CHAPTER 2

THE PROBLEM OF MENTAL CAUSATION IN

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Rene Descartes with his dualistic approach towards mind and body brings up the problem of mental causation in the field of philosophy. He holds that minds and bodies are ‘Substances’ of distinct kinds. This dualism of substances is subsequently labeled as Cartesian dualism. Descartes’ approach to the mind is considered as a platform for almost all studies in philosophy of mind. Many Philosophers have the opinion that human beings have a ‘privileged access’ to their own minds. Descartes believes that the thoughts about one’s own states of mind could not be false.

2.1 Dualism

The idea that there is a fundamental difference in kind between the mental and the material can be spelled out in two broadly different ways. One way leaves the material world as such unaffected. The special nature of the mental is entirely a matter of the nature of a special substance. The physical bodies can be fully described by the physical sciences. If one is in pain or is thinking about tigers, that is where his pain or his thinking is, strictly speaking, taking place. The sensation and the thinking both are inherent in the substance. This style of dualism is called
substance dualism. Typically, substance dualism goes along with the view that the identity of a person over time is constituted by the identity over time of this substance.

The alternative approach holds that the physical story about the bodies is incomplete even as an account of those bodies. Along with the kinds of properties to be found instantiated in the material world in general, the bodies of people and certain higher animals instantiate special properties. Given the central role that the brain and central nervous systems are not known, to play, in the possession of mental natures—things without brains thinks nor feel—these special properties are most likely attributes of certain states of the brain. This style of dualism is called, attribute dualism. Attribute dualism has a significant advantage over substance dualism that, it avoids the awkward question of what happens to mental substance when the person is not thinking. Nothing can exist without having a nature.

According to Peter Carruthers there are two types of dualism in philosophy of mind. They are; weak dualism and strong dualism. Weak dualism establishes that, people’s mental states are non-physical states. The strong dualism maintains that the subject of mental states, the person or self is a non-physical individual thing—a non-physical mind. Cartesian dualism is considered as strong dualism.
Strong dualism holds that there are two radically different kinds of states and events in the world. They also hold that the world contains two radically different kinds of substances and things. According to the strong dualist, there exists matter, which goes to make up physical objects, which must always occupy some position in space and there exists consciousness, which goes to make up minds, which are non-physical and non-spatial.

2.2 Cartesian Dualism

Descartes holds that minds and bodies are ‘substances’ of distinct kinds that, in the case of living human beings, happen to be intimately related. This dualism of substances is known as Cartesian dualism. Cartesian dualism is a strong dualism. Descartes supposes that the world is made up of substances. A substance is not, as the term might suggest, a kind of stuff like water, or coal, or paint. According to Descartes the substances like the pen, the trees, the table etc, are complex substances composed of other substances, their parts. In Descartes’ project of doubting everything that could be doubted, with a view to discovering something indubitable. His first conclusion is the famous ‘cogito’,- ‘I think therefore I am’ (cogito ergo sum). He concludes that he could not possibly doubt that he exists, so he knows that he exists. But doubting is a type of thinking, so he also knows that
whatever else he might be, he is ‘a thing that thinks’. Here Descartes couldn’t consistently doubt that he is a thinking thing because doubting itself is a variety of thinking, the very act of doubting that claim is sufficient to prove it true. In the book ‘Philosophy of Mind’ it is quoted that Cartesian dualism stands upon two interrelated epistemic and metaphysical doctrines,

(a) *The primacy of the mental* (the epistemic doctrine): we can only be epistemically secure about our own minds and not about the physical world in general and our bodies or, indeed, the minds of others: it is our own mind which is best known and which really counts.

