

Descartes' inconsistency in attaining truth and avoiding error within the Correspondences

Elizabeth Ashkinazi

René Descartes' ideas of substance dualism and the interaction between the mind and body have been contested by thinkers throughout the history of philosophy. His methodical approach and contributions to metaphysics and epistemology has sometimes been inconsistent in execution, particularly in his discussion of how to attain truth. In his exchange with Elisabeth, Princess of Bohemia, Descartes violates his own directives about how to attain truth and avoid error, and to be consistent he instead should have revoked or revised his theory about substance dualism, considered only that which he can clearly deduce with certainty and abstained from unnecessary labor, and revisited existing ideas and definitions of the senses and the union in previous works.

Descartes' conceptions of substance dualism are grounded in a type of epistemological and logical falsity, as is acknowledged by many thinkers, including Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia. Substance dualism is the idea that the body and mind are two distinct properties, and thus cannot be one and the same. The body is composed of matter, meanwhile, the mind is not. The nature of the problem lies in Descartes' assertion that the mind is an immaterial substance, whereas the body is a material substance. From this, he argues that it should follow that these elements interact with one another, in a causal manner. The body may produce effects on the mind, and vice versa. Elisabeth cannot reasonably conceive of this to be true, mainly because she correctly intuits that one cannot conclude that the mind and body influence one another if the mind is not governed by spatiality and extension, being that it is immaterial -- "I beseech you tell me how the soul of man (since it is but a thinking substance) can determine the spirits of the body to produce voluntary actions. For it seems every determination of movement happens from

an impulsion of the thing moved, according to the manner in which it is pushed..." (*Letters to Elisabeth*, p. 11). In order for information to be communicated between the mind and body, the mind must be entrenched in the body somehow and able to make and receive contact. Therefore, it must exist in space. Thus, Descartes attempts to vindicate his view of substance dualism, albeit unsuccessfully. He does this by invoking his ideas regarding arrivals at truth and avoidance of error, though he does this in a way which contradicts both his view of substance dualism and his rules for truth-arrival as mentioned in previous writings.

Descartes' directives on how to attain truth and avoid error are found in Rules 2, 3 and 8 in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. Descartes believes that in order to attain truth, "we should concern ourselves only with those objects of which our minds appear to be adequate in gaining their certain and indubitable knowledge" (Rule 2, *Rules*, p.3). He argues that we must not concern ourselves with studying that which we cannot know for certain. This involves rejecting ideas and beliefs on which doubt can be cast upon. He goes as far as to say that mathematics -- namely, the branches of arithmetic and geometry -- are the only disciplines worth studying, because they do not produce uncertainty or erroneousness. In addition, the arrival at knowledge involves the use of experience or deduction, the latter of which supposedly results in freedom from error when executed by the intellect, and the former of which can be deceptive. Rule 3 states that in the arrival of truth "...we should investigate, not what others have thought nor what we ourselves conjecture, but what we can intuit clearly and evidently or deduce with certainty, since scientific knowledge is acquired by no other means" (Rule 3, *Rules*, p. 5). Relying on the works of thinkers' past is not something that one should do in the arrival of truth. Induction and deduction are the principal ways in which truth should be sought. Rule 8 states "If in the series of things to be examined anything presents itself which our intellect is unable to intuit sufficiently

well, we must stop there and should not examine what follows, but abstain from superfluous labor” (Rule 8, *Rules*, p. 16). This rule ties in with his general view of knowledge, of which certainty is the most important tenet. If the intellect cannot intuit something in a clear and distinct manner, this article of knowledge is not worth pondering. In Descartes’ *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, Descartes’ arrival at the knowledge that he exists is reified by his cognizing mind, which is affirmed in his casting of doubt upon his body -- “Surely [sensing] too does not take place without a body...What about thinking? Here I make my discovery: thought exists; it alone cannot be separated from me” (Meditation Two, *Meditations*, p. 109). Thus, truth for him is represented in the mere fact of his existence and his having a mind, through the acknowledgment of the separability of the mind and body. In Meditation Four, Descartes’ ascribes the nature of his intellect to his notion of a perfect, benevolent God who would endow him with a similarly-perfect faculty of reason. Freedom from error, then, rests on the individual will and its ability to render judgments concerning acts of the intellect. Moreover, the “nature of [his] errors (the only things that are indicative of some imperfection in [him])” (Meditation Two, *Meditations*, p. 124), are dependent on the will incorrectly making judgments. It necessarily holds that truth and the avoidance of error are arrived at through the correct judgment of the will--God imbues one with the faculty of reason in order to attain it, but it is up to the individual to execute the will properly. Lastly, in Meditation Six, Descartes asserts the relationship between the mind-body union through the experience of sensation -- “For clearly these sensations of thirst, hunger, pain, and so on are nothing but certain confused modes of thinking arising from the union and, as it were, the commingling of the mind with the body” (Meditation Six, *Meditations*, p. 136). Descartes also makes note of the fact that their nature is primarily to

indicate what is useful and harmful to the body. Descartes attempts to derive truth from this understanding of the commingling of the mind and body in this manner.

