

The Fallacious Origin of the Mind-Body Problem: A Reconsideration of Descartes' Method and Results

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The problem of explaining the interaction of mind and body has been a central issue in the human sciences since the time of Descartes. However, a careful re-examination of Descartes' epistemological procedure in the *Meditations* (1641/1960) reveals the "fallacious origin" of the classic mind-body division. In fact, the mind-body problem is *not* a genuine ontological split "discovered" by Descartes' method, but rather an *artifact* of using a method already laden with ontological preconceptions about mental being. Furthermore, Descartes inadvertently shifted from his original (epistemological) goal of establishing certain knowledge to an implicit (ontological) investigation of mental being, which then compelled him to investigate his own mental existence. Unfortunately, this phenomenological investigation was severely biased by the exclusive attentive state of reflective thinking that is generated by the method. Consequently, Descartes' inadequate phenomenological analysis further exacerbated the illusory "insight" that mind is separable from body.

The Mind-Body Problem and Present Grounds for its Reconsideration

Ever since Descartes first distinguished between thinking mind and extended matter, the problem of how the two *interact* has been of central importance to Western philosophy and science. Viewed from our present perspective, the mind-body split is basically an ontological problem, a question of being. By positing two qualitatively distinct and independent forms of being, Descartes created the serious problem of explaining how the two substances interact. However, the mind-body problem continues to survive today because it is implicitly or explicitly assumed that Descartes had either demonstrated an authentic ontological split between mind and matter, or, at least, presented an imperative philosophical problem requiring adequate explanation. For this reason, philosophers have endeavored for centuries to "resolve" the question of Cartesian dualism. Yet all these multiform efforts (including such notable "remedies" as Descartes' dualistic interactionism, Spinoza's monistic parallel-

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ism, Leibniz's monadic parallelism, and Fechner's double-aspect theory) tend to more or less buy into the fundamental assumption of mind-body dualism.

This essay suggests an alternative approach to this classic problem by directly questioning the grounds for Descartes' original demonstration of the ontological split of mind and body. It attempts to analyse the exact epistemological moves that first led Descartes to perceive an apparent distinction between mind and body.¹ Toward this end, Descartes' methodological steps in the *Meditations* (1641/1960) will be carefully retraced to show that the ontological division of mind and matter was actually a secondary "by-product" of his guiding method and epistemological aims. Moreover, the mind-body split was not only an indirect consequence of an epistemological enterprise, but the split was then exacerbated by Descartes' inadequate (phenomenological) inquiry into the "being" of mentality. Finally, and most importantly, it is concluded that the mind-body dichotomy is not a genuine ontological split at all, but rather the illusory outcome of the ontological presumptions already contained in Descartes' method.

At the same time, Descartes illustrates a broader problem in social science. It is exceedingly difficult for investigators to recognize how the results of their experiments and studies are already informed by the many implicit assumptions embedded in the methods used to make those studies. Perhaps, by virtue of the enormous legacy of questions surrounding the mind-body distinction, Descartes provides a prototypic example of this general problem of method and results. And by reconsidering his renowned work, we can enhance our understanding of the importance of analyzing the implicit assumptions that guide our scientific investigations.

With this general thesis in mind, this paper will begin by reviewing Descartes' epistemological procedure in the *Meditations*, focusing on the specific steps involved in his categorical pursuit of certain knowledge. The goal of this review is to locate the juncture where Descartes' epistemological concern with gaining certain knowledge about Nature inadvertently shifted into an ontological investigation of "mental being," which then actuated the apparent separation of mind and body. Finally, a re-examination of Descartes' epistemological procedure reveals how he exacerbated the supposed mind-body split by means of his inadequate phenomenological analysis of "I am, I exist."

Descartes' Epistemological Procedure in the *Meditations*

To begin with, it is crucial to emphasize that Descartes' primary philosophic aim was to achieve certain knowledge about Nature. Accordingly, Descartes

¹Obviously, any modern discussion of Descartes is biased by the tendency toward presentism. However, in fairness to Descartes, this paper seeks to deal with Descartes on his own terms—analyzing what actions he made in the *Meditations*, and for what reasons—rather than criticizing his "misdirections" from a presentist perspective.

believed that such knowledge about Nature could only be obtained through the rigorous application of a systematic method of rational thinking. In fact, in his *Discourse on Method* (1637/1960), Descartes asserted that the endless disagreement among philosophers throughout history resulted from the lack of a systematic method of precise thinking. Thus, in order to surmount the shortcomings of his philosophical predecessors, Descartes designed his "method of rightly conducting the reason" to overcome the many ways that reason was prone to errors. In particular, Descartes recognized that clear rational thinking was often undermined by such enduring problems as: the human readiness to affirm sensory experience as a trustworthy source of knowledge about Nature; the inclination to believe the pronouncements of established authorities, especially the Church; the human tendency to be bound to and influenced by faith; and the susceptibility to fall into old habits of poor thinking.

