

DESCARTES ON MIND-BODY INTERACTION

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Mind-body interaction is so fundamental to human existence that it normally goes unnoticed and is taken for granted. For example, I might feel thirsty, and then, the thought occurs to me, "I'll go to the fountain for a drink of water." The next moment, almost miraculously, my legs begin moving, carrying me to the door! Mind and body are constantly interacting. Philosophers attempt to give an accurate description of mind-body interaction and to give a reasonable account of how mind-body interaction is possible.

Before I can get to the details of Descartes' theory of mind-body interaction, I first need to examine his theory of how mind and body are separate. That's the order of his argument. First, the mind and body are shown to be distinct and separate substances; then, later, he explains how interaction between them is possible. Descartes uses a thought experiment to demonstrate that mind and body are separate substances. Each can be conceived clearly and distinctly as being complete entities capable of existing independently of one another. I can imagine my mind thinking on its own and I can imagine my body existing without a mind. How can mind and body, two drastically different kinds of things, interact in such an orderly manner? It's like fire and water. Descartes relies upon theology to answer this question. Over and above creating mental substance and physical substance, there is a third kind of creation. According to Descartes, God creates a union between these two wholly different substances, a union that constitutes human nature.

At the heart of Descartes' philosophy is a commitment to substance/mode ontology and phenomenal realism. During the course of his philosophical doubts, Descartes doubts many things, but he cannot doubt the reality of his own psychological states. Whether or not the world exists, or God exists, Descartes is certain that *it seems to him* that he sees colors and shapes floating about in a world before him.¹ From this phenomenal realism, when coupled with a substance-mode ontology, the *cogito* soon follows. Psychological states include modes: colors, shapes, loud and soft noises, for

example. Their existence implies the existence of a substance in which they inhere, given the substance/mode ontology.² Descartes finds his personal identity as being tied to the thinking substance in which these psychological states inhere. Hence, he thinks and, therefore, he exists.

Since Descartes defines substance as being that which has the capacity to exist independently of any other thing and since he envisions God as being the creator of all the world, then, strictly speaking, on this view, only God exists as substance. He alone is an uncreated and independently existing infinite thinking substance. Within the world, there are two fundamental kinds of "created" substances that only need God's concurrence to exist: minds (finite thinking substances) and the physical world (finite bodies that, taken together, are infinite).³ Apart from minds, being the substance in which thinking inheres, and bodies, which are extended (occupy spaces), all else exists as properties (modes) of these two kinds of substances. The only exception to this rule is the union of mind and body that constitutes human nature and explains mind-body interaction. In this philosophy, all other properties exist as properties of some substance. The property of being cubic only exists as the shape of some finite part of infinite corporeal substance. The property of loving only exists as the psychological state of some thinking substance. Descartes offers no argument for this ontology of substance and mode other than "it is very manifest by the natural light which is in our souls."⁴ This might mean that our knowledge of this ontology of substance and mode is innate, or it might be self-evident, or both.

Each substance has one and only one principal attribute that determines its nature. With thinking substance, the principal attribute is thought and with corporeal substance the principal attribute is extension.⁵ Descartes defines essence as "nothing without which a thing can still exist . . ."⁶ and to take away my nature as a thinking thing is to cause me to cease to exist. The nature of the psychological states of a person is essential to the identity of that person, because if separated from that person, the identity of the person is also destroyed.⁷ I can focus upon the idea I have of myself and one by one separate the various qualities that are constituents of that idea. It is still / when my arm, even my head, is separated from my

