



## **Exploring Philosophy - Audio**

*Cartesian dualism*

### **Winifred**

In this audio recording Derek Matravers, course author of Book Five, is talking to John Cottingham, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Reading, about Cartesian Dualism.

### **Derek Matravers**

Descartes does not actually refer to himself as a Dualist. So what do we mean by the term?

### **Professor John Cottingham**

Well Dualist suggests two – two things. And when they apply the label they mean that Descartes had a theory that we human beings are composed of two substances. On the one hand mind and on the other body. And by substances Descartes meant things which can exist independently. So they're not as it were dependent on each other. If you lost your body you would still be you. You with a mind would still exist. So Dualism as used today is the idea that there are these two radically different kinds of thing. There is consciousness, thought, feeling, willing, desiring, all the things we include under conscious mental activity on the one hand and on the other hand there is body; whatever is material extended in space, has mass, has volume all the subject of physics. And according to Descartes those are two radically different kinds of world, the world of the mind and the world of the body.

### **Derek Matravers**

Descartes sometimes talks of the mind as the soul. What are we supposed to make of that?

### **Professor John Cottingham**

Well there are some complicated backgrounds to that but actually Descartes tended to sweep away earlier complexities about the soul and he used mind and soul more or less interchangeably. Both stood for this mental substance, this conscious thinking being. So he sometimes talks about the soul l'âme in French or L'Anima in Latin. And he sometimes talks about the mind – mens in Latin or l'esprit in French. But these are really just linguistic variants on one idea, the conscious thinking self, the me, the I.

### **Derek Matravers**

So another word for it would be the Self

### **Professor John Cottingham**

Yes. And in his first published work *The Discourse on the Method*, Descartes actually uses the phrase “ce moi” this Me, that is to say the soul by which I am what I am. So whatever makes you - you is according to Descartes this mental thing, the mind, the soul, the self, the me. The label in a way is not too important.

### **Derek Matravers**

Descartes is famous for two things: his methodological doubt which he thought he could stop with his inference “cogito ergo sum” and also his Dualism as you have just been explaining. Is there a connection between the two things? So for example does the one follow from the other?

### **Professor John Cottingham**

That’s a very interesting question. The method of doubt he used as a kind of sieve or filter to filter out all dubious or questionable assumptions. All of us acquire lots of preconceived opinions from our parents, from our teachers. And Descartes was struck by how many of these turned out to be false. So to try and filter out the false ones he uses the method of doubt, pushing doubt to its extreme. Can I possibly find a way of doubting that? “If I can”, Descartes said, “I should set it aside”. For example we might think that the sun goes round the earth, an example which was very prominent in his time because it was being questioned. Or to take an even more simple example the table that I’m now sitting in front of, that seems absolutely clear that it exists, but I might be dreaming in which case I am not in a studio recording this. I’m at home in bed. My alarm clock hasn’t gone off yet. So it’s possible even to doubt that I’m sitting here. However, there’s one thing we can’t doubt and one thing I can’t doubt and that’s that I am thinking – cogito – I am thinking. Why not? Because even if I doubt it that itself shows I am still thinking. Doubting is a species of thinking. And if therefore ‘I am thinking’, can’t be doubted there must be something that’s doing the thinking. So I must exist. Something doing the thinking must exist. So that’s the cogito ergo sum – I am thinking therefore I exist.

Now to come to the second part of your question does Descartes’ Dualism follow from that? Well Descartes does make that move from I am thinking therefore I exist he goes on to say I am a thinking thing. I am a mind - “Sum res cogitans” in Latin. I am a thinking thing. But actually it doesn’t follow and this is a big problem. Why doesn’t it follow? Well let’s agree I know I exist. That’s absolutely indubitable. But what is the me? What’s doing the thinking? What’s doing the existing? It might be a biological creature, a bodily creature. In fact most of us would say it surely is. It might be a brain perhaps or it might be me with my brain. So just from the fact that I know I exist it’s not going to follow that I’m an incorporeal immaterial thinking substance. So it’s a very problematic move.

