



Minds and Bodies

an introduction with readings

Robert Wilkinson

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Minds and Bodies: An Introduction with Readings is a concise, accessible introduction to the mind–body problem. It requires no prior philosophical knowledge and is ideally suited to those coming to philosophy and philosophy of mind for the first time.

Written with the beginner in mind, Robert Wilkinson carefully introduces the reader to the major issues in the philosophy of mind: Descartes' dualist account of mind and body as separate substances; together with other types of dualism; recent monist views including functionalism and eliminativism; computer science and artificial intelligence. Each chapter is helpfully linked to a reading from key thinkers in the field such as Descartes and John R. Searle. With the use of exercises, readers are then encouraged to think critically about the readings themselves.

By the end of the book students will be able to:

- understand and evaluate for themselves the major options in the philosophy of mind
- confidently discuss some of the writings on the mind philosophers such as Descartes, John R. Searle and Thomas Nagel
- understand proposed solutions to the mind–body problem and the major objections to them.

Key features also include activities and exercises enabling readers to monitor their progress throughout the book, chapter summaries and guides to further reading.

Robert Wilkinson is Head of Philosophy at the Open University. His previous publications include *Fifty Eastern Thinkers*, Routledge 2000.

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Introduction

OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of this chapter is to state the mind–body problem. By the end of your work on this chapter you should:

- be able to give a preliminary answer to the question: What do I believe about the nature of mind and its relation to the body?
- understand some of the major properties of the mental, notably mental causation; what it is to be a subject; privacy and privileged access;
- be able to say what the mind–body problem is.

This book is intended to be of interest to beginners or near-beginners in philosophy, and it has two main aims: the first is to introduce you to the mind–body problem, a central question in the branch of philosophy called the philosophy of mind; the second aim is to show you, by means of guided reading of primary source texts dealing with this problem, what is involved in reading a text from a philosophical point of view.

Let me say something about the second of these aims before getting on to the main business of the book. Reading a text from a philosophical point of view is somewhat different from reading it as would a student of literature or a student of history. Philosophy is the study of our most basic and general concepts and beliefs: the whole edifice of human thought rests on such concepts and beliefs that serve as its foundations, and it is the business of philosophy to identify and analyse them in a particular way, which we will see exemplified in what follows. The principal techniques used are the analysis of concepts and the deployment and evaluation of arguments – there will be many examples of both these techniques

in this book, so I will not attempt here to define them – it is, in any case, much easier to grasp what is involved by means of examples. The point to fasten on for the moment is that, when reading a text philosophically, the aim is precisely to evaluate the arguments and conceptual analyses in it. Accordingly, reading a text philosophically is not reading *about* philosophy but in a real sense *doing* it. Indeed, critical reflection on written philosophy is one of the principal ways in which the subject proceeds, though it is not the only one. I doubt if many philosophers would disagree with the view that ‘live’ debate with other philosophers is equally important. These activities are indeed two sides of the same coin. As we will see repeatedly in what follows, philosophy proceeds by dialogue: by the advancing of an argument or analysis; by the putting forward of objections, and then (if possible) of replies to these objections, and so on. Accordingly, knowing how to read a text philosophically is an essential skill for any philosopher.

As a key means to fulfilling this second aim, exercises have been included throughout, and you should try to resist the temptation to skip them. They have a number of functions: to reinforce your understanding of the most important of the concepts and beliefs discussed; to give you practice in the close reading of a philosophical text, and to consolidate your grip on the fundamentals of philosophical reasoning. You will benefit much more if you try to do these exercises yourself before reading the specimen answers and/or discussions provided. To repeat: reading in this way is not just reading about philosophy but doing it.

It is important to note that reading philosophy in this way is not quick: philosophical texts are much more like dense plum cakes than soufflés: a little goes a long way and takes a while to digest. All philosophers, however expert, find the same. To my knowledge, nobody has yet devised a way of skim-reading a philosophical text and understanding it properly, so do not be either surprised or depressed if you find it takes you some time to understand this material – this is a good sign!

We can now turn to the substantive business of this book, a consideration of the question philosophers term the mind–body problem. In the remainder of this introduction I want to set out some basic considerations which will allow us to state the mind–body problem in a preliminary way, and to begin to see why it is a real problem.