(b) *The autonomy of the mental* (the metaphysical doctrine): there is no dependency between the mental and the physical: bodies can exist independently of minds and, perhaps more importantly given (a), minds can exist independently of bodies. The relationship between the two is external and contingent.¹

This way of presenting things has the benefits of exposing an extremely important feature of dualistic thinking. It does not consist simply in the positing of a dichotomy between the mental and the physical, but involves notions of exclusion, autonomy and privilege. Exclusionary means that things are one or the other but
not both, autonomous means each exists separably without the implication of the opposed term and privileged means that it is of primary importance and something to which the second term plays a secondary and oppositional role. Descartes clears his view,

I recognize only two ultimate classes of things: first, intellectual or thinking things, i.e. those which pertain to mind or thinking substance; and secondly, material things, i.e. those which pertain to extended substance or body.

(PWDi: 208)

This view implies that a human being is an amalgam of two things, immaterial mind and material body, which seems to be joined together, but separated in principle.

2.3 The body

The discussions on mind-body problem or mental causation could be satisfactorily addressed only when the importance must be given equally to both mind and body. Normally in the mental causation discussions, one side-mind will get more importance and the role of the body will not be considered in its due importance. As in Bradley’s words,

By the body I understand all that which can be defined by a certain figure: something which can be confined in a certain
place, and which can fill a given space in such a way that every other body will be excluded from it; which can be perceived either by touch, or by sight, or by hearing, or by taste, or by smell; which can be moved in many ways not, in truth, by itself, but by something which is foreign to it, by which it is touched (and from which it receives impressions): for to have the power of self-movement, as also of feeling or of thinking, I did not consider to appertain to the nature of body; on the contrary, I was rather astonished to find that faculties similar to them existed in some bodies.³

In this regard Keith Campbell opines that the body is,

Provided you know who you are, it is easy to say what your body is: it is what the undertakers bury when they bury you. It is your head, trunk, and limbs. It is the collection of cells consisting of your skin and all the cells inside it. It is the assemblage of flesh, bones, and organs which the anatomist anatomizes. It is the mass of matter whose weight is your weight.⁴
Campbell slides seemingly from the innocent recognition of the body as a materiality to a reductive understanding of the body as something which is merely an object and the sum of its anatomical parts. Cartesian dualism presents the body as an absolute exteriority divested of meaning. Cartesian dualism picturing mind as an absolute interiority independent of its physical environment, and at the same time body as an absolute exteriority divested of meaning. The French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty cites that, “How significance and intentionality could come to dwell in molecular edifices or masses of cells is a thing that can never be made comprehensible, and here Cartesian is right”.\textsuperscript{5} Descartes gives a great detail about the bodily occurrences which he supposed to underline action and perception:

First, in so far as our senses are all parts of body, sense-perception, strictly speaking, is merely passive...(it) occurs in the same way in which wax takes on the impression from a seal...Second, when an external organ is stimulated by an object, the figure which it receives is conveyed...to...the 'common' sense...Third, the 'common' sense functions like a seal, fashioning in the fantasy...the same figures or ideas which come...from the external senses...Fourth, the motive power (i.e. the nerves themselves) has its origin in the brain,
where the corporeal imagination is located; and the latter moves the nerves in different ways...[Lastly], the power through which we know things in the strict sense is purely spiritual, and is no less distinct from the whole body than blood is distinct from bone.\(^6\)

Descartes argues that, body and mind are distinct substances, the essence of one being extension and the other thought. He accepted the importance of body by recognizing that there was something unique about human beings, that they are a subtle unity of the two-the mind and the body, and not merely an accidental union. G. N. A. Vesey cites the view that,

First of all, then, I perceived that I had a head, hands, feet, and all other members of which this body—which I considered as a part, or possibly even as the whole, of myself—is composed. Further I was sensible that this body was placed amidst many others, from which it was capable of being affected in many different ways, beneficial and hurtful, and I remarked that a certain feeling of pleasure accompanied those that were beneficial, and pain those which were harmful. And in addition to this pleasure and pain, I also
experienced hunger, thirst, and other similar appetites, as also certain corporeal inclinations towards joy, sadness, anger, and other similar passions. And outside myself, in addition to extension, figure, and motions of bodies, I remarked in them hardness, heat, and all other tactile qualities, and, further, light and colour, and scents and sounds, the variety of which gave me the means of distinguishing the sky, the earth, the sea, and generally all the other bodies, one from the other. Descartes holds that when one experiences the sensations such as hunger or pain, he feels the existence of his own body. Descartes in the Sixth meditation he tries to resist the ‘pilot in a ship’ picture, that is, a little man imprisoned within the body. He argued that the mind is not simply housed in the body as a foreign element, but is intimately connected with it. When the body is damaged, then the awareness of it is intellectually known because of the pain.
2.4 The Mind