Descartes does not adhere to his own truth-attaining principles in the articulation (or lack thereof) of the mind-body union in his correspondences with Elisabeth. In Rules 2 and 3 of *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes places a considerable amount of emphasis on the idea that one should not concern themselves with understanding courses of study that are themselves unknowable or uncertain. In other words, we must focus on what is clearly and distinctly deducible and intuitible in attaining knowledge. Descartes completely strays from this belief in his correspondence with Elisabeth, because he attempts to provide a definition for that which he cannot clearly and distinctly intuit and deduce -- the soul. After Elisabeth implores him to engage in a discussion of the soul, Descartes argues that error arises “as when one wishes to employ the imagination to conceive the nature of the soul, or else, when one wishes to conceive the manner in which the soul moves the body...” (*Letters*, p. 14). Because he conceives of the soul as an immaterial thing that is not to be understood through the properties of extension and spatiality, this is especially problematic for his claim that we should not pursue that which we cannot know with certainty. This stands as a contradiction to his philosophy of reason, which is grounded in the idea that in order to attain truth, we must examine what we can clearly deduce and intuit. Because of his inherent contradiction in his substance dualist theory, (being that Descartes fails to adequately provide a definition of the soul and how it communicates with the body if it is a nonmaterial thing) Descartes instead should have scrapped or altered his theory about substance dualism by negating the interaction of the mind and body, or by simply acknowledging that the soul is indeed a material thing which can physically interact with the body, as per Elisabeth’s suggestion. However, Descartes does not concede. In order to maintain consistency in his

truth-attaining directives, Descartes should have expressed the view that the soul or mind could indeed be knowable with certainty if they are assumed to be a part of the body. Or, he should have completely retracted his theory of substance dualism in this correspondence, if there is no way to make complete sense of it. Rule 8 offers a similar narrative, where one must not participate in the laborious task of intuiting something that cannot be intuited well. Descartes cannot intuit the soul very well, and engages in the labor of attempting to make sense of the mind-body problem instead of adhering to these principles of certainty. In *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, Descartes affirms his existence as a thinking thing in Meditation Two. The divisibility of the mind and body as substances is crucial in his deduction that he does, indeed, exist as a thinking thing. However, this assumption rests on the idea that "...that the power of self-motion, and likewise of sensing or of thinking, in no way belong[s] to the nature of the body" (Meditation Two, *Meditations*, p. 109). This notion of truth contradicts Descartes' claim that "...the human mind is [not] capable of conceiving very distinctly, and at the same time, both the distinction between the soul and the body, and also their union..." (*Letters*, p.19). In Meditation Two, Descartes is eager to inform the reader of his newfound understanding of the distinction between the mind and body. He takes this distinction to be true, and utters this truth throughout the entirety of the *Meditations*, where he first articulates his interactionist substance-dualist position. However, he contradicts this expressed attainment of truth when he claims that the human mind is unable to conceive the distinction of the soul and the body, which is exactly what he had done in the *Meditations*. In his correspondences, consistency would have been achieved had he stated that the human mind IS able to conceive of the distinction, and the union. However, this would likely not be in his self-interest once more, as his entire theory is fallible and he has no substantive defense for it. In Meditation Four, Descartes arrives at truth by

asserting that it is the burden of the individual will to make correct and rational judgments and to avoid error. However, in his correspondences, Descartes errs in his conception of substance dualism and therefore violates his own directives about how to attain truth by making erroneous judgments about the soul--a blunder that he cannot entirely help. Revocation of his theories regarding substance dualism is likely the only appropriate response he could give. Lastly, in Meditation Six, Descartes wholly conceives of the mind body union and upholds its existence in his arrival at metaphysical truth. In his correspondence, he expresses "I too find that the senses show me that the soul moves the body; but they fail to teach me (any more than the understanding and the imagination) the manner in which she does it" (*Letters*, p. 21). He contradicts the directive uttered by him in Meditation Six which expresses the notion that the senses should only be considered in terms of how they are useful or harmful to the body. By extending the usefulness of the senses to his argument in support of the interaction of the mind and soul and our experience of it, he is going against his previous statement regarding senses in the *Meditations*. Instead of going against this claim, it would have been prudent to qualify his previous ideas regarding the senses (so that he might account for experience of the union) to fit his narrative about the experience of dualism in his letter, so that a greater epistemological and phenomenological truth could be accounted for.

Descartes' inconsistency in his philosophical practices and positions led to the eventual demise of substance dualism. The rigidity of his own assertions about the arrival at truth proved too restricting even for him to follow through with. His departure from consistency in his method of arriving at truth is largely in part due to the failure of this metaphysical system. Some questions worth considering for future inquiry would be: Is there a way to salvage Descartes version of substance dualism? Are there any substance dualists today that could justify this

philosophical system? And, did Descartes himself acknowledge (in a manner most humble) his inconsistencies in the domain of truth-arrival and avoidance of error, and did he make amends to his principles and theories as a result?