

The Intelligibility of the Mind-Body Union in Descartes' Sailor in a Ship Argument

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Abstract

Descartes' account of the mind-body union has had a long history of critical reception. Perceptive readers such as Princess Elizabeth questioned how the mind and body, two completely different substances, can interact; that is, how can an immaterial mind set a material body in motion and vice versa? I argue that Descartes holds that the union can only be understood in a weak sense. Descartes lacks a precise, scientific language to explain the interaction. I follow Justin Skirry's remarks on causal interaction in this argument, stating that the ordinary terms of mover and moved cannot be employed to account for the mind-body interaction since the mind is intermingled with the body. Descartes cannot provide the appropriate idiom to describe the union. I offer additional support that for Descartes the intelligibility of the mind-body union is limited and cannot be explained scientifically.

Introduction

Descartes' account of the mind-body union has had a long history of critical reception. In Descartes' own time, perceptive readers such as Princess Elizabeth questioned how the mind and body, two completely different substances, can interact; that is, how can an immaterial mind set a material body in motion and vice versa? The stark dissimilarity in kind between the two substances posed a perplexing problem for philosophers to follow. The intelligibility of the union was certainly in question and even inspired some, after Descartes, to produce new and ingenious solutions. Some of Descartes' first reflections on the intelligibility of the union are undeveloped and lack detail, appearing in *Meditations* VI as the sailor in a ship argument. Yet this consideration and several replies that reference this argument offer some insight into how intelligible the mind-body union is to Descartes. The focus of this paper addresses this issue and his reply to the correspondence to which it is referenced, in particular Princess Elizabeth's. I argue that Descartes holds that the union can only be

philosophy@lisbon, 3, 109-115. Lisboa: CFUL.

understood in a weak sense; that is, no objective knowledge of the interaction can be acquired. In doing so, I follow Justin Skirry's remarks on causal interaction in this argument, stating that the ordinary terms of mover and moved cannot be employed to account for the mind-body interaction since the mind is intermingled with the body. I use this to point out that Descartes cannot provide the appropriate idiom to describe the union. In this way, I offer additional support that the mind-body union's intelligibility is limited. Descartes retreats to experience, an empirical framework alone, in describing the intelligibility of the union and concedes that an *a priori* science is elusive. Whenever the senses are involved in gaining knowledge, the understanding is restricted, and this is especially the case with the mind-body union. Thus, it is plausible to conclude that the intelligibility of the union is not equal to his requirements of science and is considerably thin.

The Problem of the Substances and the Real Distinction

The notion of substance has been used in philosophy since ancient times. One purpose for which Descartes rehabilitates the concept is to distinguish mind from matter. Descartes calls the human being a union, a composite of substances, existing "in a real and substantial manner" (ATiii, 692 qtd. In Cottingham 130). Descartes identifies the human being as a composite of two substances: mind and body. Mind is thinking substance; it is immaterial and its attribute is thought. Descartes explains that there are many forms or ways in which the attribute of thought is expressed, and this is described as a mode. Many modes fall under thought such as willing and imagining. The second substance is body which is material; its attribute is extension, and it too has varying modes such as motion, weight, and shape. For Descartes, the attribute determines the substance; that is, thought is what distinguishes thinking substance, and extension clearly identifies body. In knowing the attribute one can know the type of substance in question.

To argue for a substantial union, Descartes has to maintain that a real distinction exists between the substances. This distinction holds when mind can be conceived separately without the body's existence and vice versa. The real distinction advantages Descartes in preserving the separateness of the substances, thus making possible the substantial union. In commenting on the real distinction, Descartes remarks to Caterus that shape and movement are properties of bodies—modes. These properties depend on the bodies to which they belong. Yet a body can be thought of without mental properties. Mind, in likewise fashion, can be conceived without physical properties. In this way, Descartes defends a real distinc-

tion between the substances, one in which mind and body can be known as entirely distinct (Caterus' remarks in Southwell 130). As the example demonstrates, in conceiving each substance separately, there is no necessary link between the substances, and no required connection can be discovered. To this extent, their relationship is a contingent one, not based on necessity. In this way, Descartes maintains the respective individuality of the substances.

