



## Rene Descartes'

### Theory of Dualism under a veil of doubt

Rene Descartes (1596- 1650) was a French philosopher, a creative mathematician of top order, a scientific thinker and an original metaphysician, and has been dubbed the "Father of Modern Philosophy".

He remained a Catholic throughout his life but became dissatisfied with scholasticism. While serving in the Bavarian army in 1619, he conceived that his task was to reconstruct the entire philosophy, and indeed knowledge, into a unified system on a basis secure from skepticism modelled

on mathematics and rigid rationalism. He expounded the major features of his project in his famous work, the *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (1641, *Meditations on First Philosophy*). He began his enquiry by claiming that a person can doubt all his sense experiences, even the results of reasoning, but that a person cannot doubt his own existence as a thinking being: *cogito, ergo sum* ('I think, therefore I am'). He argued that, on this basis, God must exist and could not be a deceiver; therefore his beliefs based on ordinary sense experiences could not be incorrect. He further argued

that mind and body were distinct substances on the belief that this dualism made possible human freedom and immortality.

In short, Rene Descartes' mind-body or mind-brain theory, a philosophical-cum-scientific puzzle of enormous significance, says that the body is a physical object having physical properties and the brain yet another object containing mental substances, irreducible to the physical. According to the theory, there are two fundamental kinds of entities or substances in the world – physical objects and immaterial minds or souls, but not based on scientific merit. Descartes was, however, able to offer subtle and profound argument based on scientific consideration of his time like the theory of animal spirits.

Pain, for instance, shows that the body and brain closely interact though they are different and separate entities. But, how they interact still remains a philosophical mystery like the problem posed by the unconscious to psychology.

Dualism was even ridiculed by Gilbert Ryle as the doctrine of the "ghost in the machine". Despite treating the human body as a machine, Descartes was able to concede that the human body was a complex and subtle machine but has unique capacity for language and for acting through knowledge to overcome finite limitations of clockwork mechanism to transcend these limitations. It is interesting that Alan Turing in the 20th century was able to revolutionize and transform the concept of machine not to work as a robot but a computer to provide information.

The earlier theories, those of Leibneiz's

pre-established harmony of body and mind like synchronized clocks, Malebranches' theory of causality known as occasionalism that God alone is the cause of all events, Berkeley's idealism that mind and body's causal interaction is an illusion, Spinoza's double aspect theory that mental and physical as different aspects of one and the same substance which was God, and Huxley's epiphenomenalism that brain causes mental events but it cannot cause behaviour, all discounted the Descartes' theory of dualism.

Intentionality, which is the about-ness or of-ness of mental states described as "the



Dr. Mathu H. Liyanage

mark of the mental", and the existence of secondary qualities strongly support dualism. But the mystifying problem of interaction between mind and body, the argument for evolution that considers life on earth as entirely a physical process, and the argument from Ockham Razor, the principle of parsimony, which forbids multiplicity beyond necessity, oppose dualism.

Theories supportive of and those opposed to dualism have, however, failed to show how the interaction between body and mind occurs to challenge the validity of dualism on a scientific basis.

Since present day philosophers are moving away from the Descartes' theory of dualism, perhaps neuro-science can shed some light on this subtle and complex interaction between body and mind.

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