In fact, it is not too much to say that the mind–body problem is one of the most intriguing in the whole of philosophy. Typically of such philosophical problems – for example, concerning the nature of time or the source of the power of music – the mind–body problem arises when we reflect philosophically on features of the world which normally we take for granted and hardly notice in the ordinary course of life. The mind–body problem arises when we begin to pay attention to what is in fact a most remarkable feature of human beings (and indeed a number of other forms of life as well), namely, that we are conscious or, as we usually say, that we have a mind as well as a body. When you really stop to think about this, it rapidly comes to seem much more puzzling than you might expect. We all have an intuitive understanding of what material objects or bodies are like; but if you ask yourself the question: Is my mind the same sort of thing as my body or not? – in other words: Is the mind an effect or property of the body or at least significantly like it? – then we are liable to stop short at once and be

stuck for an answer. Perhaps many people would accept, for example, the view that the mind must at least depend on the body in some way, on the ground that there are regular (or as philosophers sometimes say ‘law-like’) correlations between states of my body (like putting my hand on a drawing pin) and states of my mind (a sharp pain). Again, bodily disorders often result in predictable mental disturbances: the fever brings on the delirium. Yet the fact (if it is a fact) that the mind might depend on the body in some way yet to be fully specified does not entail that the mind cannot be a quite different type of thing from the body. Dependency is logically quite compatible with distinctness. Informal reflections of this kind will start us off on our inquiry, but we find rapidly that they will not take us far along the road. In order to think about this matter to some purpose we need to do some philosophy.

We will begin our investigation in this Introduction with two steps: first, I will ask you to work out where you stand at the moment with regard to a basic question; and then I will set out some basic philosophical considerations about minds and bodies that will allow us to state the mind–body problem in a more detailed way and show why it is so intriguing and genuine a problem.

Put at its simplest, the question we are going to investigate is: What is the mind, and how is it related to the body? I now want you to work out roughly where you stand on this question at the moment, before you have investigated it from a philosophical point of view: to repeat, everyone has a basic intuition about this, and it is interesting, as a starting point, to tease it out. So, let us proceed by identifying your present basic idea about the mind–body question. Let me sketch out two different points of view, towards opposing ends of the spectrum of opinions which are taken on this issue.

POINT OF VIEW 1

The mind must be a very different sort of thing from the body. Many religions include the doctrine that it can and does live on, in some way, after the death of the body, and for that to be true minds¹ have to be very unlike bodies. After all, everything that is a material thing above the level of elementary particles is made of parts, and there is no material thing whose parts stay the same, or stay organized in the same way, forever. All material things change and decay, and all the living beings we know on earth – vegetable, animal and human alike – are mortal. They change and eventually they die. And so, if minds do not die, they must be very different sorts of things from bodies.

Again, you don’t have to be religious to believe this. People have out-of-body experiences, and these are so well attested they just can’t be ignored. Here is a typical report of such an experience:

It was a hot day and the air conditioner was on. After taking a shower I stretched out on the bed to cool off before dressing to leave the house. I did not fall asleep. I was not in the habit of taking naps in the afternoon and was very alert but thinking of nothing in particular that I could recall later. One moment I was on the bed, the next I was standing away from the foot of the bed. The mirror of the dressing table was in my line of vision and I saw myself. The reflection looked like me, yet it did not. ... It was as if I looked like myself but that I had been

refined and my features made more regular ... I was aware of the body on the bed but not interested in it ... I was not a 'body' such as was on the bed; it was something I wore, in the same way that one wears clothes. I did not want to go back to my body and felt a sense of heaviness in relation to it.

I have met only one person who was able to verify such an experience. Her name is ... When she was so ill she was not expected to live, she thought she had left her body and was looking down at the house (of course, much more details to it) and saw a garden hose on the roof. It was a flat-topped house they had just bought so that when she came to herself she knew that if there was such a hose up on the roof that she then had actually seen it. Not telling her husband why, she asked him to go up, and there was a hose to his surprise (a new one the last owners had forgotten).

(Tart in Ramakrishna 1993: 127–8)

In the light of experiences like these, it just isn't plausible to say that the mind is in some way a material thing, because material things just don't act like this. No other aspects or properties or bits of me can act in this way, so my mind must be a very different sort of thing from the rest of me.

POINT OF VIEW 2

The best guide to the way things are in the universe, in all its aspects, is science: it has worked better than any other method human beings have yet devised, and has made more true prophecies about the future than all the prophets there have ever been. What science has discovered is a universe of material things and forces in which extremely simple basic elements, like sub-atomic particles, have, over the unimaginable stretches of cosmic time, combined to form the extremely complex and richly varied universe we live in. Now, no scientific theory to date has included the idea of something so different in nature from matter that it escapes the conditions, like change and decay, which have been found to affect all complex material things. Even if we don't know yet how the brain generates the mind, it's a safe bet that it does generate it in some way, and that minds will turn out to be – in any sense of the word that is significant – material things. The peculiar out-of-body experiences just described are not enough evidence on their own to justify believing in minds that are not matter-dependent in some important way. After all, these experiences are really only like having a body that can do odd things such as flying: the people who have them always report visual sensations for instance, and if you really were detached from your body it isn't likely that your experience would be anything like having sensations at all, because you would not have any sense organs. We don't yet know how odd experiences like those described in Point of View 1 are to be accounted for, but the most probable assumption to work on is that some day we'll find a neat biochemical explanation for them – maybe the wiring in a key bit of the brain goes haywire for a while, or the electrochemistry malfunctions. After all, the human brain is the most complex entity in the known universe, with literally billions of connections and very complex processes going on in it all the time: small wonder if some of them go wonky now and again. One day we'll work it out. You won't get anywhere with this problem unless you take a scientific point of view, and that means not

assuming there are ghostly things in the universe without much better reason than we've found so far.