Descartes' epistemological method had been expounded several years before the *Meditations* in the second part of his *Discourse on Method*. Stated in brief, Descartes asserted four "Principle Rules of the Method." The First Rule of Method was to accept nothing as true unless it could be recognized as indubitable and certain. The Second Rule was to divide each problem into as many smaller parts as possible and necessary in order to best solve it. The Third Rule was to proceed in an orderly fashion from knowledge of the simplest and easiest things toward more complex understanding. The Fourth Rule was to make careful reviews and enumerations to be sure that nothing had been omitted in the reasoning procedure.

The First Meditation

In the opening of the First Meditation, Descartes describes what his First Rule of Method requires of him: he will set aside all his present beliefs about the natural world (i.e., because these beliefs are obvious and not certain), and accept nothing as true if he can find any grounds for doubting it (i.e., if it lacks the kind of rational necessity found in mathematics). Descartes states that everything he has thus far accepted as true about the world has been learned from or through the senses (Descartes, 1641/1960, p. 76). He then delineates those occasions when he has found the senses to be misleading, thus preparing the reader for the more drastic proposal that *everything* learned through the senses may also be considered as unreliable. In this way, Descartes is beginning to differentiate the reasoning mind from the sources of information which it considers. For Descartes, this is the first important step in accustoming the mind to work *independently* of the senses by using the analytic method. Thus Descartes was using his method to overcome what he probably viewed as the foremost source of errors in human thinking: our readiness to affirm that which the senses immediately tell us is true.

Descartes then accentuates the crucial distinction between reason and the sensory information it uses, by making the “astonishing observation” that there are *no* conclusive grounds by which waking life can be distinguished from dream sleep. Dreaming, like the thought of a lunatic, is a state of mind where “seeing is believing” and *all* illusions are readily accepted as fully real and true. In Descartes’ systematic demand for clarity, this dramatic example reaffirms that the mind cannot yet accept anything it allegedly knows about the world as true.

Descartes then offers some brief examples of how one can “jump to false conclusions” based on what the senses tell us is true. He demonstrates that sensory knowledge, such as the perception of color, is readily accepted by the mind, but it is *not* as real and certain as it appears to be. Rather, careful analysis reveals more simple and universal concepts which are true, such as extension, shape, quantity, and location (1641/1960, p. 77). To some extent, the physical sciences also recognized this distinction between the so-called “primary” and “secondary” qualities of matter. However, Descartes has earlier rejected this knowledge when he methodologically set aside all his present beliefs about the world *in order to gain certain knowledge*.

Descartes’ distinction between sensory qualities such as color and the concept of extension then leads him into a discussion of how *mathematical treatments always yield certainty* (1641/1960, p. 78). Indeed, this represents Descartes’ ideal for human reason: to “treat” ideas in the same mathematical way in order to obtain certain knowledge about the natural world. At this point, we can see that Descartes has first revealed his conception of what clarity of the understanding is like, and it is clearly modeled on the methods of geometry and mathematics.

Descartes then proceeds to “break the habits of faith,” which also often leads reason into error. He does so by applying his analytic method once again, and assuming that all his beliefs about God are false (1641/1960, p. 79). In this way, Descartes has used his method to separate reason from faith, the authority of the Church, and the dictates of “theological” natural science.

In his next step, Descartes states that he will now assume that *all* things he has accepted as true are but illusions and dreams—referring, of course, to his earlier point about the apparent reality of dreams and lunacy. Moreover, Descartes increases the rigor of his demand for certainty by introducing an *additional* methodological check on reason: he will assume that all his thoughts are false illusions created by a deceiving evil genius. By applying the evil genius hypothesis, Descartes shows that he is still unclear about such “obvious facts” as the sky, the earth, and his own body. Thus, by “redoubting” his earlier doubts (i.e., by applying the evil genius hypothesis), Descartes is systematically establishing a mental state that is even further “removed” from the information and things which it considers. Then, as he completes the First Meditation, Descartes remarks that habit and laziness call him back to his usual ways of thinking. Realizing how easy it is to fall into such error, Descartes will now use the

powerful check of the evil genius hypothesis to undermine the compelling influence of old habits of thought.

In summary, it is important to see that every action taken by Descartes in the First Meditation is determined by his guiding epistemological concerns and his methodological procedures for gaining certainty. At this point, Descartes has carefully distinguished the reasoning mind from the sensory information which it considers. At the same time, it is clear he has *not* intentionally separated mind and body as an aim in itself. On the contrary, the degree to which Descartes has thus far "separated" the mind from the senses (i.e., the body) must be seen as a secondary consequence of applying his method to achieve certain knowledge.