The Mind-Body Union—Not Like a Sailor in a Ship

As mentioned above, many of Descartes' correspondents thought the crux of the issue regarding the mind-body union is to explain how two completely different substances can interact. In 1645 Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia asks Descartes, "I beseech you to tell me how the mind of man (being only a thinking substance) can determine the spirits of the body in order to make voluntary actions" (AT 661 Skirry's translation 135). To this, however, Descartes has already anticipated certain critical questions in his sailor in a ship argument, expressing what he does not mean by the union and illustrating that the bond is only intelligible in a weak sense. The sailor in a ship argument appears in *Meditations* VI, with the title "The existence of material things, and the real distinction between mind and body". In short, Descartes discusses the sense in which he can speak of the union between mind and body. He comments on the sensations such as hunger and thirst as confused modes of thinking, making a precise account of the union vague. Descartes writes,

Nature also teaches me, by those sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is in a ship, but that I am very closely joined, and as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form one unit...For those sensations of hunger, pain, thirst, and so on are nothing but confused modes of thinking which arise from the union and, as it were, intermingling of the mind with the body (AT VII 81:CSM II 56).

The passage serves Descartes in several ways. First, Descartes establishes that he is not arguing that the body is a house for the soul as it is portrayed in the Platonic tradition. Human beings do not inspect damage to their own bodies by way of pure intellect alone as a sailor inspects a leak in a ship. Human beings are more closely connected, so Descartes is saying that this analogy does not properly explain the union. Rather, the bond is felt; the union between mind and body is given in experience. Second, the mind is intermingled with the body, and various states of consciousness such as thirst are not capable of being clearly distinguished. This is in absolute contrast to the way in which the individual substances can be certainly

understood independently of one another.

In replying to Princess Elizabeth, Descartes' answer is already contained in the sailor in a ship argument. According to Justin Skirry, if the mind is intermingled with the body, then the ordinary causal interaction, that is, between two separate things, mover and moved, does not apply (139). Princess Elizabeth, in the quote above, questions the mind-body union because she is thinking in terms that are inappropriate to what Descartes characterizes; she is thinking in terms of two separate things that are not united, one impinging upon the other. The mind's intermingling with the body demonstrates a different relationship in which the ordinary causal interaction does not fit with this schematic. So, the Princess has presupposed a causal interaction that does not exist between the two substances since they are already together. Skirry comments, "Descartes explicitly rejects this sailor in a ship view of mind-body union in the argument...he rejects the mover-moveable relation as the relation constituting the union" (139). Descartes' argument appears to be nuanced in retaining the idea of separate substances yet bringing them together to interact in some way. The intermingling of the mind with the body highlights the unfamiliarity and vagueness with which it is difficult to express in terms other than those of mover and moved. To this extent, Skirry's explanation can be used to help explain why Descartes has trouble making sense of the mind-body union since it cannot be expressed in the habitual terms of mover and moved.

Along with Princess Elizabeth, Gassendi, another correspondent, makes the same error, assuming the kind of interaction between two separate things. Gassendi asks, "How can there be effect directed against anything, or motion set up in it, unless there is mutual contact between what moves and what is moved?" (AT VII 341: CSM II 237). Gassendi's question, however, implies that mind and body are like two separate things moving across a surface. Skirry once again makes Descartes' point clear when he explains that the sailor in a ship argument "concludes that mind and body are united so as to form one thing, not two that causally interact as mover and moveable" (139). In this way, because the mind is intermingled with the body, the union is different from those objects that are typically thought of in ordinary experience. However, this is only at the expense of creating a further problem concerning what kind of idiom is appropriate to describe the interaction.

