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Severing body from mind: the Cartesian model revisited

Supakwadee Amatayakul

Abstract

This paper attempts to reevaluate Descartes's doctrines of mind-body distinctness and mind-body union and their contribution to feminist theories. The understanding that Descartes's substance dualism establishes an absolute demarcation between mind and body is philosophically misleading, especially when his investigations of "genuine human beings" that are capable of having "passions" are considered. Descartes's accounts of the mind-body union and the passions can be interpreted as consistent with feminist tenets and thus deemed a possible resource for feminist philosophical analyses.

In most contemporary feminist philosophical scholarship, it almost goes without saying that the absolute split between mind and body can be traced back to the theory of substance dualism in the philosophy of René Descartes, the father of modern philosophy himself. It is also widely accepted, almost as an uncontested fact, that the dichotomies between male and female, reason and emotion, objectivity and subjectivity are deeply rooted in the mind-body dualism of Descartes's metaphysics. Although Descartes himself never addressed the issue of gender identity, a large number of feminist philosophers has criticized his theory of mind-body distinctness for the relegation of women to a realm of physicality and affect while elevating men to a realm of the intellect dominated by reason and objectivity. It must be admitted that by asserting the distinctness of body and mind and treating each as separate orders of being, Descartes presents an easy and inviting target for feminist theorists. However, in a more recent self-critical trend in feminist philosophy, there have been attempts to reevaluate the

commonplace assumption that Descartes’s metaphysics, in particular his substance dualism, entails such a sharp and total divide between mind and body. It has been argued that to pinpoint and criticize such an obvious and easy target within a complex set of philosophical ideas such as those of Descartes can and often does give us a distorted account of what could otherwise be interpreted as beneficial to the feminist agenda. This paper attempts to do justice to Descartes’s philosophy by joining in the reevaluation of his doctrine of mind-body distinctness and its contribution to feminist theories.

I want to argue that the understanding that Descartes’s substance dualism establishes a rigid and absolute demarcation between mind and body is misleading in important and philosophically significant ways. I want to show that Descartes’s theory of mind-body distinctness, which is usually taken to be the originating point of gender-based bifurcations in modern and contemporary philosophy, represents only an incomplete part of his account of what he calls a “genuine human being.” I strongly believe that an accurate and thorough understanding of his explanation of a “genuine human being” is not only consistent with but also useful for feminist theories. In order to make my point, I will first present a sketch of Descartes’s argument for mind-body distinction. I will focus on the Second Meditation and on parts of his *Discourse on the Method*. Then, I will try to show how, in Descartes’s view, such an account is insufficient for theorizing about actual human beings, which is the reason why Descartes proposes his theory of the mind-body union. I will here focus on the Sixth Meditation, on his correspondence with Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia, as well as on *The Passions of the Soul*. Finally, I will offer an analysis of the misconception of his philosophical ideas from a historiographical perspective, and will try to show how such misunderstanding can undermine some feminist tenets.

**Descartes’s theory of mind-body distinctness**

Descartes’s metaphysics, particularly his substance dualism, took shape as part of the reaction to the scientific revolution and the ensuing cosmological and theological transformations in the...
Early Modern period. The proven fact that the earth is not the stationary center of the universe but merely one of the many revolving planets in the solar system gave rise to the “New Science” that relies heavily on principles of mathematics and physics based on “clear and distinct” ideas. Descartes and his contemporaries believed that the new “quantitative method” could explain the structure of all natural phenomena in terms of mechanical interactions between micro-particles much more effectively than the Aristotelian “qualitative method” widely used among Scholastic philosophers in the Middle Ages. The resulting accuracy of the “quantitative method” not only triumphed over the Aristotelian search for “essential qualities” and their definitions but also gave the “New Science” a strong predictive power. Aristotle’s hylomorphism, with its insistence on the specification of essential qualities of things, was replaced by a new ontology. In Descartes’s physics, there are no true individual substances; there is only a universal plenum of homogenous matter which Descartes calls *res extensa* or extended matter or simply “body.” He states in the *Principles of Philosophy* that “the nature of body consists not in weight, hardness, color, or the like, but simply in extension.” This “body” or extended matter can be explained with clarity and distinctness in terms of its shape, divisibility, and motion.