Descartes’ analysis of the perception of wax reveals that mind is better known than body. The mind’s existence is firmly known. Any act of perceiving a body provides evidence for the existence of mind, since a mind is required for perception. So in order to know the wax there needs a mind. In the Second Meditation, the existence of the mind is proved by the act of perception, including touching the wax or imagining it. Gary Hatfield in his book ‘Meditations’ gives Descartes’ wax argument as,

Moreover, if my perception of the wax seemed more distinct after it was established not just by sight or touch but by many other considerations, it must be admitted that I now know myself even more distinctly. This is because every consideration whatsoever which contributes to my perception of the wax, or of any other body, cannot but establish even more effectively the nature of my own mind. But besides this, there is so much else in the mind itself which can serve to make my knowledge of it more distinct, that it scarcely seems worth going through the contributions made by considering bodily things.8
According to Descartes a mind is something whose essence is to think, he implies that minds could exist with no other characteristic than that of thinking, or having ideas. The immaterial mind in itself is just an idea-perceiving entity. Cartesian philosophy establishes the metaphysics of the thinking thing. The mind as clearly represented as the thinking substance, exists by itself and is conceived in itself. The foundation of Descartes philosophy of the universe is the idea of the thinking substance. According to Descartes the idea of a thinking substance is the key to the understanding of the natural world and the scientific knowledge. The understanding of the mind will be a clear mirror towards the universe. Rorty opines that the conception of the mind seeks to project the view that the mental representations constitute the representations of the world so that by knowing the essential representations of the mind one can discover the essential structure of the world. So mind can be considered as a ware-house of the ideas that represents the things in the world. This idea is expressed in the book ‘Body and Mind’ as,

But afterwards many experiences little by little destroyed all
the faith which I had rested in my senses; for I from time to
time observed that those towers which from afar appeared to
me to be round, more closely observed seemed square, and
that colossal status raised on the summit of these towers,
appeared as quite tiny status when viewed from the bottom;
and so in an infinitude of other cases I found error in judgments founded on the external senses. And not only in those founded on the external senses but even in those founded on the internal as well; for is there anything more intimate or more internal than pain? And yet I have learned from some persons whose arms or legs have been cut off, that they sometimes seemed to feel pain in the part which had been amputated, which made me think that I could not be quite certain that it was a certain member which pained me, even although I felt pain in it.⁹

The book ‘Body and Mind’ further cites as,

And to those grounds of doubt I have lately added two others, which are very general; the first is that I never have believed myself to feel anything in waking moments which I cannot also sometimes believe myself to feel when I sleep, and as I do not think that these things which I seem to feel in sleep, proceed from objects outside of me, I do not see any reason why I should have this belief regarding objects which I seem to perceive while awake. The other was that being
still ignorant, or rather supposing myself to be ignorant, of
the author of my being, I saw nothing to prevent me from
having been so constituted by nature that I might be deceived
even in matters which seemed to me to be most certain. And
as to the grounds on which I was formerly persuaded of the
truth of sensible objects, I had not much trouble in replying
to them. For since nature seemed to cause me to lean towards
many things from which reason repelled me, I did not
believe that I should trust much to the teachings of nature.
And although the ideas which I receive by the senses do not
depend on my will, I did not think that one should for that
reason conclude that they proceeded from things different
from myself, since possibly some faculty might be
discovered in me—though hitherto unknown to me—which
produced them.¹⁰