The Stronger and Weaker Senses of Knowledge

After she read the *Meditations*, Princess Elizabeth and Descartes exchanged more letters. Descartes attempted to explain the contact between the immaterial and the material. In one dated 20 June 1643, Descartes

offered a poor explanation that he later admitted (Hatfield 267-8). However, in a following letter soon after to the Princess, dated 28 June 1643, Descartes describes what he calls "primitive notions"; they are of the mind, body, and the mind-body union. In this response, recalling the sailor in a ship argument, Descartes writes,

The soul is conceived only by pure intellect; body (i.e. extension, shapes and motions) can likewise be known by the intellect alone, but much better by the intellect aided by the imagination; and finally what belongs to the union of the soul and the body is known only obscurely by the intellect alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it is known very clearly by the senses (AT 3: 691-2 qtd. in Hatfield 268).

For Descartes the pure intellect can understand the mind and the body separately; if the latter is helped by the imagination, it is known better. Knowledge of the union, on the other hand, is actually drawn from the phenomenon of living; the bond is close, personal, given sharply in experience. This passage can be understood as a description of Descartes' view of the stronger and weaker degrees by which the mind, body, and the mind-body union are known. The mind is the most intellectual substance, the foundation in Descartes' epistemological architecture. This is especially demonstrated when Descartes says that he can understand himself without the aid of the imagination and sense perception. In one comment, he remarks, "but I cannot conversely understand faculties without me, that is without an intellectual substance to inhere in" (AT 7:78 qtd. in Hatfield 258). Next is the body that can be known by the intellect and better with the aid of the senses. Lastly, there is the union, a combination of the two substances, the self-evident, raw fact of the everyday that cannot be clearly interpreted by the pure intellect. As James Collins remarks, "the only kind of union possible between these two substances is a *contingent* one, that is, one which is not required essentially by the natures in question and hence not capable of an *a priori*, scientific deduction" (47). The mind-body union, in comparison with the certainty of the pure intellect alone, can be understood in a weaker and altogether non-intellectual way in comparison with the mind alone. If one follows the order of ideas in the passage, and the *Meditations* in general, the mind-body union is only intelligible in a weak sense.

Admittedly, the obscure nature of the mind-body union comes to light in the everyday. But, in the *a priori* theoretical sense, that is, in a purely scientific framework, it remains inexplicable and cannot be communicated in those terms. In the passage, Descartes sustains the individual natures of the substances, leaving knowledge of the union disclosed in experience, which is, for all intents and purposes, an inferior mode of cognition when held to the standards of pure rationalism. Descartes explains

that the mind-body union is intelligible to those who never philosophize, since they conceive the union to be one thing, perhaps not following the correct order of ideas, not grasping the distinction between the substances. The conservative answer to whether Descartes thinks the mind-body union is intelligible lies in the fact that the philosopher looks to the self-evident event of the interaction and cautiously withdraws from the confidence with which he discusses the substances independently of one another. Descartes conceives science as based on the pure rationalism of the *a priori* framework. Therefore, any understanding of the union between the substances lies beyond the depth of science.

Conclusion

Descartes' sailor in a ship argument and the replies that reference this claim provide insight into whether Descartes thinks the mind-body union is intelligible. In pointing out that the mind-body union is not like a sailor in a ship, Descartes successfully retains the individuality of the substance but at the expense of creating further questions about the intelligibility of the union. Skirry's interpretation of Descartes' responses to Princess Elizabeth and Pierre Gassendi lend credence to the scientific perplexity with which Descartes views the union. The union cannot be understood in mover and moved terms because the mind is intermingled with the body; there is no surface-to-surface contact. The idiom, therefore, that can best serve Descartes in expressing the union is elusive. Descartes acknowledges that the mind-body union is abstruse in a purely intellectual way and falls back on experience as the final arbiter. Given Descartes' pure rationalism, the union can only be grasped in experience, making a scientific understanding of it limited. Descartes falls short of explaining the union scientifically in comparison with the intelligibility of the substances individually. For Descartes, the mind-body union, on purely intellectual grounds, can, at best, be understood in a weak sense.

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