Descartes’s physics and his explanation of mechanical interactions between extended matters are, however, seriously limited when applied to human beings who, in his view, are of an absolutely different nature. In his attempt to account for human beings and the material world, Descartes drew a dividing line between two separate categories under which everything in the world, including humans, can be subsumed. The first is *res extensa* or extended substance which covers everything physical including the human body; the second is *res cogitans* or thinking substance which is the human mind. In both the *Discourse on the Method* and the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes sought to investigate the nature of human beings, and finally found that he is a “thinking being” whose nature is totally distinct from extended beings. He says:

...while I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world and no place for me to be in, I could not for all that
pretend that I did not exist. I saw on the contrary that from the mere fact that I thought of doubting the truth of other things, it followed quite evidently and certainly that I existed. ... From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. Accordingly this 'I' — that is, the soul by which I am what I am — is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist.7

The conception of his own nature or essence as a thinking thing is resonated quite clearly in the Second Meditation: "I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason ... But for all that I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of a thing? As I have just said—a thinking thing."8 This absolute demarcation between mind and body is subsequently known as "Cartesian Dualism" or "Substance Dualism," and has become an integral basis for contemporary rationalist philosophy.

Descartes's dualistic separation of mind and matter led to a twofold alienation of humans from the physical world. In the first place, the essence of human beings as "thinking things" not only renders us separate and distinct from the physical world but also defines us as something whose essential nature is absolutely incompatible with anything material. Matter consists of extension—things that can be defined in the language of three-dimensional geometry and described by particle physics in terms of indefinite variations of size and shape. The mind, on the contrary, is simple, unextended, indivisible, and therefore inexplicable by the quantitative categories employed by physical science. As a result, the place of the thinking subject within the physical world becomes problematic since, in virtue of their very nature, humans as thinking things are necessarily and permanently alienated from the physical world around them. Such alienation brought about a historic shift in humans' attitude towards the natural world. In the Middle Ages, human lives were considered to be in harmony with the natural order of the universe. However, in the context of the transformed worldviews and the dualistic ontology of the Early Modern metaphysics, such harmony was replaced by a sense of
alienation. Speaking metaphorically, the natural world became something inanimate and mechanical; there was no room for anything beyond geometrical descriptions of matter operating in accordance with the mathematical laws of motion. Humans were set over against an alien physical world, and the new mechanical science enabled them to manipulate and control it according to their liking. Descartes himself declared in *Discourse on the Method* that the principles of his new physics will make humans “masters and possessors of nature.” In the second place, the alienation is a little more personal, for the *res extensa* which makes up the physical world includes the human body itself. It turns out, then, that humans are not only distinct from “body” in the general sense of corporeal matter, but also from the physiological makeup of their own bodies. The result is that the alien world over which humans aim to gain technological control through the New Science includes our own bodily make-up. The working of the body was likened to the inner mechanism of a clock, an automaton perhaps, and humans became incorporeal inhabitors of the body-machine, or according to Gilbert Ryle, we became “the ghost in the machine.”

Like the natural world, the “machine of the body,” as Descartes often calls it, is not only dead and mechanistic, but is also there to be scientifically manipulated and brought for the first time under mechanical control. His mechanistic accounts of the human body presented in the *Treatise on Man* and the *Description of the Human Body* are evidence for the alienation resulting from the dualistic ontology. In a certain sense, we can see how Descartes’s objectification of the human body shaped the medical practices and treatments in modern medicine and science.

If we take into account only his theory of mind-body distinctness, it seems that Descartes successfully severed the body from the mind in a manner that no other philosopher had ever done. The split is so complete that body and mind are not only incommensurable in terms of their nature, but according to Descartes the mind is so independent it can exist even without the body. It is hardly surprising that feminist theorists took issue with his theory of substance dualism that strongly emphasizes the superiority of the mind over the body due to its ability to use reason. Such a criticism would be justified if Descartes did not offer
another set of explanations to account for genuine human beings that actually are composed of both mind and body. I now turn to investigate his theory of the mind-body union.