The Second Meditation

In accordance with his Fourth Rule of Method, Descartes begins the Second Meditation with a careful review of his preceding actions. He has resolved to assume that all his beliefs are false, and "that nothing has ever existed of all that my deceitful memory recalls to me" (1641/1960, p. 81).² However, Descartes achieves his first fundamental insight through the very act of systematically doubting the reliability of all the things he knows: although he can doubt the reliability of everything he thinks, he cannot doubt the fact that he is doubting those thoughts. "I am, I exist, is necessarily true every time that I pronounce it or conceive it in my mind" (1641/1960, p. 82). Moreover, Descartes realizes that "I am, I exist" necessarily remains true even if the evil genius is actively seeking to deceive him because "he can never make me be nothing as long as I think that I am something" (1641/1960, p. 82). In other words, "I am, I exist" was the first proposition that could pass Descartes' rigorous methodological procedure, including the "hyperbolic" doubt generated through the employment of the evil genius hypothesis.

Descartes then proceeds to further analyse this single, self-evident, indubitable truth of "I am, I exist" to see if there are not other things he can discern (e.g., about his nature as a knower). In short, now that Descartes is sure *that* he is, he

²Edmund Husserl recognized the basic similarity between the purified field of consciousness created in Descartes' *Meditations* and the radical mode of scrutiny that marked the starting point of his own phenomenology (Berger, 1972). Indeed, in his *Cartesian Meditations* (1929/1960) Husserl clearly acknowledged his indebtedness to Descartes. But Husserl also contributed an important criticism of Descartes that specified his crucial divergence from Descartes' approach: Descartes sought to establish an absolutely indubitable sphere of being, and he exceeded the strict suspension of judgement about the world by systematically transforming the various ideas he considers about the world *into their negation*. Hence, in Husserl's words (1913/1962, p. 98), "Descartes' universal attempt at doubt is just an attempt at universal denial [of the existence of the world]." The outcome of Descartes' procedure is an "I" which must then "find its way back" into contact with the "external world." In contrast, Husserl's phenomenological procedure does *not* deny the existence or value of the external world. Instead judgement about the existence of the world is "suspended" or "placed in brackets" without being denied or destroyed, so that the world continues to offer itself as before, but now as "phenomenon" for study.

wants to determine *what* he is: "I do not yet know sufficiently clearly what I am, I who am sure I exist" (1641/1960, p. 82). One of the first things he notices is that the knowledge "I am, I exist" is more certain and evident than all of his other previous knowledge about the world or himself. So Descartes reviews his previous beliefs about himself to determine whether he can affirm any that are indubitably certain. Using the First Rule of Method, Descartes soon rejects the various beliefs that he is a "rational animal," or that "I am" is some kind of "soul" located in the corporeal mechanism of a body. Hence, although Descartes knows he cannot doubt his own "existence" while thinking these thoughts, he can still doubt whether these ideas are themselves trustworthy (i.e., in their reference to "certain existing things" in the world).

Descartes continues to analyse the certainty "I am, I exist" and reveals a whole group of additional facts, which he can affirm about this indubitable, self-evident experience of existent thinking. First of all, he recognizes that he can be certain of his own existence even though he can still doubt whether his own body exists (1641/1960, p. 83). Hence, he can see that "I am" is non-bodily since all the intellectual actions he has made do not seem to require the body. Secondly, he realizes that he can be sure he is a "thinking thing," and that "I am" exists *as* mental experience (1641/1960, p. 83). Thus thinking is an attribute inseparable from his existence. Thirdly, Descartes recognizes that he can be certain he exists only as long as he is thinking: "For it might perhaps happen, if I totally ceased thinking, that I would at the same time completely cease to be" (1641/1960, p. 84). In this way, he has established with certainty that thinking is "episodic." Fourthly, Descartes recognizes that "I am, I exist" does not seem to depend on things whose existence is not yet known to him. Thus he can see that his thinking existence is autonomous, independent of any external influence such as his own body. Fifthly, he can be certain that there are many different *modes* of thought:

What is a thinking being? It is a being which doubts, which understands, which conceives, which affirms, which denies, which wills, which rejects, which imagines also, and which perceives. It is certainly not a trivial matter if all these things belong to my nature. (1641/1960, p. 85)

Finally, Descartes recognizes that "I am, I exist" is certainly "the same being" who has been engaged in these various modes of thinking (1641/1960, p. 86).³

Despite his affirmation of the above series of insights, Descartes again finds himself compelled to accept those things which present themselves so obviously to his common sense orientation. He is fully aware of the dangerous shortcomings of such knowledge. This "moment of weakness" reminds Descartes that common sense is highly prone to errors because it readily accepts things at

³This is an important point, especially in connection with later quarrels over whether the self *has* thoughts (Hume) or *is* those thoughts (Leibniz).