The world is made to be revealed in the network of ideas or the mental
representations. The unextended substance mind is capable of projecting the
extended world. Minds have a built-in mechanism to connect ideas to things and
also to connect the ideas into judgments or thoughts. Mind’s functions include not
only ideas but also judgments which are directly validated by things in the world. Descartes’ pure mental representations of the world modeled on mathematical sciences. The impure thoughts which consist in the perceptual reports of the world constitute the probable sciences. Descartes’ understanding of the mind has a scientific background that naturally came from his mathematical background. Dr. R. C. Pradhan explains the idea of Descartes’ as,

Thus it is the mind or the thinking substance that is at the foundation of the new mathematized science of the world because it alone reveals the true nature of the universe. The metaphysics of the mind is in this way the foundation of the metaphysics of the universe. There are two important principles that Cartesian metaphysics of the mind offers, namely,

(M1) Mind is the domain of the representational thoughts and is the medium of the ideational representations of the world.

(M2) Mind is self-conscious of its representations in that it can represent its representations of the world on a higher level.
The first principle M1 tells us that mind and the universe are attuned to each other so that the mind reveals the necessary and universal structures of the universe. The mental representations of the world stand for their objective correlates in the world. For example, the ideas of matter, extension and motion are the representations of the mechanistic structure of the world. They constitute the mechanistic picture of the world which Descartes so painstakingly defends.

The second principle M2 brings out the subjective dimensions of the Cartesian mind or the *Cogito* that not only thinks about the world but also is aware of the fact that it has representations of the world. That makes the *Cogito* self-conscious of its own existence: *Cogito ergo sum*. The existence of the self or the thinking substance is revealed to itself in its self-conscious awareness. This makes *Cogito ergo sum* the first principle of the Cartesian metaphysics of the mind. Thus consciousness of its own existence is the essential property of the Cartesian “I”. ¹¹
According to Descartes the thinking mind makes the world appear as the most rational and law governed. So from the mental representations, it is easy to discover the laws of the nature. Descartes conception of the world is a derivation from the laws of the mind. The mind and the world are self existing. It is the mind that takes the cognitive precedence over the world. Dr. R. C. Pradhan explains this as,

The difference between the existence of the mind and the existence of the world is a matter of epistemic priority and not of metaphysical substantiality since both mind and the world are metaphysical substances. The presence of the mind makes an epistemic difference to the world as the latter receives its cognitive significance from the former.12

2.4.1 Mental Representations

Descartes opines that the self is the metaphysical reality par excellence and thus brings itself to the very center of the epistemic activities, namely, thinking, perceiving, etc. The hallmark of the Cartesian mind is the self-validating character of the mental representations. The true virtue of reason is the self-validated representations. The ultimate metaphysical substances are God, mind, and matter.
These representations are not the products of imagination but they are dependent on the natural “light of reason”. That is the reason they are called innate and also a priory such that they are revealed to the mind in a self evident way. Descartes took the mind as autonomous and substantial being. The ideas of the mind need objective assessment in terms of truth and falsity. The judgments concerning the mind and God are taken to be true, but at the same time the truthfulness of the judgments regarding the world are to the extent validated by the mind and god. According to Descartes there is a transparent representation of the world in the mind. The Representation thesis given by Dr. R. C. Pradhan in his article states:

\[(RT)\text{ All science or knowledge of the universe is representational in character in that in it our thoughts corresponds to the world as there is a metaphysical harmony between mind and the world. The metaphysical harmony itself is a matter of certainty because it is a truth discovered by mind or intellect. It is in this metaphysical truth that the mind discovers the certainty of all mental representations of the world. On this metaphysical ground stands the edifice of the Cartesian mechanistic physics that promises to reveal the ultimate structure of the world.}\]
The material objects are spatial; they occupy a location in space and exhibit spatial dimensions. The same time mental objects like, thoughts and sensations are apparently non spatial. The second important difference between the mental and the material is qualitative. The pain in one’s big toe is difficult for him to explain, but that doesn’t affect the awareness of that pain. The mental qualities differ in kind from material qualities. The third distinction between the mental and the material is epistemological. It concerns the character of the knowledge of such things. The knowledge of one’s own states of mind is direct and at the same time the knowledge of the material objects is not. Descartes accepted the common understanding of the ‘privileged access’ to the states of mind. According to this one have a ‘privileged access’, to his own states of mind. Descartes opines that the knowledge about one’s own knowledge about the states of mind could not be false. He believes that if one is in a particular state of mind, then he is aware that he is in that state. The states of mind are private. They are directly observable by that person only, the outsiders can only infer them from their material effects, and then too it is indirect and not sure about its reliability. At the same time material events are public. With the same observational position end number of people can observe the same material events, just opposite that of mental events. Here the
asymmetry in the access to the mental events is absent. This suggests that the mental events and the material events are distinct.