**Descartes’s theory of mind-body union**

As I have mentioned earlier, Descartes’s theory of mind-body distinctness is only a part, albeit a much more popular part, of his explanation of human beings. It is important to keep in mind that most of Descartes’s philosophical writings are concerned with metaphysical and epistemological matters, for which a clear demarcation between mind and body is essential. This is because Descartes wanted to arrive at a “metaphysical truth” that would serve as the basis for all knowledge. To be able to do so, he needed to separate things that can be called into doubt from things that are indubitable, and according to Descartes, you can doubt whether you have a body or not but it is impossible to doubt that you are thinking. Without a sharp division between mind and body, Descartes would not have been able to arrive at a clear and distinct “metaphysical truth.” It is therefore not too surprising that readers of Descartes’s works consider his contribution in the areas of metaphysics and epistemology to be most significant. Nevertheless, the stronger emphasis on the mind-body distinctness does not in any way suggest that Descartes did not give due attention to real human beings who experience life through a composite or a union of mind and body.

Descartes’s reductionist and mechanistic explanation of bodies in terms of interaction between micro-particles cannot be applied to the human mind because metaphysically speaking, mind and body are ontologically distinct. But then an important question arises: how does an actual human being fit into his dualistic schema? The notion of a pure thinking thing does not seem to represent a human being accurately since humans are, after all, also biological creatures of flesh and blood. In his attempt to discuss the real human being, Descartes contends that his official dualistic ontology, consisting on the one hand of the machine of the body and on the other of the incorporeal “rational soul,” has somehow to be modified so as to allow for the existence of what he calls a “genuine human being.”
He states the following in the *Discourse on the Method*:

> Next I described the rational soul, and showed that, unlike the other things of which I had spoken, it cannot be derived in any way from the potentiality of matter, but must be specially created. And I showed how it is not sufficient for it to be lodged in the human body like a helmsman in his ship, except perhaps to move its limbs, but that it must be more closely joined and united with the body in order to have, besides this power of movement, feelings and appetites like ours, and so to constitute a genuine human being.\(^{12}\)

In this passage and in many other places in his later writings, Descartes underscores the idea that there is more to a human being than a body-machine moved around by an incorporeal mind. He had a lot to say about the special nature of the connection or the "union" between mind and body. To him, mind and body are united "not by position or disposition ... but by a true mode of union," and "we perceive that sensations such as pain are not pure thoughts of a mind distinct from a body, but confused perceptions of a mind really united to a body."\(^{13}\)

It is here that Descartes’s explanation of sensations and emotions or passions proves to be helpful for understanding the mind-body union. Although sensations are not part of the defining essence of a thinking being, they are an inevitable part of our daily experience as *human beings*. In the Sixth Meditation, Descartes claims to have been vividly taught by nature that he has a body as well as sensations or feelings. He goes on to say the following:

> Nature also teaches me, by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. If this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken.\(^{14}\)

This passage reveals the inadequacy of the mainstream interpretation, according to which Descartes classifies all phenomena into two exclusive categories—the mental and the physical. However, our human sensory awareness and our
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experiences of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., reveals that our mind is intimately joined with our body. A pure mind would be endowed only with intellection and volition, which are the two “modes of thinking.” A pure body, on the contrary, would be incapable of having any experience at all, but would operate entirely as a mechanical automaton. Only a composite between mind and body, or what Descartes calls a “genuine human being,” is capable of having sensations.

In The Passions of the Soul, Descartes offers his account of the mind-body interaction through a theory of the emotions or passions, and describes how feelings such as love, hatred, and desire arise in the mind when the body acts on it. According to Descartes, what we are aware of as sensations (such as those of heat or cold), appetites (such as those of hunger and thirst), and emotions or passions of the soul (such as those of joy and sadness) are all caused, on the physical level, by various physiological disturbances. These disturbances excite movements of the “animal spirits” which are in turn transmitted, via the nervous system, to the brain. The “pineal gland” in the center of the brain, which Descartes calls the “seat of the soul,” mediates the resulting brain events and the ensuing awareness in the soul or the mind. Accordingly, sensations, appetites, and emotions have both physical and mental components, and are thus experiences of the mind-body union.