“face value” without a proper demand for certainty. After all, Descartes’ entire investigation to this point has been directed by his complete faith in reason, and by his conviction that reason can achieve certainty if it is rightly guided by his analytic method. Therefore Descartes again applies his method to challenge common sense for its justification in believing that “the bodies which we touch and see” are as easily known as we commonly believe (1641/1960, p. 87). By introducing the example of “the changing wax” (1641/1960, pp. 88-89), Descartes shows that perception is *an inspection by the mind*, which can be imperfect and confused (such as when it uncritically accepts what the senses tell us about the wax object—color, odor, sound, temperature), or clear and distinct (such as when the wax object is judged with reason—i.e., extension).

Following this discussion, Descartes remarks that applying his method to gain certain knowledge “serves much better to show the nature of my mind” (1641/1960, p. 90). He asserts that there are “many other things in the mind itself which can contribute to the clarification of its nature, that those which depend on the body . . . hardly deserve to be taken into account” (1641/1960, p. 90). Hence Descartes has shown that when we are using our minds, we can be completely clear and certain about this thinking event—even though the nature and existence of the things we are thinking about remain entirely uncertain. Descartes then closes the Second Meditation by reaffirming that the mind is definitely easier to know than what is “out there” (1641/1960, pp. 90-91). In other words, he can know his own mental being with absolute clarity, but his knowledge of the natural world is still entirely unclear.

As the Third Meditation begins, Descartes carefully reviews all that he knows with certainty up to this point, again in accordance with the Fourth Rule of Method. This review leads him to yet another insight: “I can establish as a general principle that everything which we conceive very clearly and very distinctly is wholly true” (1641/1960, p. 92). This means that Descartes now recognizes what it is like to gain certainty with the understanding and affirm it. He knows what it is like to have clear and certain knowledge, and he has learned more about how his First Rule of Method works to guarantee this certainty. In addition, by analysing “I am, I exist” to reveal further insights, Descartes has seen that clear rational insights can be expanded and further clarified.

Ontology or Artifact?—The Mind-Body Split as a Consequence of Descartes’ Epistemological Method

The stated goals of the preceding review have been (1) to illuminate the epistemological moves that led to the positing of mind and matter as independent substances, and (2) to emphasize the *primacy* of Descartes’ epistemological purposes throughout this undertaking. In this regard, the opening of the Third Meditation provides the ideal place to stop and carefully reconsider the self-evident truths, which Descartes has thus far uncovered. For, in the same way

that one finds a letter in the mailbox without having seen the postperson deliver it, the mind-body split has already quietly emerged from Descartes' methodological procedure in the Second Meditation.

As we have clearly seen, Descartes was primarily concerned with establishing certain knowledge of the natural world, and he was convinced that this could be achieved through the resolute application of his analytic method. Indeed, by rigorously applying his method in the First Meditation, Descartes was able to affirm his first indubitable truth — the fundamental certainty that “I am, I exist.” In turn, Descartes' systematic analysis of this basic insight in the Second Meditation revealed a series of additional facts about the knowing “I.” Among them, he disclosed the crucial insight that thinking could exist independently of any external influence (i.e., the body). However, at all times, Descartes' immediate aim remained strictly epistemological. He wanted to obtain as much certain knowledge as he could about the nature of his knowing experience. Within the circumscribed framework of his original epistemological program, he did not intend to pursue an ontological investigation into the “being” of mentality. More accurately, it can be said that *Descartes formulated an epistemological question which was cast in ontological terms*: “Now that I know that I am, what am I?”

It is vitally important to see that Descartes did not ask, “what more can I know with certainty about my indubitable knowing?” Instead he asked, “what am I as thinking being?”⁴ The point is that the first question represents an (epistemological) investigation into the nature of human knowledge, while the latter question constitutes an (ontological) investigation of the being of mental knowing.

Therefore, at the point where Descartes asked, “what am I, I who am sure I exist?” (1641/1960, p. 82), he inadvertently shifted from an epistemological inquiry of certain knowledge to an admittedly ontological study of mentality, the mind. As we have seen, Descartes answered the question “what am I” with a series of insights about thinking existence, including the observation that thinking does not seem to require the body. Thus the first clear expression of the mind-body split as an ontological problem can be “located” at this crucial juncture in the Second Meditation.