According to Descartes that, the distinction between the mental and the material events is because the minds and the material bodies are distinct kinds of substances. A mental substance possesses properties which cannot be possessed by any material substance, and a material substance possesses properties no mental substance could possess. According to Descartes there is no overlap in the properties possessed by mental and material substances. Descartes in his Sixth Meditation clearly speaks about the mind body distinction as follows,

It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, insofar as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.¹⁴
2.6 The Cartesian Picture

The Cartesian picture includes the mental events and the corresponding material events. Imagine that one sits on a tack planted on the chair by a malicious practical joker. The sitting on the tack a material event involving a pair of material objects, the tack and the body gives rise to a distinctive sensation of pain a mental event. This sensation of feeling in turn generates another mental event, a desire to leap upward, and this desire brings about an appropriate leaping bodily motion.

Cartesian dualism has a speciality that it fits with the common sense. This is a common understanding that human beings have minds. Cartesian dualism promises a reconciliation of the scientific picture of the world and the ordinary experiences. Dualism makes sense in this bifurcation, like the material bodies are nothing more than colorless objects interacting in space. Such interactions, however, produce experiences with qualities that differ from the qualities of any
material object in the mind. The qualities of one’s experiences at bottom, modes of thought seem to differ from the qualities of material bodies, modes of extension. Descartes holds that in spite of these apparent differences, the experiential qualities are correlated with material qualities. So there is a correlation between the experiences of the world and the world. The presence of this correlation is what enables the qualities of experiences to serve as signs of the qualities of the material world.

2.7 The Mind-Body interaction

Descartes regards that the mind is autonomous and distinct from the body and the material world. In the Sixth meditation proposes the nature of mind as,

Next I examined attentively what I was. I saw that while I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world and no place for me to be in, I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist. I saw on the contrary that from the mere fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed quite evidently and certainly that I existed; whereas if I had merely ceased thinking, even if everything else I had ever imagined had been true, I should have had no reason to
believe that I existed. From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist.\footnote{15}

The meditator explains the nature of mind and its independence to the material world here. He analyzes the nature of mind as thought. To Descartes the body is an independent substance and the nature of body is extension. In the fifth meditation he analyzes the body as,

Quantity, for example, or “continuous” quantity as the philosophers commonly call it, is something I distinctly imagine. That is, I distinctly imagine the extension of the quantity (or rather of the thing which is quantified) in length, breadth and depth. I also enumerate various parts of the thing, and to these parts I assign various sizes, shapes, positions and local motions; and to the motion I assign various durations.\footnote{16}

In this passage the meditator contains the list of properties that follow from the essence of matter. According to him extension or continuous quantity is the
essence of matter. In Descartes’ concept both the mind and body can interact. The mind can causally engage with the world through its mysterious union with the body. In the Sixth meditation Descartes analyzes the mind body union as,

Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. If this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken.17