The union between mind and body is a real and substantial one, and cannot be reduced to either of its components. An important corollary of this is that the mind-body union cannot be known or understood through the faculty of reason alone, since it is a mode of only one of its components, namely the mind. In a letter to Princess Elizabeth, Descartes writes:

...what belongs to the union of the soul and the body is known only obscurely by the intellect alone or even by the intellect aided by the imagination, but it is known very clearly by the senses. ... Metaphysical thoughts, which exercise the pure intellect, help to familiarize us with the notion of the soul; and the study of mathematics which exercises mainly the imagination in the consideration of shapes and motion, accustoms us to form very distinct notions of body. But it is the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from meditation and from the study
of the things which exercise the imagination, that teaches us how to conceive the union of the soul and the body.\textsuperscript{17}

We might say, then, that understanding the union of mind and body requires more than just philosophical reasoning. The union is beyond the power of philosophical reason to explicate fully, and has to be grasped on the level of our inner experience. Not only does this passage confirm the irreducible quality of the union, it also teaches us to distinguish knowledge of the mind and the body as separate entities from knowledge of the union of mind and body as a whole. The former are metaphysical notions and thus can be known or understood only through pure intellect of the mind. The latter is more of a moral notion since it involves human actions and the preservation of the body, and thus cannot be known through metaphysical categories but must be understood through some inner experience in the course of everyday life.\textsuperscript{18}

Although Descartes's model for science and metaphysics seems extremely dualistic and ratiocentric, we have seen that, for Descartes, it cannot be employed in theorizing about actual human beings. It is true that the scientific model enabled Descartes to view the world as an abstract, mathematically ordered system of "extended matter in motion," and to construe the human investigators of that system as pure thinking things, detached from the physical world of extension, and alienated even from the physical mechanisms of their own bodies. However, Descartes's attempt to develop a distinctive account of "genuine human beings" puts all this in a rather different focus. Although the deliverances of reason reveal a rigidly dualistic world of extended matter plus incorporeal consciousness, our own daily experience as real human beings provides a very different kind of awareness—one colored by intimate and urgent feelings and emotions resulting from a substantial union of mind and body.

\textbf{Analysis of misconception}

It turns out, then, that Descartes does offer an alternative account to the metaphysical dualism in order to explain "genuine human beings" that are substantial unions of mind and body. An inevitable question then arises: why do a lot of interpreters of
Descartes's works, including feminist theorists, focus on his mind-body dualism and the conceptual problems or dichotomies that follow from it rather than try to reconcile it with his theory of the mind-body union, in particular with his theory of sensations and emotions? From a historiographical perspective, I believe there are two major reasons for this, one pertaining directly to feminists.