Actually the most immediate answer to Descartes' question “what am I?” should have been “*I am something which can ask about itself!*” In fact, “I am” something which recognizes that “I exist” when I ask about myself. Descartes failed to realize the major implications of this essential characteristic of thinking — namely, that when thought becomes fully aware of its own activity, *thought is a reflective experience*. Thus, the capacity to ask “What am I, now that I am sure I exist?” reveals the essential reflective quality of the mind: it knows that it knows.

⁴Heidegger (1977, p. 274) notes that Descartes' indubitable “I am” forced his successors to doubt in the same manner: “He led them to think of themselves, of their ‘I’. Thus the ‘I’, human subjectivity, came to be declared the center of thought. From here originated the I-viewpoint of modern times and its subjectivism.”

In other words, thinking's capacity to be attentively self-aware is demonstrated by the fact that one can recognize that one is engaged in systematic doubt of the reliability of one's own ideas. To ask whether a proposition held in the understanding is certain, first requires knowing the proposition, and then knowing that one is considering its validity.⁵

Thus Descartes formulated the ontological question of "what am I as thinking being?" strictly in accordance with his epistemological concern with obtaining certain knowledge. In turn, since this was basically a question of mental being, Descartes was then obliged to engage in a *phenomenological* inquiry into the nature of mentality. However, Descartes' failure to adequately acknowledge the reflective capacity of the mind seriously affected his subsequent phenomenological analysis of mental experience. For instance, his insights that "thought is episodic" and "has many modes" were observations that were made while thinking was fully attentive and reflecting upon itself. Likewise, it is much easier to experience thinking as occurring independently of the body when thinking is conceived as fully attentive, reflective thinking. We will return to a more detailed discussion of these crucial points later.

Actually, the key to the mind-body problem lies in Descartes' unanalyzed ontological preconception of what knowing or knowledge is. By definition, Descartes insists that he cannot accept anything as true unless it presents itself to the *mind* with such clarity that it cannot be doubted. Thus the First Rule of Method carries with it a preconception of the sort of thing that a knower of the "really real" is. The unanalyzed assumption in the First Rule is that the act of affirming certain knowledge will be like the grasping of necessary truths in logic and mathematics. For instance, this assumption is revealed as early as the First Meditation when Descartes points out that mathematical treatments always yield certainty (1641/1960, p. 78). It is also revealed when Descartes conceptualizes perception as "an inspection by the mind" in the Second Meditation (1641/1960, pp. 88-89). Moreover, this unanalyzed assumption of the logico-mathematical structure of certain knowledge (i.e., the knowing mind) contains additional assumptions.⁶ In particular, it is assumed that certainty of knowledge is judged solely through acts of the attentively self-aware mind, and that this procedure requires a specific kind of knower that is like a calculator or deducer.

Since Descartes' method is designed to guide the proper use of *thinking*, the method itself is already loaded with the assumption that the user of the method is an alert mental knower. One can "know" things with certainty only with an attentive reasoning mind, that is capable of fulfilling the express demands for

⁵This can be seen as marking the beginning of Kant's distinction between *verstand* and *vernunft*.

⁶Kennington (1978) has presented a valuable critique on this subject, in which he convincingly defended Descartes against the charge of "universal mathematicism." The present discussion focuses only on the consequences of applying the standards of knowledge used in mathematics to the realm of *res cogitans*, the mind.

certainty, and that has the reflective capacity to recognize true knowledge when it sees it.

The problem is that Descartes' method establishes an exclusive mental state for judging truth, which then uses that state of the reasoning mind *itself* as the criterion for truth. As a result, using the method will naturally yield itself as an apparent "revealed truth." Hence, by creating a definition of what certainty is (based on certainty in mathematics), and then asking himself what he could know with certainty, Descartes revealed nothing more than that self-same definition. In other words, thinking is an attribute of the mind that is already presupposed in using the method. But thinking existence itself is *not* revealed by using the method, as Descartes concludes. In short, when the mind asks itself what it can know with indubitable certainty, it first recognizes itself (as the very definition of certainty!), and then affirms that it exists as long as it thinks. Therefore Descartes' "discovery" of the insight, "I am, I exist as thinking substance," is actually only an *artifact* of the unanalyzed ontological presumptions embedded in his method for gaining certain knowledge. Furthermore, Descartes' subsequent series of insights about mental being (such as its capacity to think independently of the body) are themselves based upon this preceding illusory "revelation." Hence, Descartes' assertion of the ontological autonomy of mind from body is based on a prior mistaken premise of "revealed truth."

