

Research
Based
Curricula

Does consciousness have
a body?

Key Stage 5 Philosophy
Resource 1

2019



Resource One

Overview



Topic	René Descartes: The Real Distinction Argument
A-Level Modules	Reason as a source of knowledge
Objectives	<p>After completing this resource you should be able:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ To understand how Descartes's philosophy favours a dualistic interpretation of the relationship between mind and body.✓ To explore how religious and scientific views have contributed in shaping Descartes' philosophy.✓ To evaluate the possible limitation of such a view.
Instructions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Read the data source2. Complete the activities3. Explore the further reading
Context	<p>René Descartes 1596–1650 was an accomplished mathematician, scientist, and philosopher. He formulated the first modern version of mind–body dualism, from which stems the mind–body problem, and promoted the development of a new science ground in observation and experiment. For these reasons, he has been called the father of modern philosophy.</p> <p>Applying an original system of methodical doubt, he dismissed apparent knowledge derived from authority, the senses, and reason and erected new foundations for knowledge on the basis of the intuition that, when he is thinking, he exists; this he expressed in the dictum “I think, therefore I am” (best known in its Latin formulation, “Cogito, ergo sum” though originally written in French, “Je pense, donc je suis”).</p> <p>He developed a metaphysical dualism that distinguishes between mind, the essence of which is thinking, and matter, the essence of which is extension in three dimensions.</p>

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Reading



One of the deepest and most lasting legacies of Descartes' philosophy is his thesis that mind and body are really distinct—a thesis now called "mind-body dualism." He reaches this conclusion by arguing that the nature of the mind (that is, a thinking, non-extended thing) is completely different from that of the body (that is, an extended, non-thinking thing), and therefore it is possible for one to exist without the other. For Descartes the payoff is twofold.

a. The Religious Motivation: In his Letter to the Sorbonne published at the beginning of his seminal work, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes states that his purpose in showing that the human mind or soul is really distinct from the body is to refute those "irreligious people" who only have faith in mathematics and will not believe in the soul's immortality without a mathematical demonstration of it.

b. The Scientific Motivation: Descartes understood one thesis to stand at the heart of the entire scientific tradition: the doctrine that everything ultimately behaved for the sake of some end or goal. Here, Descartes is claiming that the concept of a substantial form as part of the entirely physical world stems from a confusion of the ideas of mind and body. This confusion led people to mistakenly ascribe mental properties like knowledge to entirely non-mental things like stones, plants, and, yes, even non-human animals. The real distinction of mind and body can then show that bodies exist and move as they do without mentality, and as such principles of mental causation such as goals, purposes (that is, final causes), and knowledge have no role to play in the explanation of physical phenomena. In his Sixth Meditation, Descartes states:

[O]n the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing [that is, a mind], and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far 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 (AT VII 78: CSM II 54).

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Reading Notice that the argument is given from the first person perspective (as are the entire Meditations). This “I” is, of course, Descartes insofar as he is a thinking thing or mind, and the argument is intended to work for any “I” or mind. So, for present purposes, it is safe to generalize the argument by replacing “I” with “mind” in the relevant places:

I have a clear and distinct idea of the mind as a thinking, non-extended thing.

I have a clear and distinct idea of body as an extended, non-thinking thing.

Therefore, the mind is really distinct from the body and can exist without it.

At first glance it may seem that, without justification, Descartes is bluntly asserting that he conceives of mind and body as two completely different things, and that from his conception, he is inferring that he (or any mind) can exist without the body. But this is no blunt, unjustified assertion. Much more is at work here: most notably what is at work is his doctrine of clear and distinct ideas. Indeed the truth of his intellectual perception of the natures of mind and body is supposed to be guaranteed by the fact that this perception is “clear and distinct.”

According to Descartes, his ability to clearly and distinctly understand them separately from one another implies that each can exist alone without the other.

Descartes, then, clearly and distinctly perceives the mind as possibly existing all by itself, and the body as possibly existing all by itself. But couldn't Descartes somehow be mistaken about his clear and distinct ideas? Given the existence of so many non-thinking bodies like stones, there is no question that bodies can exist without minds. So, even if he could be mistaken about what he clearly and distinctly understands, there is other evidence in support of premise 2.

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Reading But can minds exist without bodies? Can thinking occur without a brain? If the answer to this question is “no,” the first premise would be false and, therefore, Descartes would be mistaken about one of his clear and distinct perceptions. Indeed, since we have no experience of minds actually existing without bodies as we do of bodies actually existing without minds, the argument will stand only if Descartes’ clear and distinct understanding of the mind’s nature somehow guarantees the truth of premise 1; but, at this point, it is not evident whether Descartes’ “clear and distinct” perception guarantees the truth of anything. However, in the Fourth Meditation, Descartes goes to great lengths to guarantee the truth of whatever is clearly and distinctly understood. This veridical guarantee is based on the theses that God exists and that he cannot be a deceiver.

However, if it turns out that God does not exist or that he can be a deceiver, then all bets are off. There would then no longer be any veridical guarantee of what is clearly and distinctly understood and, as a result, the first premise could be false. Consequently, premise 1 would not bar the possibility of minds requiring brains to exist and, therefore, this premise would not be absolutely certain as Descartes supposed. In the end, the conclusion is established with absolute certainty only when considered from within Descartes’ own epistemological framework but loses its force if that framework turns out to be false or when evaluated from outside of it.

These guaranteed truths express some very important points about Descartes’ conception of mind and body. Notice that mind and body are defined as complete opposites, as two natures that have absolutely nothing in common. And, it is this complete diversity that establishes the possibility of their independent existence. But, how can Descartes make a legitimate inference from his independent understanding of mind and body as completely different things to their independent existence?

Resource One Activities



Activities



1. Read the text above, before writing a brief response to the following questions:
 - a) What is the religious motivation of the real distinction argument?
 - b) What is the scientific motivation of the real distinction argument?
 - c) How is the real distinction argument constructed?
 - d) What are its possible flaws?
 - e) What, in your opinion, have been the consequences of the real distinction argument on the history of philosophy?



2. Watch [Cartesian Skepticism – Neo, Meet Rene: Crash Course Philosophy](#) Reflect: In what way this video does reflect/extend what you have learnt about Descarte's philosophical views?

Resource One Further Reading



Explore "Phenomenal Films"



<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2003/may/20/features.paulmacinnes>



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