EXERCISE 1.1

TWO POINTS OF VIEW

The first question to answer is this: To which of these alternative points of view are you broadly sympathetic at the moment, or are you currently a 'don't know'? Please note down your present point of view and keep it handy. We shall return to it at the end of the book.

DISCUSSION

I am not going to comment on the assertions in these points of view here: in a sense, everything we are now going to do for the rest of this book will be a commentary on these opposing outlooks. If you take the view, inherent in Point of View 1, that minds and bodies are very different sorts of thing, then you probably take some form of the point of view philosophers call dualism, and we will be looking closely at this in the next chapter. If, on the other hand, you are more sympathetic to Point of View 2, which includes the assertion that minds and bodies are fundamentally the same sort of thing, then you will believe a version of the view philosophers call monism (in this case materialistic monism), and we will spend some time investigating some versions of that outlook in [Chapter 3](#), where all these technical terms are explained. However, you may – very reasonably – take the view that you are not sure about where you stand on this question at the moment. It may well appear to you – and you are by no means alone if this is so – that there is merit in both these points of view. This is a position in which many people find themselves when faced with this problem for the first time. The only way to proceed in such a case is to do what we are about to do, namely examine the arguments on both sides.

What we are going to do in this book is to take both these points of view very seriously indeed, and subject them to philosophical investigation. It is worth mentioning the point that philosophical studies of this kind are not, as they are sometimes alleged to be, ivory-tower pastimes – clever games for idle people in warm libraries or university departments, with no practical implications whatsoever. Take the following examples from our present area of study, the philosophy of mind. The first is as follows:

Over the centuries, human beings have given a number of different answers to the question: What are we to count as sentient beings – i.e. beings with some form of consciousness – capable of feeling, for example, pain and fear? What you believe about this question, together with your moral beliefs about rights and about obligations to minimize suffering (for example) has direct implications for the way you behave in treating the rest of the universe. Descartes – whose philosophy of mind we will come to presently –

believed that, so far as life on earth is concerned, consciousness is a property only of human beings, and that other animals are automata, no different in principle from clockwork dolls. A direct consequence of this view is that there is no moral ground on which to disapprove of vivisection or hunting since automata do not feel pain: the rabbit I infect or blind with cosmetics or agonize with electrodes, or the fox torn apart by dogs, is no more the subject of pain and fear than a car disassembled by a mechanic.

Second, many philosophers have thought that only if dualism is true can human beings be said to have freedom of the will: the material world (it is argued) is a realm of inexorable causal sequences with no room in it for freedom of choice in any meaningful sense – if what I experience as my choices are just neuronal functionings, are they not just as rigorously determined as the boiling of a kettle of water over a flame? If the mental is a distinct realm from the physical, outside the network of physical causes (it has been argued), perhaps this rigorous determinism can be avoided. (I should add that though this is a widespread view, it is by no means universally held: other philosophers hold that the question of free will is logically independent of the question of the nature of the mental.)

My final example is less controversial and it is simply this: what you believe about the nature of the mind or soul has a very direct bearing on how it is rational and moral for you to behave. If you believe in the immortality of the soul, and that this life is merely a prelude to a timeless life after death, then it is quite possible for you rationally to take a very different attitude to setbacks in this life from that of someone who believes this life is all there is. On the other hand, for those who believe in the mortality of the mind or soul, the quality of life here and now is, quite rationally, a matter of consistent urgency.

MINDS AND BODIES: SOME BASICS

One of the most difficult things which everyone finds when beginning philosophy is to understand what the given problem is: in our case, the question of the nature of the mind and its relation to the body. We can add a supplementary question here as well, one which has been debated, literally, for centuries: Why is it, apparently, so hard to settle? In a sense it will take the whole of this book to answer that question. However, we can begin to see why there is a deep problem here if we start by getting clear about some of the basic features or properties of the two terms of the problem – the mind (or the mental) and the body (or the material or physical, which are synonyms, and used interchangeably). I want now to reflect on a few basic features of each, in a not too technical way. We can refine our understanding of these ideas as we go along, but we need to get a basic grip on the ideas which follow now, as they are taken as read by all the philosophers whose ideas we are going to consider.