There is yet another critical problem resulting from the unanalyzed ontological presumptions in Descartes' "method of rightly conducting the reason." In order to know anything with certainty (as defined by the criteria of "certainty" used in the method), one must first set up a specific mental orientation of "removed careful inspection by the mind" (1641/1960, p. 80). However, this act of "distancing" the mind from the objects of its consideration is not the same as genuine ontological independence of mind. In fact, this methodological act of "removed inspection" is prefigured in the opening of the First Meditation when Descartes first distinguishes the reasoning mind from the sensory sources of the information it considers. To some degree, applying Descartes' method does create a select mental state of high attentiveness and lucidity, wherein the mind genuinely *seems* to exist independently as "pure mental being." But this supposed "self-evident experience" of mental existence is already presupposed in the method when Descartes insists that he can accept nothing as true unless it presents itself clearly to the mind.

In fairness to Descartes, he would grant that his method contains certain presumptions, such as the conception that all insights and chains of reasoning "follow from" what appears clear or justified. However, for Descartes, this would be a small price for finally setting philosophy on the course toward its long-esteemed goal of universally agreed-upon truth. Nevertheless, Descartes does not fully appreciate how the unanalyzed *ontological* preconception of mental being in his method impacted on the results of his epistemological program. Specifically, the exclusive mental state of absolute clarity required by

the method (as the definition of certainty itself) reveals the distinctive logico-mathematical preconception of mental being that is already embedded in the method:

First of all, the indubitable experience of "I am, I exist" served to further clarify Descartes' own understanding of what "clear and distinct knowledge" is like: it is like grasping an indubitable mathematical truth. Secondly, Descartes recognized that the proposition "I am, I exist" is *necessarily* true in the logico-mathematical sense. Finally, when Descartes states that he "attentively reviews" these various ideas about himself and the world (1641/1960, p. 83), he reveals yet another implicit ontological assumption about his mental state of absolute clarity. It is modeled on the procedure of considering a logical or mathematical proposition with a fully attentive mind (i.e., "an inspection by the mind," 1641/1960, p. 88), and then grasping its truth with the understanding. In conclusion then, there is a presupposed conception of the mind in Descartes' method, which has a distinct logico-mathematical structure.

The Mind-Body Split as the Product of Descartes' Inadequate Phenomenological Investigation

In the previous section, it was argued that the independence of mind from body is an illusory artifact arising from the unrecognized ontological preconception of mental being already embedded in Descartes' epistemological method. The present section explores how this illusory ontological separation of mind and body was then exacerbated by Descartes' inadequate phenomenological investigation of "I am, I exist." As noted previously, Descartes inadvertently shifted from an epistemological pursuit of certain knowledge into an ontological investigation of mental being at the point where he formulated the *ontological* question, "What am I, I who am sure I exist?" (1641/1960, p. 82). In turn, by asking what is the essential being of mentality, Descartes was obliged to engage in a phenomenological study of mental experience itself.

Unfortunately, *before* Descartes made this phenomenological analysis, he had "set up" a very specific state of mind, which severely biased the results of this study. This exclusive mental state was established in accordance with the "fully attentive" criterion of certainty defined by the method, and implicitly structured by the unanalyzed logico-mathematical preconception of mental being embedded in the method. Consequently, when Descartes examined his own mental state, he experienced mental existence as being "acutely aware" and "absolutely clear," and he concluded that several qualities of this specific instance of mental experience characterized the *essence* of mental being in general: namely, the series of "self-evident insights" that thinking existence is a mental experience; is non-bodily; is episodic; is autonomous from external influence; has different modes; and recognizes itself as engaged in various mental acts.

Yet Descartes' "discovery" of all these supposed essential characteristics of mental being resulted from the methodological biases coloring his phenomenological analysis. Basically, *Descartes' strict adherence to his method required him to experience mentality as fully attentive and self-aware*, and this had the profound effect of exacerbating the "split" between mental and bodily being. Without the rigorous delimitations of the method, Descartes' phenomenological study could have affirmed that there is a *continuum* of conscious awareness, ranging from full clarity of the understanding, to mental experience that is barely aware of itself.

In his brilliant study of Descartes and medicine, Zaner (1981) draws a similar conclusion from a differing perspective. Zaner convincingly shows that Descartes himself always recognized and insisted on the *union* of mind and body in living experience.⁷ However, Descartes' alternate treatment of the mind and body as "intimately blended" or as separate "substances" depended on his contrasting use of two fundamentally differing "modes of discourse." The first mode of discourse was Descartes' "metaphysics of substance," which was based on a conceptual and heuristic separation of mind and body, and treated either "mind-substance" or "body-substance" as an "in-itself." For example, in his *Treatise on Man* (1662/1972), Descartes regarded the "body-in-itself" as analogous to a machine, treating the body *as if* there was no soul in it (an approach typified in the practice of cadaverial anatomy in that historical period). Descartes also employed the substance doctrine in the *Meditations* (1641/1960), where, for the most part, he treated the mind independently of the body. The second mode of discourse was Descartes' "appeal to daily experience," which consistently emphasized the *union* of mind and body in living experience. By illuminating the central importance of clinical medicine in Descartes' life, Zaner (1981) demonstrates that