Here the meditator gives the evidence of mind-body union from the existence of sensations such as hunger or thirst. Descartes clears that if there is no real union among the body and mind then, the mind receives the information about the state of body with a perspective of a sailor in a ship. The sailor sees the ship has damage but he cannot feel it. Descartes here clears that the union between the mind and body is not like a sailor in a ship. Here if something happens to the body that will affect the mind with pain.
According to Descartes the causal engagement of mind and body has two
directions. The mind affects the body and the body affects the mind that is the
causal relationship is in two ways. Descartes explains that, two principles govern
the bodily movements. According to him the will governs the bodily movements. He argues that it is clear from the childhood experiences that the bodily movements
of a human being are occurring in obedience to the will. For example, the intention
to kick ball results in the forward movement of a leg and foot in the direction of the
ball. Here the intention to kick a ball results the bodily movement. In Descartes
own example, “when a sword strikes our body and cuts it, a sensation of pain is
produced in us by the physiological changes which occur in the body”.18 This
example provides a particular kind of causation that is, a physical or bodily event
causes a mental event. Here the feeling of pain in the body is because of the
physiological changes happened in the body by sword’s cut. Here Descartes comes
to a difficulty, up to the explanation related to the distinct character of the body and
mind is clear, but when it comes to the causal relation between the body and mind
is problematic. There are two different reasons for this difficulty. One is the way
Descartes presented the body and mind. According to him body and mind are
logically distinct subjects. The second is his general understanding of causation in
terms of the push of one thing on another. These sorts of causation explanation
work in the extended material things and it is not applicable to the causation
relation between the body and mind. Because Descartes’ conception of body is an extended material thing and the mind is an unextended immaterial thing.

Descartes attempts to give a convincing solution for the causation of body and mind by introducing a new approach. He explains that the soul (mind) is joined to the whole body. In Sixth Meditation he writes as,

The mind is not immediately affected by all parts of the body, but only by the brain, or perhaps just by one small part of the brain….Every time this part of the brain is in a given state, it presents the same signals to the mind, even though the other parts of the body may be in a different condition at the time….For example, when the nerves in the foot are set in motion in a violent and unusual manner, this motion, by way of the spinal cord, reaches the inner parts of the brain, and there gives the mind its signal for having a certain sensation, namely the sensation of a pain as occurring in the foot. This stimulates the mind to do its best to get rid of the cause of the pain, which it takes to be harmful to the foot.¹⁹
Descartes cites that the soul (mind) is located in the conarion or pineal gland. Pineal gland is a small gland in the center of the brain. From the pineal gland that is the place in the body and from where the soul or mind exercises its functions. Descartes further explains that, soul (mind) exercises its function by slight movements on the part of this gland. He cites that,

which in turn affects the course of animal spirits (a very fine wind) through cavities in the brain, driving these spirits towards pores of the brain, which then direct them through the nerves to the muscles in various ways so as to make the limbs move in the manner required. And conversely, the gland can be moved by these spirits in as many different ways as there are, for example, perceptible differences in the objects of perception.²⁰

Here Descartes is trying to clear the doubt about the mental causation. But his clarification just gives an idea about location of the interaction happens between the mind and the body. But this is not giving any notion on the philosophical explanation on how the interaction between the body and mind is possible. Descartes here concedes that, reason cannot provide an adequate account of the causal interaction between the body and mind. Descartes suggests,
That is why people who never philosophize and use only their senses have no doubt that the soul moves the body and that the body acts on the soul….it is the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from meditation and the study of things which exercise the imagination, that teaches us how to conceive the union of the soul and the body.  

There is another problem with Descartes interactionism. This is related to the conception of the physical that he initiated, that is known as over determination of the physical. Descartes argues that all the bodies’ movements are caused by the will. But when it comes to confront with the assumption of physical causes by themselves are sufficient to bring about a physical event in the material world. This is a fundamental assumption underlying modern science. If this modern science principle is accepted then for example, the bodily movement of X’s leg having two causes. They are a physical cause and a mental cause. Both of this causes are sufficient to bring the effect out. Here the effect is over determined. This approach of two causes for a single event is not allowable according to the completeness of physics principle.
Reference


5. Ibid 9


10. Ibid

11. Indian Philosophical Quarterly, *Journal of the Department of Philosophy*, University of Pune, vol. No. XXIII Nos. 1-2, R. C. Pradhan Descartes and Wittgenstein : Two Philosophical Models of Mind. 120

12. Ibid 122

13. Ibid 125


15. Ibid 246

16. Ibid 205

17. Ibid 264


21. Ibid 19