As I have said, like many philosophical questions, the mind–body problem

arises when we begin to reflect in a philosophical way on some concepts which are entirely familiar to us: namely, those concepts in which we in daily life describe our mental life and those we use to describe the material universe. We will begin with the mind, and return to the material world presently. We can profitably begin our investigation of the mind by reminding ourselves of some facts about daily human mental experience. Human mental experience in our normal waking state consists of self-conscious awareness of the different types of phenomena which philosophers refer to as mental contents. (In one way, this is an unfortunate term since it might be thought to imply that the mind is some odd sort of container, but that is not the intention at all. Mental contents are just the sorts of things we are ordinarily aware of in ordinary daily conscious life. The term implies nothing about the nature of these contents or the mind.) First, we are aware of the sensations furnished by our five senses which inform us of some feature of the world other than our own bodies – sights, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations of touch. There are also bodily sensations which inform us of our own physical condition, from intense pleasure to a generalized sense of well-being, through all the vast array of disagreeable and painful sensations of which we are capable. Second, we are aware of the state of our emotional life via consciousness of moods and emotions. These fluctuate, as do sensations, but generally over rather longer periods, from hours to years, and have a marked bearing on that mysterious condition we call our happiness (or lack of it). Third, we are aware of thoughts; we have beliefs, opinions, wishes, desires, goals, wants and needs, most of which are subject to change over time. Fourth, we have memories, of varying degrees of vividness and accuracy, of the events of our own lives or of things we have learned. Fifth, we have imagination: we can imagine things and situations which have not happened to us. Our imaginings can be more or less vivid, more or less valuable, but everyone has this ability to some degree. Sixth, we perform what are called mental acts: we take decisions to do certain things, and so forth. Finally, we assume that, in normal health and in all but a few special cases (e.g. reflexes), our bodily movement is under our control: if we want to move a limb or (more unusually) make a deliberate conscious decision to move it, then the limb moves. This is a feature of the mind philosophers call mental causation.

Further – to make a point which is less commonsensical but no less obvious when pointed out – we experience all these types of mental content as ours; this is a way of saying that we are not just conscious but self-conscious. The experiences I have are all experienced as mine: for any mental content you name – sensation, thought, memory, and so on – it is always the case that when I am aware of it, I am aware of it as my sensation (etc.). I never have to try to work out, for any mental content, whose it is. Any such content is always experienced as mine. Our minds are not at all like mirrors, which just reflect passively and unpossessively what is before them. Human experience is, save for a few quite exceptional cases, experience which is always the experience of an individual – or, as philosophers often say, of a subject. To say that something is a subject in this sense is to say that it is such that it experiences the world from a unique point of view.

This idea of being a subject in this strong sense is worth dwelling on for a little

longer. Associated with it are a number of features of our mental life we need to keep in mind as we go along. The most important of these is that there is something odd and special about the way I am aware of my own experience as compared to the way in which I am aware of anyone else's. The point is often put quite graphically as follows: there is in the universe only one person whose experience I can be aware of from the inside, namely myself. My awareness of the experience of every other being in the universe is from the outside. This feature of our experience is reflected in the way we understand our own states of mind as opposed to the states of mind of others, even those few other persons whose mental life we know well enough to be able to predict many of their reactions. For example, I never need to work out by observing my own behaviour what my feelings or beliefs are: I am aware of these aspects of my mental life directly by self-conscious awareness. I have no comparable way of being aware of the mental life of any other person, no matter how close I may be to them. In order to understand what someone else is experiencing, I need, as we say (and the form of words itself makes the point), 'to put myself in their place'; I must try to imagine what they are going through and perhaps empathize with them – and we can become quite good at this with people we know well. But what I am doing, in every case, is imagining what it would be like for me to go through what they are going through. My imaginings and empathic feelings remain my mental contents and not theirs: there is a certain type of solitariness and isolation built into the framework or constitution of human consciousness. The point to hang on to is that the way in which anyone is aware of their own mental contents is unique in their experience. In a very strong sense of the term, our awareness of our own mental contents is private to each individual. A number of other phrases are regularly used by philosophers, including those we are to read in this book, which make much the same point – for example, that we have privileged access to the contents of our own minds or that we have immediate awareness of them. We will meet such turns of phrase fairly often in what follows. Behind all these technical phrases lies the extremely important set of related features of human mental life we have been discussing which centre on the concepts of privacy and subjectivity. Whenever you meet these terms in writings on the philosophy of mind, bear in mind that they are being used in these very strong senses.

To recap then: our ordinary mental experience is a ceaselessly changing blend of the elements we have called mental contents, unified by their being our experiences, the experiences of a subject or self which is constant through the changes of mental content. Moreover, these experiences are private to each individual, in the special sense just outlined. The next step is to look at our ideas about matter or the material world, and compare it to the world of the mental.

As revealed by the methods of empirical science, the material world has a number of important properties. All material things or objects exist in the framework of space and time (space–time, as one has to say in the post-Einsteinian world, but relativistic effects are not relevant to the phenomena we are considering). Indeed, this is in effect a definition of what a material thing is: it is something which occupies a position in space and a position in time. (Quantum effects are not relevant in the present context.) Anything which exists in space has a location which can be specified, and has dimensions which can be specified.