whenever Descartes addresses the question of the *union* of soul and body, he makes no use of the substance doctrine but instead appeals to "experience" (of pain, hunger, affliction), "daily life," and "ordinary conversation" The substance doctrine is explicitly said to be in effect an *impediment* to the understanding of the union of soul and body. (Zaner, 1981, p. 108)

In this fashion, Zaner (1981) vigorously rejects the criticism that Descartes' appeal to experience is "inadequate" as a source of knowledge indicating the union of soul and body (e.g., Spicker and Engelhardt, 1976). At the same time,

⁷In fact, Descartes (1641/1960, pp. 134-135) refers explicitly to the *union* of mind and body in the Sixth Meditation:

Nature also teaches me by these feelings of pain, hunger, thirst, and so on that I am not only residing in my body, as a pilot in his ship, but furthermore, that I am intimately connected with it, and that the mixture is so blended . . . that something like a single whole is produced All these feelings of hunger, thirst, pain, and so on are nothing else but certain confused modes of thinking, which have their origin in and depend upon the union and apparent fusion of the mind with the body.

Zaner admits that Descartes was too zealous in applying his method (which often employed the substance doctrine), and so he “forgot his own counsel” to turn to ordinary life as evidence of the mind-body union. I have argued that the defined rules of the method precluded *any* possible appeal to daily or sensual experience as a source of knowledge, and thereby disallowed this sort of evidence, which might have contradicted the separation of mental and bodily being.

Clearly, in his systematic epistemological pursuit of certain knowledge, Descartes believed he *must* rigidly adhere to the method in order to overcome the traditional errors of “unclear thinking.” Consequently, Descartes’ method precluded him from affirming his own awareness of non-alert mentality in two ways: First of all, if the mind is operating according to the rules of the method, it *must be alert* and paying attention. Secondly, by definition, attentive clarity is the *only* condition that permits the affirmation of certain knowledge.

Hence, there is a strong tension in the *Meditations* between (1) Descartes’ own recognition that he is frequently *not* attentive (a fact he observes each time he strays from the method), and (2) Descartes’ faithful compliance to the method, which necessarily disallows all instances of non-attentive thinking as unreliable. For example, in the Second Meditation, Descartes remarks that “my mind is a vagabond who likes to wander and is not yet able to stay within the strict bounds of truth” (1641/1960, pp. 86-87). Similarly, Descartes comments directly on this tension at the conclusion of the First Meditation, when he admits, “a certain laziness leads me insensibly into the normal paths of ordinary life” (1641/1960, p. 80). In both examples, Descartes finds himself compelled to accept those things which present themselves so obviously to his common sense orientation. But Descartes resists the predilection to make an appeal to the experience of “ordinary life.” He is aware of varying degrees of mental attentiveness and clarity, but the method prevents him from affirming a conception of the mind’s essence, which can take this into account. Furthermore, as Descartes becomes increasingly skilled in the application of his method, he is increasingly less susceptible to the compelling habits of unclear, non-attentive thinking. In turn, there are fewer experiential opportunities to be reminded of these additional characteristics of mental being.

In other words, if Descartes had set aside the method, he would have readily observed the numerous occasions when the mind is *not* alert and *not* self-aware—moments when the mind is so lax that it would seem that “thinking existence” has ceased altogether. The crucial point is that it is much easier to experience thinking as occurring “independently” of the body when the mind is conceived as fully attentive, reflective thinking. But it is extremely difficult to posit the independence of mental being when thinking is not defined so narrowly. For example, one can drive a car four miles without any awareness or recollection of having driven those miles. Obviously, one can see that something other than alert mental experience had accomplished this act. The mental state of the

driver is not attentive, and certainly not attentively self-aware. When thought is barely aware, it becomes very difficult to experience its "independent" operation from the body. The same is true for the experiences of illness, hunger, and thirst, as Descartes himself recognizes in a letter to Hyperaspistes in August 1641:

We know by experience that our minds are so clearly joined to our bodies as to be almost always acted upon by them; and though in an adult and healthy body the mind enjoys some liberty to think of other things than those prescribed by the senses, we know that there is *not the same liberty in those who are sick.* (Zaner, 1981, p. 97, emphasis added)

At this point, one might well ask, why should non-attentive thinking be seen as dependent on the body and attentive thinking more independent? The answer is available through an "appeal to the common experiences of everyday life." For example, the mind seems to function quite independently of the body when one is concentrating on a complex arithmetic problem. But if one attempts the same task while bedridden with a bad cold, or while distracted by a growling hungry stomach, the experience of the mind-body union is undeniable. Nevertheless, Descartes clearly understood that such an "appeal to daily experience" might be accused of begging the question of mind-body interaction. Thus, for instance, after explaining to Princess Elizabeth that the union of mind and body is demonstrated by living experience, Descartes prudently adds, "I almost fear that your Highness may think I am not speaking seriously here" (Zaner, 1981, p. 105).

