

Locke's Conception of the Materiality of Mind

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Descartes and Locke were both thinkers within the realm of epistemology and metaphysics who varied considerably in their assertions. Locke took issue with many Cartesian ideas, some of which were rooted in conceptions of the mind, soul, and knowledge. One of the ideas articulated by Descartes that was contested by Locke is the idea of the immateriality of the mind. Descartes believed in mind-body or substance dualism, a theory which expressed the distinctness of the mind and body as substances pertaining to the individual. As a substance dualist, Descartes believed that the mind was not based in any form of physicality. He holds the mind to be immaterial, separate from the body in its operations. This conclusion was wrought with errors and uncertainties, which eventually resulted in the rejection of the particular brand of substance dualism (Cartesian dualism) that Descartes endorsed. Locke was among those who contested this theory, arguing that we cannot truly know whether the mind is immaterial or not. I believe that Locke's conception regarding the uncertainty of the immateriality of the mind is well-taken, and I am inclined to agree with Locke on this position. In the contents of this essay, I will provide a presentation of Descartes' conception of the immateriality of the mind, followed by Locke's rebuttal of this notion. Lastly, I will defend Locke's position that one cannot deduce the immateriality of the mind in our consideration of matter and thought, or, alternatively, that God "superadded to" a material body the power to think.

Descartes believes the thinking thing within us to be an immaterial substance, arguing that the body is composed of matter and the mind is not:

"Now my first observation here is that there is a great difference between a mind and a body, in that a body, by its very nature, is always divisible. On the other hand, the mind is utterly indivisible. For when I consider the mind, that is, myself insofar as I am only a thinking thing, I

cannot distinguish any parts within me; rather, I understand myself to be manifestly one complete thing.” (*Meditations on the First Philosophy*, p. 139).

By saying that the body is divisible and the mind is indivisible, Descartes is insinuating the immateriality of the mind and the distinctness of the two substances, because the mind is said to not be extended in space. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes makes note of the fact that we can clearly and distinctly conceive of the mind as a thinking thing that is distinct from the body or extension in space --

“Because on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, insofar as I am merely a thinking thing and not an extended thing, and because on the other hand I have a distinct idea of a body, insofar as it is merely an extended thing and not a thinking thing, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it” (*Meditations*, p. 135).

He then draws a relation between the mind and body. Sensation is a medium through which this union occurs -- “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 argues that the mind and body causally interact despite the immateriality of the mind, though this notion is contested by Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia. This is because Elisabeth (correctly) fails to understand how the immaterial mind and material body interact, if the mind does not exist in space given its immateriality:

“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 communication to take place within the union, physical contact is necessary in its facilitation. In his attempted vindication of substance dualism, Descartes ends up contradicting his view of substance dualism altogether, and never offers a clear solution to the mind-body problem. His notion of the mind-body union is contested by Locke, but for a different reason,

who argues that we do not have an adequate conception for the immateriality of the mind since we cannot know wherein thinking consists.

Locke's notion of perception involves the idea that we can never perceive the world directly. When we perceive objects, we notice its qualities, which he terms primary and secondary qualities. One assumes that these qualities (such as its color, weight, smell, extension) comprise the object, or substance. These qualities supposedly belong to the object that is being perceived. Locke believes that the thing which underlies these qualities is the substratum. He argues that we cannot truly know what the substratum is -- we only know what it subsists in (the qualities which are visible to us by the human faculty of sense experience). Rather than thinking of it as a composite of qualities, it exists as a separate entity --

“The idea then we have, to which we give the general name substance, being nothing, but the supposed, but unknown support of those qualities, we find existing, which we imagine cannot subsist, sine re substante, without something to support them, we call that support substantia; which, according to the true import of the word, is in plain English, standing under, or upholding” (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 118).

Thus, “we have no clear idea of substance in general”, and the same holds for our ideas of mind and body alike. He expands this idea to minds and bodies, arguing that we can only understand both through their properties. Because we can only understand mind and body through their properties, this lends itself to the idea that we cannot truly know the materiality of the mind because we do not know the substance of the mind. The faculties of our mind (such as thinking, emoting and willing) help us to form a “complex idea of immaterial spirit”. But yet, we still do not know the thing in which thought subsists, because “For our idea of substance, is equally obscure, or none at all, in both [body and mind]; it is but a supposed, I know not what” (Essay, p. 122-123). The substratum of the body cannot be gleaned through our consolidation of ideas and properties -- it merely binds them together. Why would this process be any different for the

mind? Thus, we cannot know the substratum in which thinking occurs, and whether or not it is material.