Again, so far as is known, all material things have a time at which they begin to exist, and none endures forever. Material things are subject to the forces which have been discovered in the universe, and obey the laws of physics, chemistry, the life sciences, and so forth, as is appropriate to their constitution.

Very importantly from our present point of view, the phenomena studied by science are public and objective; that is, all these phenomena can in principle be studied by all observers in the same way. Any experiment to test a particular hypothesis can be carried out by any competent observer. In principle, there are no data which are not available to all observers, and no observer occupies a point of view with regard to the data which is not available to all other observers. For example, all the data collected by neuroscientists about the fantastically complex physical structure and electrochemistry of the brain are public and objective in exactly this way.

Broadly, then, the universe revealed by science is a vast web of forces and material entities which stand to one another in causal relations. All the phenomena thus revealed are public, observable in principle in the same way by all observers. Moreover, the application of scientific methods to these phenomena has been startlingly successful in allowing us to understand, predict and in some cases modify to our benefit some features of the universe in which we have evolved. I don't mean to imply by this last statement that all is well with regard to human applications of science and technology – far from it; only that empirical science, of the human intellectual tools so far devised, has the highest success rate in enabling us to understand our own nature and our environment.

SUMMARY

This chapter introduces you to some of the most important properties of each of the terms of the mind–body problem: the mental and the material. In respect of the former, we have seen that our mental life in normal waking states consists of self-conscious awareness of our mental contents: we are, in the sense explained, subjects of experience. Moreover, our awareness of these contents is private in a very strong sense of the term: we have a mode of awareness of our own mental contents which is unique to us and which is in principle unavailable to others. These properties are in contrast to those of the material world as revealed by the empirical sciences, the realm of matter moulded by forces and following strict causal sequences. Importantly, all material phenomena are in an important sense public. All material phenomena can in principle be observed by any observer: none are subject to any special mode of access and none are in principle private, and it is important to note that this conclusion applies to any brain state. It is this very striking asymmetry of properties between the mental and the material realms which gives rise to the mind–body problem. If it is so strikingly unlike the material realm, what can the mind be and how is it related to the body?

CONCLUSION

If we now put these basics about mind and matter together what emerges is both a contrast and, on the face of it, an anomaly. Among the most important features of human mental experience are what we have called subjectivity and privacy: each individual has a special way of being aware of their own experience which is unique to them and which no one else can share. Put in the language I have just used to describe science, no other observer can be aware of my experiences as I am aware of them. Note that it is no objection to this assertion to point out that all observers (me included) can be aware of my brain states as manifested on devices which record changes in the electrochemistry of the brain, because my experiences are not experienced by me as brain states: they are of what we have called mental contents – sensations, emotions, thoughts, and so on. I am (it seems) no more aware of brain states by introspection than I am aware of the chemical processes of digestion.

Many philosophers, when faced with the considerations I have set out in this chapter, have concluded, not at all unreasonably, that what follows is that the mind must occupy a unique and anomalous position in the scheme of things; nothing else studied by science is like it; nothing else has this special property of subjectivity. Further, many thinkers from science and theology as well as philosophy have concluded on grounds such as these (there are more, and we will notice them in detail as they come up in the course of reading) that minds really must be very different from bodies or material things, and these thinkers take up some version of the view of the mind called dualism: that is, the view that there are two irreducibly different sorts of things in the universe – minds and bodies. Dualism is one of the most important types of philosophical position proposed as a solution to the mind–body problem, and it is with a consideration of four dualist views that we begin our philosophical investigation of the nature of the mind and its relation to the body.

NOTE

- 1 Or souls: in this book these terms will be used interchangeably.

FURTHER READING

On the mind–body problem:

Churchland, P.M. (1988) *Matter and Consciousness: A Contemporary Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind*, 2nd edn, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Warner, R. and Szubka, T. (eds) (1994) *The Mind–body Problem: A Guide to the Current Debate*, Oxford: Blackwell.

On out-of-body experiences:

Green, C. (1968) *Out-of-the-body Experiences*, London: Hamish Hamilton

OBJECTIVES

The overall objective of this chapter is to introduce you to dualist responses to the mind–body problem, principally by means of guided reading of texts by René Descartes. By the end of this chapter you should:

- understand what is meant by a dualist view in the philosophy of mind;
- understand the principal arguments for and against Cartesian dualism;
- understand in outline three further forms of dualism – occasionalism; epiphenomenalism and property dualism – and be aware of the principal objections to them;
- begin to understand what is involved in reading a text philosophically, notably in terms of the extraction of arguments from prose texts and assessment of them for validity and soundness.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO DESCARTES' PHILOSOPHY

