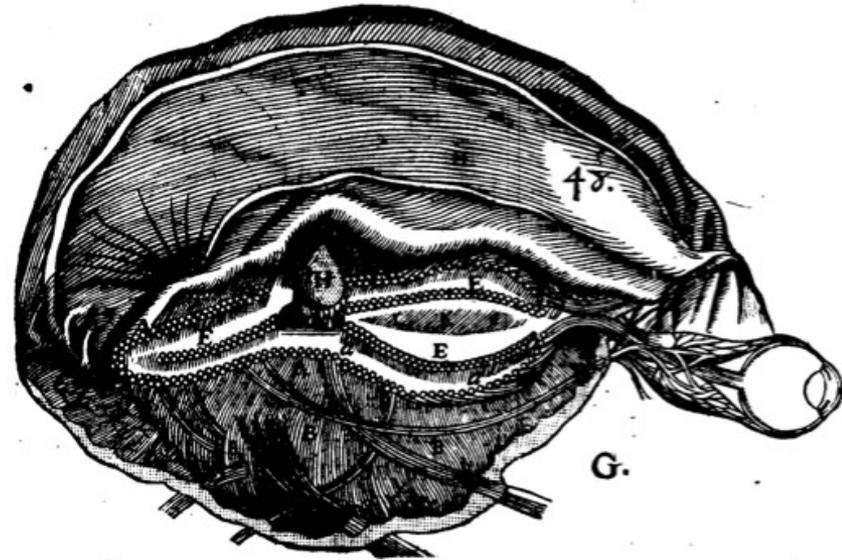
“when I consider myself as a thinking thing, I can distinguish in myself no parts [...] I am somewhat absolutely one and entire.”

(3) Therefore, mind and body are distinct.



Descartes' theory of mind-body interaction

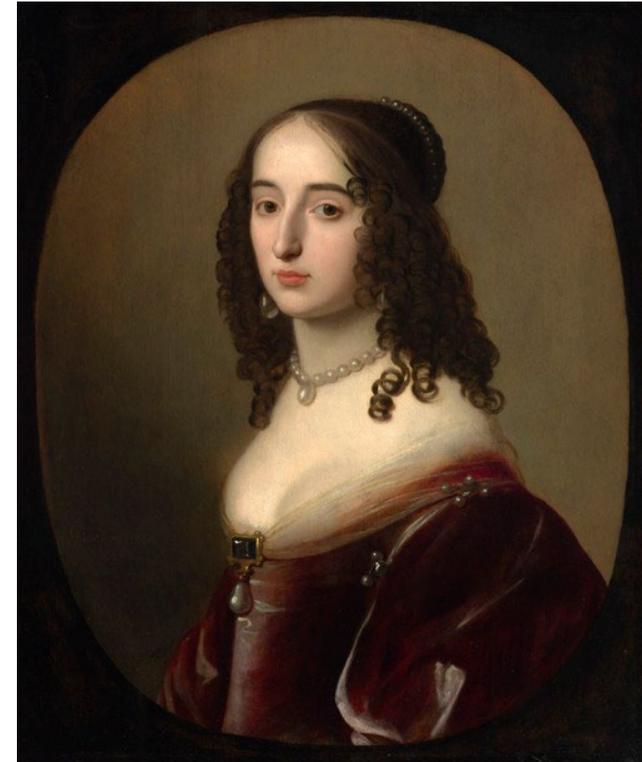
- ▶ A human being is a union of mind and body, two radically distinct substances that interact in *the pineal gland*.
- ▶ The pineal gland because it is the only nondouble organ in the brain, and double reports, as from two eyes, must merge.
 - ▶ We will return to this issue in the context of split-brain patients.
- ▶ Each action on a person's sense organs causes small matter to move through tubular nerves to the pineal gland, causing it to vibrate.
- ▶ These vibrations give rise to emotions and passions and also cause the body to act.
- ▶ Bodily action is thus the outcome of a reflex that begins with external stimuli e.g. when a soldier sees the enemy, feels fear, and flees.
- ▶ The mind cannot change bodily reactions directly—for example, it cannot will the body to fight—but by altering mental attitudes, it can change the pineal vibrations from those that cause fear and fleeing to those that cause courage and fighting.



The Pineal Gland (H), according to Descartes. *Treatise of man* (1664, p. 63).

Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia (1618-1680)

- ▶ After a protestant uprising (that triggered the Thirty Years' War), her father, Frederick V (then leader of a protestant military alliance), became King of Bohemia (1619).
- ▶ Only one year later Catholic armies invaded Bohemia, Frederick fled with his family to his uncle, Prince Maurice, in the Netherlands in 1622.
- ▶ Here, Elisabeth would receive an education, and would make profound contributions to mathematics, physics, and philosophy, albeit by influencing her male counterparts, including Descartes, through letters and correspondence.
- ▶ After receiving prominence e.g. from having several books dedicated to her (including Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy* and *The Passions of the Soul*), she established one of the first networks of female scholars in Europe.
- ▶ In 1662 Elisabeth joined the Abbey of Herford in Germany and in five years became abbess (head of nuns) and governed the surrounding community of 7,000 people.
- ▶ Here, she made the Abbey into a centre of religious tolerance and discussion and a refuge from religious persecution.



Portrait of Elisabeth in 1642, aged 24, one year before her first letter to Descartes.

Elisabeth writes on 6.v.1643

- ▶ Elisabeth's fundamental question:
 - ▶ Given that the mind of a human being is only a *thinking* substance, how can it affect the body, in order to bring about voluntary actions?
- ▶ This is a pressing question for Descartes because:
 - ▶ How a thing moves depends solely on:
 - ▶ (i) How much it is pushed,
 - ▶ (ii) the manner in which it is pushed,
 - ▶ (iii) the surface texture and shape of the thing that pushes it.
 - ▶ Points (i) and (ii) require *contact between two things*.
 - ▶ Point (iii) requires the cause *to be an extended thing*.
 - ▶ But Descartes' thinking substance has no extension, so cannot possibly touch an extended thing.

Descartes writes on 21.v.1643

- ▶ We form our knowledge on the basis of small number of *basic* notions, that cannot be defined in terms of each other:
 - (1) Applied to *everything*:
 - ▶ Being, number, duration, etc.
 - (2) Applied to just the *body*:
 - ▶ Extension, shape, movement.
 - (3) Applied to just the *mind*:
 - ▶ Thought, perceptions, inclinations of the will.
 - (4) Applied to *the union* of mind and body:
 - ▶ Mind moves body, body causes experiences in the mind.

- ▶ We cannot understand (4) in terms of (2) or (3).
 - ▶ Descartes notes that in Aristotelian physics, *weight* (which belongs to (2)) is mistakenly understood in terms of (3), where earth (the substance) has an *inclination* to reach the center of Earth (the planet).

Elisabeth writes on 10.vi.1643

- ▶ Elisabeth's response:
 - ▶ It may well be an error to try to understand mind-body interaction strictly in terms of body-body interaction (or vice-versa, as with the Aristotelians).
 - ▶ But that still provides us with *no positive understanding* of mind-body interaction.
- ▶ We then get one of the earliest defenses of materialism:
 - ▶ “I would find it easier to concede matter and extension to the soul [mind] than to concede that an immaterial thing could move and be moved by a body.”

Descartes writes on 28.vi.1643

- ▶ In response, Descartes emphasizes how we *acquire knowledge* about each category:
 - ▶ *Mind*: pure intellect.
 - ▶ *Body*: pure intellect aided by the imagination.
 - ▶ *Their union*: the senses.
 - ▶ “That’s why people who never come at things in a theoretical way and use only their senses have no doubt that the soul [mind] moves the body.”
 - ▶ “What teaches us how to conceive the [union] is the ordinary course of life and conversation and not meditating or studying.”
- ▶ Descartes also responds to Elisabeth’s materialism:
 - ▶ Attribute extension to the mind if you like, but it cannot be *bodily* extension, because *bodily* extension *excludes* other extended bodies from the space it occupies.

Elisabeth writes on 1.vii.1643

- ▶ Elisabeth responds:

- ▶ “the senses show me **that** the soul moves the body, but as for **how** it does so, the senses tell me nothing about that, any more than the intellect and imagination do.”

- ▶ This sets Elisabeth up for her final objection to Descartes’ meditations:

- ▶ “This leads me to think that the soul has properties we don’t know—which might overturn your doctrine [...] that the soul is not extended.”
- ▶ “This doubt seems supported by the rule that you give [only form a judgment when you have a clear and distinct idea].”

Group discussion

- ▶ Discuss the various points of disagreement between Descartes and Elisabeth.
- ▶ Try to identify the most important points of disagreement.
- ▶ Try to come to an agreement over who has the more reasonable position in this debate and why.