# Philosophical Interpretation Of The Mind-body Problem

Rene Descartes, a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist, commonly referred to as the “Father of modern philosophy” was one of the pioneers in trying to understand the philosophy of the mind. His idea of Cartesian Dualism: the belief that the whole world divides into two completely different metaphysical realms, the physical realm of extended material objects and the mental realm of minds or souls, gives rise to one of the most debated philosophical problems: the mind-body problem. Descartes considered the essence of the mind to be “thinking” or “res cogitans”, and that of the body to be “extension” in three dimensions in physical space or “res extensa”. It is this crude distinction between the mind and the body that gives rise to questions like, how can these two completely distinct entities causally interact to give rise to a human being capable of having voluntary bodily motions and sensations? In his Second Meditation, Descartes argues that he is a “thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions”. Since such capabilities cannot be exercised by the extended non-thinking body, we can only attribute these powers to the mind. Regarding the role of “thinking” or consciousness as a crucial part of self-attribution, Descartes presents his famous proposition “cogito, ergo sum”:

“While we thus reject all of which we can entertain the smallest doubt, and even imagine that it is false, we easily indeed suppose that there is neither God, nor sky, nor bodies and that we ourselves even have neither hands nor feet nor, finally, a body; but we cannot, in the same way, suppose that we are not while we doubt of the truth of these things; for there is a repugnance in conceiving that what thinks does not exist at the very time when it thinks. Accordingly, the knowledge, I think, therefore I am, is the first and most certain that occurs to one who philosophizes orderly.”

The mind is indestructible and indivisible, basically an “immortal soul” and possesses the power of free will. Conversely, bodies are destructible entities, governed by laws of physics and are infinitely divisible. In fact, bodies cannot even be known directly but only indirectly by inferring their existence and features from the contents of the mind. That is, one does not directly perceive the table in front of him, but only the “idea” of the table and infers the existence of the table merely from the presence of the idea.

Human beings are supposed to be combinations of mind and body such that the mind’s choices can cause motion in the body, and motion of the bodily parts induces some sensation in the mind. Consider an example of the so-called problem of “mind to body causation”: the voluntary choice, or willingness, to raise one’s hand in class to ask a question. The arm moving upward is the effect while the choice to raise it is the cause. But willingness is a mode of the “thinking” mind alone, whereas the arm’s motion is a mode of the extended body alone: how can the non-extended mind bring about this extended effect?

As an example of the “body to mind causation” John Searle presents the following scenario in his book “Mind: A Brief Introduction” :

“if somebody steps on my toe, I feel pain even though his stepping on my toe is just a physical event in the physical world, and my feeling of pain is a mental event that occurs inside my soul.”

Once again, the sensation of pain in response to physical injury cannot be explained in light of Descartes' propositions. Pain is merely caused by the body's feedback system being activated through the release of hormones or the firing of nerve impulses, but it is manifested in the mind as a feeling of hurt or unpleasantness.

For a second example, take the sensation of looking at a flower. When our eyes receive an image of a flower, our brain, which is a physical extended entity, processes it as an image of a flower because of some chemical exchanges in the neural pathway for sending that image to the optical center of the brain and bringing back to the eyes. In this case, again the mind is controlling over the brain, so that it can send information at the correct time to give the visual experience of looking at a flower. As we see the flower, we have a visual perception of a flower and from our knowledge we say that brain recognizes it as a flower, but how did the brain understand it is a flower?

Idealism aims to attack this problem by assuming that mind is all that exists, that is, all objects of experience have minds and thought is the highest level of reality. Some sections of idealists claim that minds are aware of or perceive only their own ideas, not external objects. However, no idealist approach of any persuasion has ever been to explain the details and the functioning of the material world in a manner satisfactory to the modern scientific mind.

Materialism, at the other extreme, proposes that the Universe is composed of physical objects and that even the mind itself is created by some extremely subtle mechanism of interaction between physical entities in the brain. So, consciousness can be completely explained by physical matter and leaves no room for the 'non-physical' mind. Materialists believe that it is only our brain functions that are important and not our subjective experiences, otherwise described as 'matter over mind'.

I personally feel that in modern times, an interesting application of the mind-body problem can be in the growing scope of Artificial Intelligence. If all human actions can be reduced to well-defined procedures, then a well-programmed machine should be able to simulate a human being both mentally and verbally. And in that case, will a computer be able to engage in creative activities of the sort we associate with human intelligence? If the mind-body problem can be reduced to figuring out a complicated network of algorithms the brain executes to give a sense of consciousness or feelings, then computers that are able to compose poetry and music, fall in love or even feel pain may be a reality in years to come. Technology will be able to gift us beings with similar emotional and logical intelligence instead of dumb slaves that can only execute commands as pre-programmed.

We can approach this mind-body problem similar to John Searle by rephrasing the question of how the mind and the body are connected, to "How can brain processes produce mental phenomena at all? How can brains cause minds?" We have basically reduced the problem to the interaction of the brain with consciousness or the mind.

We see that Descartes fails here in his dualist approach as he considers the mind to exist independently without the brain which is a part of the physical extended body. According to him, bodies, even brains could no more be conscious than inanimate material objects around us. Modern dualists have tried to answer this question by considering that the body with the brain is conscious and that conscious souls are attached to the human body. This solution to the mind-body problem presented by Searle seems logically acceptable, but it doesn't explain exactly

how the soul and body come into physical contact with each other to bring about “mind to body” or “body to mind” causations.

If we adopt a materialist approach, we still run into issues because neuroscience has not explicitly led to any details as to where consciousness, that is the core of one’s self-attribution, arises in the brain or what neural components constitute the consciousness. The intrinsic difficulty of understanding consciousness in the light of neuroscience, further, presents the problem of distinguishing the mind from inanimate material objects and the “problem of other minds”, that is, how one can appreciate the existence of a thinking facility in other animals. Materialism does not sufficiently account for the role of our subjective experiences in consciousness. It either completely eliminates their role or it claims that they are simply the same as our physical brain states.

Neuroscience is in its infancy and even the fundamental principles about how the brain processes information are still debatable. The possibility of the creation of consciousness by brain activity is even more controversial, but it is possible that in future neuroscience may make significant progress in demystifying how consciousness arises in the brain. I hope that the scientific approach to locating the root of consciousness in the brain can solve the mystery of how the essence of “I” comes into being and how the mind and the body work in harmony to constitute rational, functioning individuals.