In this chapter we are going to investigate four forms of dualism in the philosophy of mind. What all forms of dualism have in common is an acceptance of the view that the universe – all there is – is composed of two irreducibly different sorts of stuff, the material and the mental. They all construe the material in much the same way, as outlined in the previous chapter; but, as we will see, they differ in the way in which they construe the mental, and in the way in which they

regard the mental as related to the physical. In the history of modern philosophy, undoubtedly the most important thinker to adopt the basic dualist premise was René Descartes, and we will devote most of our investigation of dualism to a consideration of his version of it. Though he does not use the modern terminology I have just used to describe the nature of our mental lives, he was perfectly aware of the apparently anomalous position of the mind in the material universe. He also had religious reasons for adopting dualism – he was a sincere Catholic; but he had other reasons too. He was a scientist of some note, as well as a philosopher, and was well aware, in his own terms, of the features of the mental and the physical we noted in [Chapter 1](#). We are now going to look in detail at how Descartes answers our basic question on the nature and relation of mind and body using the basic assumption that minds and bodies are irreducibly different in nature.

CARTESIAN DUALISM

In this section, we are going to examine in detail one strand of argument from *Meditations on First Philosophy* by Descartes, first published in Latin in 1641. I stress *one* strand of argument advisedly: the *Meditations* is one of the richest texts in modern Western philosophy and we simply do not have the time in the present context to examine it all. The arguments we need to focus on are in *Meditations* II and VI, together with four Articles (i.e. short sections) from a later work by Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* (written in the winter of 1645–6, but not published until 1649). The additional articles from the later work are necessary because they provide the fullest statement of a crucial point in Descartes' philosophy of mind, furnishing more detail in that area than the text of the *Meditations*.

If you have glanced at any histories of philosophy or articles about him in encyclopaedias, you will probably have found Descartes described as 'the father of modern philosophy', or in some similar way. If you were to penetrate further into what has been written about him – and the bulk of the secondary material in European languages alone is now awesome in its extent – you will have discovered a variety of opinions: from those which portray his ideas as being unprecedented, the product of pure original genius, to those which find extensive antecedents for them in the earlier philosophical tradition known as scholasticism. There is some truth in all these approaches; what is beyond dispute, however, is that Descartes changed the direction of Western philosophical thought decisively and irrevocably. No one after him could ignore what he had said or escape the influence of the change he had brought about, and that is a sure sign that we are dealing here with a thinker of world class.

Descartes was not only a philosopher and an empirical scientist but also a mathematician of considerable stature, and even if he had not written one word of philosophy he would still have a place in the history of mathematics. He is generally credited with inventing the discipline of co-ordinate geometry, and this branch of the subject is named after him. Nor is it an irrelevance in the present context to mention this fact, since it leads directly to the identification of one of the most important assumptions Descartes makes about how to do philosophy, and what it can achieve. Perhaps the best known of Descartes' works is the

Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason and Seeking for Truth in the Sciences (1637), usually referred to as *The Discourse on Method*. This was, in fact, Descartes' second important work: before the *Discourse* he had written another essay concerned with method, the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (1628) (in commentaries on Descartes you will often find this work referred to by the first word of its Latin title – the *Regulae*). Even the titles alone prompt one to ask why Descartes should have been so concerned with the right *method* to use in philosophy, and what he thought that method was. The answer lies in the influence of mathematics, an influence which not only affected Descartes but was also one of the major factors shaping philosophical thought in Europe throughout the seventeenth century.

The seventeenth century was without doubt one of the most spectacularly innovatory in the history of mathematics, due partly, of course, to discoveries made by Descartes himself. Now, when any intellectual discipline begins to deliver significant results, when major discoveries begin to be made, when human knowledge grows rapidly in a given area, the thought naturally occurs that we must be doing something right. Equally naturally we ask: What are we doing right, and can we do the same thing in other areas of thought and make the same sort of advances? This is precisely what Descartes asked himself about mathematics, and he decided that what was right about mathematics was what he took to be its method, which he believed he could reduce to simple rules. Hence the subjects of the two early works just referred to. He believed that the method he had identified could be applied to any area of human knowledge, and this he set out to do. Consistently, his approach to philosophy employs this method.

To digress briefly: this phenomenon – that of trying out the method and concepts of the most powerful and successful contemporary discipline elsewhere – occurs quite regularly in human thought on large and small scales. For example, in eighteenth-century Europe (roughly speaking) the most powerful intellectual model was supplied not by mathematics but by what we would now call an empirical science. Newtonian mechanics and its method then came to be applied to many other areas of culture. Later in this book we will look at another if less grand contemporary example of the same thing, the belief that some discoveries from computer science can help us to understand the human mind.