**Derek Matravers**

What does Descartes mean by “a clear and distinct understanding”?

**Professor John Cottingham**

Well a clear understanding is something that's present to the attentive mind. It's just there in front of you as it were. To be distinct is a bit richer, a bit more complicated. A distinct perception must contain nothing except what is clear. Now many of our perceptions seem clear but they perhaps have extra bits built into them that could be questioned. For example I may say I have a pain in my leg. That's clear. The pain is present, vividly present. But it's not distinct Descartes would say because it contains obscure elements. Do I know I have a leg? I might be dreaming. I might have been might have had my leg amputated so the pain might not be in the leg itself. In fact Descartes was an early pioneer into the research of the phantom limb syndrome you know where someone has had a leg amputated but still complains of pain in the missing bit. So although it's clear that I have pain if I say I have a pain in my foot let's say, it's not distinct. To be distinct something must have nothing in it but what's clear. There it is. It's absolutely clear and there's nothing in it. There are no as it were hidden assumptions. It's- it's there in front of you and in front of you there is all you need to see that it must be true.

**Derek Matravers**

How does Descartes argue for what he calls “the real distinction between mind and body”? Is there one particular move which is key?

**Professor John Cottingham**

Real distinction perhaps in Modern English sounds a bit vague like there really is a distinction. But in Descartes it's quite technical. Real – realis in his original Latin – means that the two things mind and body are different rays, things, and by that he means different substances. So a real distinction between mind and body means that mind is a substance and body is a substance and they are completely independent. So to give one example he uses you could exist without your body. You, the thinking thing, could lose your body but you would still be you. Similarly of course body could exist without mind. I mean we know that anyway. A table can exist without there being any consciousness. So the real distinction is just a way of referring to that substantial distinction between mind and body as two separate and independent substances.

**Derek Matravers**

So having argued that mind and body are distinct doesn't Descartes face a problem with how they interact? So I'm thinking in particular of causal interaction. So when I think that it's warm, something that happens in my mind, then my body takes off the jacket. Did Descartes face a problem in accounting for this?

**Professor John Cottingham**

It was a problem but he does address it. He discusses it in many places but in particular in the sixth meditation in his Meditations of 1641. What he says there is that the mind is not just lodged in the body like a sailor in a ship but is very closely intermingled with it; closely kind of infused or joined with it so as to form a unit. Now the problem you refer to how can a purely mental substance causally interact with a physical substance is indeed a problem. How can a ghost make a machine move? And as you know the label ghost in the machine is often used to describe Descartes Dualism. But actually what Descartes says is that I'm not really – what he implies I should say - is that I'm not really like a ghost trying to move around a mechanical structure of the body. Rather I'm intermingled with the body. I'm – it's almost like an organic – though he doesn't use that word – almost like an organic unity. And the sign of this unity is feelings. If I put my foot in the fire I will feel a sharp pain. Now that's a psychophysical event. There's physical stuff going on in the foot in the nervous system, in the brain. And then there's mental stuff going on, the feeling of pain. And the two in a certain way are almost inseparable. One follows immediately on the other. So the feelings, the emotions, the passions, these are for Descartes all signs of our embodiment. We are not just angels inhabiting bodies. We are not just ghosts in the machine. We are feeling sensing creatures. So that's his view. Whether he can make it compatible with his official mind, body, dualism, which we started with is another question. But my own view is that he can. Consider this analogy. It's not Descartes. Hydrogen and oxygen are really different elements but they can be fused together in water and water is a genuine compound in it's own right. And what is more water has properties, which aren't properties of hydrogen, nor are they properties of oxygen. So when the compound comes into existence there are as it were new properties, water properties. And I think Descartes would have said the same about the feelings and emotions and passions and sensations that come into existence when mind is joined to body.

**Derek Matravers**

Thank you very much.