Due to Locke's position as an empiricist, he believes that we can use sense experience to gain ideas of the external world using intuition and deduction. Sense experiences produce perception -- a concept which is in some ways tied to the existence of a thinking structure inherent to the body. But Locke does not exactly cling to this notion either. Instead, he states:

“We shall never be able to know, whether any mere material being thinks, or no; it being impossible for us, by the contemplation of our own ideas, without revelation, to discover, whether omnipotency has not given to some systems of matter fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think, or else joined and fixed to matter so disposed, a thinking immaterial substance” (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 236).

Locke does not believe in the reliability of our own ideas in regards to the arrival at truth and understanding, unless we arrive at it through intuition, deduction, or demonstration, or sometimes, if something is divinely revealed to us. We may have certain concepts ingrained in our mind about matter and thought in isolation from one another, but we may never be able to deduce with certainty that the mind is a material, nor an immaterial, thinking thing. Locke then goes on to say that the omnipotent God may “superadd to matter a faculty of thinking...since we know not wherein thinking consists, nor to what sort of substances the almighty has been pleased to give that power, which cannot be in any created being” (p. 236). The reason Locke invokes this argument is to demonstrate that we cannot identify the place or organ in which thought originates due to our not knowing the substance of mind. The argument that God in his ability to design such a being where these processes of cognition, sensation and perception take place is logically sound, as it cannot be disproven. Since we do not know where thinking takes place in matter because we cannot know the substratum in which thinking subsists, the next logical step would be to question whether thinking takes place in matter at all, and how matter accomplishes

the task of thinking. Descartes believed that the part that thinks is immaterial, but Locke questions this notion -- perhaps thinking resides in our brain, (a physical portion of our body) and God imbued us with the faculties necessary for thought being carried out in the body, rather than adding them to another substance altogether. Locke's invocation of theology in argument against Descartes renders it logically and conceptually sound, because a perfect God would, in theory, reciprocate perfection in his strivings -- "For I see no contradiction in it, that the first eternal thinking being should, if he pleased, give to certain systems of created senseless matter, put together as he thinks fit, some degrees of sense, perception, and thought" (p. 236-237). Locke adopts a similar approach to Elizabeth, questioning the nature of the communication between the mind and body, both of which should be able to make contact with one another in theory. Locke articulates the notion that one cannot know with certainty whether this is true (such as perceptions of pleasure and pain taking place within the body upon contact), if the mind is immaterial, due to his not knowing of mind as the origin and nature of thought (the substratum of thought). Thus, Locke does not necessarily dispute Descartes notion of the immateriality of the mind -- rather, he questions it, arguing that we cannot truly know whether it is given our epistemic disadvantages -- something that can be overridden by the divine.

Locke's position that the immateriality of the mind can neither be proved nor disproved is a laudable one. Instead of dogmatically asserting something that we do not have clear or well-defined knowledge of, Locke poses a valid critique of epistemic certainty. That which we have not enough knowledge about can and should be explained away by the divine. For the same reason that Elisabeth critiques Descartes, I believe Locke's position to be more intellectually satisfying and logically consistent. Mind-body dualism has been contested by thinkers throughout philosophical history, with good reason. It is fraught with problems and

inconsistencies which render this version of dualism unusable. But this is the very nature of dualism itself — we cannot with certainty, (with our sense-faculties and human tendency to err) know whether the mind is an immaterial substance. Elisabeth is inclined to disagree with Cartesian dualism altogether, but Locke does not go this far. Rather, he plants seeds of doubt regarding the immateriality of the mind, and he is correct in doing so. If an omnipotent being like God truly exists, there exists the possibility that our human faculties were given to us by him. In addition, it could also be possible that these faculties were given to another substance not rooted in the material. Because we do not have enough knowledge on the workings of the Creator, or of universal forces — operating on a subatomic level, or even an real awareness of our own mind (as Locke puts it, ideas are not enough in determining such a thing, since we have no grasp of what substance mental properties belong to), we cannot conceive of a mind in such a way that we can presume its materiality or lack thereof. Moreover, Locke's duty in the project of empiricism is solidified in his undertakings. Mind-body dualism is a difficult position to defend, especially when Descartes does not do a good enough job at vindicating it (as evidenced through his exchanges with Elisabeth). But, Locke sheds new light onto the issue, and puts it into theological perspective, adopting a sort of informal skepticism that even Descartes could not match.

Locke in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* dispels the debate of Cartesian dualism, offering insight into its fundamental issue of being unable to prove the immateriality of the mind and subsequently the mind-body union with certainty. This debate is significant in the realm of metaphysics and epistemology due to the presentation of ideas which further the advancement of these disciplines as a whole. Locke's reasoned arguments make for a compelling case against the fallaciousness of Descartes' conception of the mind-body union. Locke makes very valid claims regarding the nature of knowledge, and our limited understanding of mind and

where it resides. Something to consider in the debate against dualism for the future would be the examination of physicalism and neurobiology and the role it plays in this debate.