

# Descartes and the Problem of Consciousness

Philosophical Considerations

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## Rene Descartes (1596-1650)



- "Cogito ergo sum"  
I think, therefore I am

When Descartes asked himself what he could be certain of, he decided that the only thing he was certain of was his conscious awareness

This was "mind", and it was different from "body"

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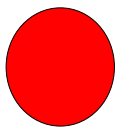
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## Cartesian Dualism

- Two kinds of substance, mind and matter
- Mind
  - Not material substance (Immaterial)
  - Not extended in space
- Matter (Body)
  - Physical substance
  - Extended in space

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## Advantages for Descartes

- “Mind” could be equated to “soul”
- Hence, the relation of the soul to the material body was “explained”
- Primacy of awareness was recognized

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## Problems for Descartes

- How can non-material mind influence material body?
  - The problem of Casper, the friendly ghost (Daniel Dennett)
- How can mind be localized to body?
- Why does consciousness vary with variation in bodily states?



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## Mind - Body Problem

- Monism
  - Idealism
    - There are only mental things (minds)
  - Materialism
    - There are only material things (bodies)
- Dualism
  - There are both minds and bodies
  - Substance dualism
  - Property dualism

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## Questions for Dualism

- How are minds and bodies related?
  - interactive substance
    - Minds and bodies interact with each other
  - psychophysical parallelism
    - Minds and bodies act in parallel, but do not interact

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## Churchland's Critique

- Dualism is not parsimonious
  - Postulating one kind of thing is simpler than postulating two kinds of things
- Dualism is unable to explain anything
  - Understanding perception, memory, and judgment, as well as physiological states has only been possible in terms of material explanations

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## Materialism

- Epiphenomenalism
  - “mind” is irrelevant
- Identity theory
  - “mind = brain”
- Emergent interactionism
  - “mind emerges from interactions in brain”
- Functionalism
  - “mind is a functional operations of the brain”
- Realism (Searle)
  - “mind” is a biological property of (human) brains

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## Epiphenomenalism

- “Mind” is to brain as a dragon-shape is to a cloud
  - It exists but has no function and no importance
- This is inconsistent with our sense of our own mind

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## Identity Theory

- The activity of the brain is the mind
  - e.g. images of brain activation is a depiction of mental activity
- Problem: A subjective experience is different from the brain state that is correlated with it.
  - E.g., our experience of a dream is not the same thing as the observation by others of a REM state in our sleep

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## Emergent Interactionism

- Developed by Roger Sperry, who devised the “split brain” procedure
- If mind “emerges” from the brain at some level of development or some level of activity, what kind of thing is it?
  - Does mind exert an influence on the body, or is it just another kind of psychophysical parallelism?

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## “Computational” Mind: An Example of Functionalism

- Mind is the computer program; brain is the computer hardware
- John Searle’s argument against computational mind
  - Computer programs have only syntax without content
  - Minds have meaning
  - Minds cannot be a computer program
  - The Chinese Room “ thought experiment”

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## Easy vs. Hard Problems

- David Chalmers separated problems of consciousness into “easy” vs. “hard”
- Easy problems
  - ability to discriminate between stimuli
  - ability to integrate information
  - ability to report on mental states
  - focus of attention
- Hard problems
  - how to go from physical activity to subjective experience
    - What is it like to be a bat?

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## Other Minds

- Does consciousness occur in other entities?
  - Determining if something is conscious
    - argument from analogy
    - argument from behavior
      - introspection
      - intelligent behavior
      - self-awareness
    - argument from theory

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## Other Minds: What's it like to be a bat?

- Can consciousness be separated from the biological processes that give rise to it?
  - Can we imagine the consciousness of a bat?
  - See like a bee:  
<http://cvs.anu.edu.au/andy/beve/bevehome.html>
- Consciousness as a biological phenomenon
  - John Searle
  - What is it good for? Why did it evolve?

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## Other Minds, cont'd

- Origin of consciousness in human development
  - When does a child become conscious?
- Origin of consciousness in evolution
  - What animals are conscious?
  - When did hominids become conscious?
    - E.g., Julian Jaynes and *The Bicameral Mind*
- Origin of consciousness in functional complexity
  - Can a computer be conscious?

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