The next question, obviously, is this: What is it about mathematics, and particularly its method, which so impressed Descartes and others? The easiest way to answer this question is to look briefly at some basic features of the *Elements* of Euclid, the greatest single work of Greek geometry, dating from around 300 BC. Book I of this work begins with a few brief *definitions* – for example, a point is that which has no part; a line is a length without breadth; an obtuse angle is an angle greater than a right angle, and so on. These definitions are accompanied by what are termed *postulates* – for example, that all right angles are equal to one another – and by *axioms* (also called *common notions* – remember this phrase). Examples of axioms are: things which are equal to the same thing are equal to one another; if equals are subtracted from equals the remainders are equal; or: the whole is greater than the part. Definitions, postulates and axioms are all types of fundamental assumption. Every area of thought has to make some basic assumptions in order to get off the ground, as it were, and Euclid takes care to

spell them out. The differences between definitions, postulates and axioms need not concern us here. Think of them as the assumptions Euclid believed he had to make in order to do geometry at all.

What so impressed Descartes about this method was the following: first, it begins from fundamental assumptions – the definitions, postulates and axioms – which are of the greatest simplicity and clarity: they appear to be beyond the range of the doubtful. Second, it uses strict deductive reasoning; and third, it is able, from its fundamental assumptions and using strict deduction only, to generate a comprehensive and complex geometry which appeared at the time (and long afterward) to describe actual space. So, by using a few very simple fundamental assumptions and deductive logic, it appeared possible to construct a body of knowledge of unparalleled clarity, certainty and rigour and which described the real world. Small wonder, then, that Descartes should have been so keen to apply this method in other areas of thought, philosophy included. Small wonder also that those who shared these same beliefs about the power and applicability of the mathematical method should have genuinely expected real benefit for humankind as a result. Later in the century, the philosopher and mathematician Leibniz (1646–1716), who also took mathematics to be the model for all human knowledge, hoped by the use of its method to be able to resolve finally not only problems in metaphysics but also (for example) issues in ethics. As he put it:

The only way to rectify our reasonings is to make them as tangible as those of the Mathematicians, so that we can find our error at a glance, and when there are disputes among persons, we can simply say: Let us calculate, without further ado, in order to see who is right.

(*The Art of Discovery* (1685) in Weiner 1951: 51)

And this is the voice of genuine conviction, not propaganda.

One last point about terminology before turning to Descartes' text to see what the application of this method to philosophy looks like. The full title of the text is *Meditations on First Philosophy*. As with so much of the terminology of Western philosophy, the phrase 'first philosophy' begins its life in the works of Aristotle (*Metaphysics* E, 1, 1026a, 23–32), and common to all its uses is the notion that this is the area of philosophy which deals with those assertions that are the most fundamental, and on which all other branches of the subject rest. Descartes' use of the term is entirely appropriate: his aim here is no less than to establish with mathematical certainty the foundations of all human knowledge, including centrally our knowledge of the nature of mind and body.

DESCARTES' ACCOUNT OF THE NATURE AND RELATION OF MIND AND BODY

In this section, we will examine Descartes' philosophy of mind, using methods which are applicable to any philosophical position. The first step will be to break down the text into the individual arguments of which it is composed; then, for each argument, we shall make sure that the meaning of any technical terms is

clear; then we shall set out the argument as a series of premises and a conclusion or conclusions, examining it for validity and soundness. If it is invalid or unsound, we need to work out where the problem lies. Quite often, the fallacies of a great philosopher are instructive, revealing some unapparent aspect of the problem in hand. Finally, we will also look for important presuppositions and consequences of the argument. Unnoticed presuppositions are often the root causes of philosophical difficulties; and, of course, if an argument entails a consequence which is false, it must contain at least one premise which is itself false.

For the rest of this section on Cartesian dualism, we are going to examine in detail the arguments in the second and sixth *Meditations* dealing with mind and body, and will look only as is necessary at the other major issues which Descartes raises, notably the nature of sense perception and the nature of knowledge. Though split into six individual *Meditations* by Descartes, the *Meditations* as a whole is a very fine example of a single sustained chain of philosophical arguments. To try to give a flavour of this without distracting from our main focus of attention on the mind, I have summed up the omitted *Meditations* in the head notes to the texts printed in the readings at the end of the book. Please be sure you read the head notes as well as Descartes' text: in what follows, I am going to assume that you *have* read them, at the appropriate point.

In our investigation of Cartesian dualism, the arguments in *Meditations* II and VI are broken down into stages: we have to investigate the trees before we can generalize about the wood.

STAGE 1: *MEDITATION II*, PARAGRAPHS 1–3

Now read paragraphs 1–3 inclusive of Descartes' *Meditation II* ([Reading 2](#)) in conjunction with the summary note at the start of *Meditation I* ([Reading 1](#)). (Note that *Meditation I* is optional reading.)



Two points are raised by the title of the second *Meditation*: 'Of the Nature of the Human Mind; and that it is more easily known than the body'. The first is that we can expect there to be two major stages in its argument, one concerned to establish the nature of the human mind (I will drop the qualification 'human' from now on, and take it as read), and a second concerned to show that the mind is more easy to know than the body, and this is indeed how the piece is structured. The second point is more complex: when Descartes speaks of the *nature* of the mind, he is making a more precise and technical claim than the use of this innocent-looking word suggests. In order to understand Descartes' argument, we need to spend a short time alerting ourselves to the framework of basic technical terms he is going to use, and which he could assume his contemporary readers understood. The most important of these terms are: substance, attribute, mode and essence.