Again we observe the conflicting tension between Descartes' acknowledgement of experiential knowledge, and the epistemological requirements of his method (which necessarily rejects such "unclear" sources of knowledge). This basic inconsistency is evident in the *Meditations* in Descartes' definition of the term "thinking." He repeatedly emphasizes that he includes the unclear as well as the clear in his use of the term "thinking." By "thinking," he means wishing, feeling, willing, perceiving, imagining, and so on (for example, 1641/1960, p. 85). While it is true that *he* (as experiencing person) recognizes varying qualities of clarity and attentiveness, *the method does not* because, by definition, the method rejects all but the most extremely attentive states of reflective thinking. Again, if Descartes had conducted an unbiased phenomenological investigation, he might have affirmed the varying degrees of conscious awareness as well as the continuum of mental experience.⁸ However, the rules of the method restricted Descartes to experiencing only a narrow instance of mental being, and prevented him from acknowledging the broader range of essential mental qualities. As a result, Descartes eventually arrives at the illusory conclusion that "thinking existence" is autonomous from the body.

⁸We are reminded here of William James' now famous observation of "the stream of consciousness."

This line of argument can be summarized in the following way. When thinking is operating with the full attentive clarity required by the method, it creates a specific mental state of acute self-reflection. *Experientially*, the mind really *seems* to exist independently of the body when mental attention is intensely concentrated on itself and its own activity. But when mental experience is barely attentive, as it more often is, it is *not* experienced so clearly as "autonomous." In other words, *the apparent perceived "split" of mind and body is experienced in its most extreme form when the mind is fully attentive and reflecting on itself as required by the method.* However, this does not constitute a genuine ontological split of mental and bodily being.

Likewise, in the same way that the special state of fully attentive thinking precluded Descartes from recognizing the continuum of mental awareness, it also caused him to overlook the continual changing complexion of mental experience. When thinking is preconceived as fully self-aware thinking, then one is led to perceive mental experience as a series of seemingly separate mental episodes. Thinking is "episodic" in the sense that one can experience moments when thinking is aware of itself thinking, and moments when thinking is not aware of itself thinking. But it is *not true* that thinking itself is essentially episodic (as Descartes concludes) because not all thinking is reflective and self-aware like this. Thinking is experienced as "episodes" of explicit attentiveness only when all less-than-attentive mental activity is discounted as unreliable or as something that cannot be verified as true. Thus, Descartes' preconception of what is "mental" is too narrowly defined as moments of attentive clarity to be phenomenologically accurate with the actual varying quality of mental experience.

Similarly, mental life is *not* experienced as radically distinct "modes" of thinking *except* when thinking is fully attentive and focusing on itself, and can discern the varying qualities in its own activity. Hence, biased by the requirements of the method, Descartes falsely concluded that mental existence is characterized by switching from one discrete episode to the next, from the mode of imagining to judging to perceiving to doubting to feeling and so on. But separate "modes" are experienced only when the fully attentive mind is carefully attending to itself while it engages in its various capacities. In contrast, the barely attentive mind (i.e., when thinking is not guided by the method) is not aware of its own activity, much less whether its activity is in the form of, say, perceiving or imagining. When mental experience is not restricted by Descartes' method to the exclusive state of attentive self-awareness, these "modes" of thinking are blended together in a continuous stream of consciousness with varying degrees of awareness.

In conclusion, the basic problem with Descartes' phenomenological analysis of mental being was that he conducted his investigation while in a very specific state of attentive self-reflection. As a result, he concluded that mental being exists independently of the body, is episodic, and has distinct modes, and he regarded these observations as self-evident truths. However, the specified men-

tal set generated by the method is a unique frame of mind (modeled on the standards of mathematics), which predisposed Descartes to observing these sorts of characteristics of mental being. In contrast, a proper phenomenological investigation would not have been restricted to episodes of mental "clarity" and "attentiveness" by the method, and therefore would have yielded quite different conclusions about the essential characteristics of mental being. Above all, an adequate inquiry would *not* have affirmed the ontological separation of mind and body.

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