SUBSTANCE

Descartes' view of mind and body is properly and more fully referred to as two-substance dualism, and obviously we need to be clear what he means by the term 'substance'. His own most helpful definition of it does not occur in the *Meditations* but in a later work *The Principles of Philosophy* (1644), where he writes:

By substance, we can understand nothing else than a thing which so exists that it needs no other thing in order to exist.

(*Principles* I, 51; Haldane and Ross 1931, vol. I: 239)

The contrast presupposed in this remark is between substance on the one hand and qualities or properties on the other: a property is that which cannot exist on its own, but has to be a property of something, and that something is a substance. This is a point Descartes goes on to make – note that he uses the phrase ‘common notion’, which we noticed above in Euclid, and, as in Euclid, Descartes is here using the term (as he always does) to mean ‘axiom’, a fundamental and unquestionable assumption:

it is a common notion that nothing is possessed of no attributes, properties or qualities. For this reason, when we perceive any attribute, we therefore conclude that some existing thing or substance to which it may be attributed, is necessarily present.

(*Principles* I, 52; Haldane and Ross 1931, vol. I: 240)

In other words, substance is that which qualities qualify: wherever there are qualities we always assume there must be a substance of which they are the qualities.

ATTRIBUTE AND MODE

These are different types of property. An attribute is an invariant property, a property uniformly present in a substance – for example, all material things have the attribute of duration or existence in time; a mode is a property which is variable – for example, cats may be tabby, ginger, black, white (and so on), and tabbiness (etc.) is a mode in this usage of the term. Having some colour (i.e. being coloured) is an attribute of a cat; having a particular colour is a mode.

ESSENCE

This concept has one of the longest and most complicated histories of all philosophical concepts, starting (once again) in the works of Aristotle. It is one of those concepts which should put any reader of philosophy on the alert, since it has been used in a number of different if related senses, right up to the present century. Descartes is using the term in a sense drawn from the earlier scholastic tradition of philosophy. In the present text, we can think of what he is driving at in the following way: the essence of any thing is that which makes it what it is; or, put another way, to state the essence of x is to specify the property or properties the loss of which would entail the loss of x 's identity. Accordingly, to state the essence of x is in effect the same as defining x , or saying what its *nature* is. For example, it is an essential property of a chair that it is an artefact suitable for human beings to sit on. If any artefact lacks or ceases to have this property, then it is not or ceases to be a chair. By contrast having four legs is not an essential property of a chair: chairs can have three legs, or more than four, or indeed be one continuous piece of steam-bent wood and have no legs (properly so called) at all. Again, chairs can have plain wooden seats, or cane seats or upholstered seats, and

so on. Properties like these – i.e. having a certain number of legs or a certain type of seat – are called in this terminology *accidental* properties of chairs: objects called chairs can either have or lack these accidental properties and still be chairs; but if an object loses the essential property of being an artefact suitable for human beings to sit on, it ceases to be a chair. Thus when Descartes claims to identify the essence or nature of anything he is making a powerful assertion: he is claiming that whatever property he picks on as the essence of x is such that the loss of this property entails that x ceases to be x at all.

We can now return to the second point raised by the title of *Meditation II*. To repeat: it is important to note that for Descartes ‘essence’ and ‘nature’ are interchangeable terms. Accordingly, when he says he will discuss the *nature* of the mind, Descartes is making a weighty philosophical claim. He is claiming to be able to establish which property or set of properties constitutes the essence of the mind, the property (etc.) which makes the mind what it is.

EXERCISE 2.1

DESCARTES AND DOUBT

Write a summary of paragraphs 1–3 of *Meditation II*, including in it an answer to the question: What does Descartes believe he cannot doubt?

SPECIMEN ANSWER

Descartes resolves not to accept as true any belief he can find the least reason to doubt, and in the light of the dream and evil-genius arguments, rejects all beliefs derived from sense perception, including the belief that he has a body. However, he finally reaches a belief which he cannot doubt, and which is true even if the whole fabric of his experience is a deception woven by the evil genius: it is absolutely indubitable that he himself exists, at least every time that he thinks, since in order to be deceived, he must exist.

DISCUSSION

This famous assertion raises a number of interesting philosophical issues, and it is well worth dwelling on it for a short while:

- 1 In *Meditation II*, Descartes states his indubitable belief in these words: ‘This proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it’. You have probably come across another, better known, formulation of this proposition, ‘I think, therefore I am’ (in Latin, *cogito ergo sum*).¹ This formulation, which Descartes uses in the *Discourse on Method* and in works written later in his life, does not occur in the text of the *Meditations*. For ease of reference, it is always referred to as the *cogito*, and a great deal has been