Firstly, the theory of sensations and emotions in Descartes's philosophy which gives us insight into the nature of the mind-body union has often been neglected due to the modern and contemporary conception of philosophy as a scientific and secular form of enquiry. Such conception has influenced our interpretation of historical texts and led us to read them as mainly focusing on the scientific, metaphysical, and epistemological issues that at present tend to be considered the crux of the subject. In her insightful study of the emotions in seventeenth century philosophy, Susan James remarked that interpretations of Early Modern philosophy that neglect accounts of the emotions, while not necessarily mistaken, are partial in several ways: they leave out certain topics such as the emotions or passions that are perceived as marginal or irrelevant to a particular understanding of what philosophy is; and they focus mainly on certain works of the chosen philosopher that most easily answer to the preconceptions created by this interpretation. Having thus shaped the subject, they risk oversimplification of complex philosophical ideas by labeling them as, for example, rationalist or empiricist. By doing so, they, maybe unknowingly, distort the "human" side of Early Modern philosophy, especially that of Descartes, since emotions and sensations are integral to his philosophical system and are crucial for a philosophical understanding of our own nature as well as our ability to comprehend and negotiate the natural and social environments in which we live. The study of Descartes's theory of the emotions and sensations can substantially revise our views about the character of his philosophy. The conception of emotions, appetites, and sensations as states that have both physical and mental components enable Descartes to confront with subtlety questions about the interactions or interconnections between mind and body, questions about the development of personal identity, as well as questions about the significance of the physical expression of the passions. A
thorough understanding of his work in these areas undermines the stereotypical image of Descartes's philosophy as dominated by a methodical dualism between mind and body, and strengthens the revisionist historiography that has begun to replace it. The belief, for example, that Descartes made an absolute distinction between states of the body and states of the mind and allowed nothing to cross it has long been the basis of the modern and contemporary philosophy of mind; but it is a basis that will not stand up if Descartes's account of the passions is taken seriously. By neglecting the role of the emotions, appetites, and sensations, interpreters of Descartes have been inclined to misidentify both the epistemological issues and the character of the knower that prevail in Descartes's philosophy. By severing body from mind, and by extension emotion from reason, these interpreters have in a way generated parodies of Descartes's account of knowledge acquisition, and have obscured a rich conception of the emotional character of learning as well as the role of the passions or emotions in rational thought and action. On the whole, Descartes's philosophy continues to be portrayed as the originating point of a culture in which humans become juxtaposed against nature, and nature takes on a purely instrumental role, and in which a range of emotional responses to the natural world give way to dispassionate calculations of utility.

The second reason why readers of Descartes's works tend to overlook his theory of the mind-body union and his account of the passions is particularly relevant to feminists. In a large number of feminist philosophical writings, it has been argued that interpretations of the differences between men and women are deeply embedded and reflected in some of the most central philosophical categories. In certain ways, bifurcations such as those between mind and body, reason and emotion, carry connotations of male and female, and mirror the power-relations of a patriarchal society in which women are dominated by men. Taking up the popular view that modern philosophy begins with Descartes, some feminist writers have also argued that the patriarchal character of philosophy was secured in the seventeenth century: the emergence of a sharp division between body and mind served to attach women more firmly to the physical world, and a similar split between
reason and emotion condemned them to the realm of affect. This interpretation is partly the result of selective reading and relies heavily on the historiographical strategy of demonizing our philosophical past in order to gain reassurance of the philosophical progress in our own time or discipline. If Descartes's theory of the mind-body union and especially his theory of the emotions and sensations are taken into account, such interpretation will no longer be viable. Those wishing to demonize our philosophical past have relied on the familiar technique of discrediting a philosopher of choice, and have achieved the intended effect of enabling people to see that philosopher differently. The fact that many of these interpretations are partial in the ways I have mentioned is therefore not altogether a criticism.

It remains to be said that Descartes's theories of the mind-body union and the passions are in line with the feminist agenda in the sense that they advocate the consideration of human beings as both mind and body combined, and contend that emotions are not opposed to reason—they even have an intellectual component which is "thought." The fact that a lot of feminists still use Descartes's theory of the mind-body distinctness as a springboard for launching their criticism against the history of modern philosophy could prove to be disadvantageous to feminist theories. It may be an easy and convenient target, but it is not the only possible interpretation of Descartes's philosophy. The principle of charitable interpretation should be used to guard against establishing a weak foundation for feminist philosophy—one that rests on a mistaken assumption. Moreover, neglecting Descartes's theories of the mind-body union and of the emotions is, I believe, a significant loss for feminists, since by doing so they overlook important contributions and inspirations that can be gathered from a careful study of all aspects of Cartesianism.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that some rethinking or reevaluation of past philosophical ideas might be beneficial or even crucial for the feminist project. One possible implication of my study is that Descartes may not be the only philosopher
misunderstood or misrepresented in feminist theories. The reassessment of the feminist interpretation of past philosophical ideas gives us an opportunity not only to reflect on how we have used them, but also on how we may better use them in the future. The current feminist attempts at “reinterpreting” canonical thinkers and their ideas attest to the fact that these traditional philosophical accounts could actually be useful for feminist purposes. At the moment, this change in attitude is particularly relevant to feminist philosophy, where a history that is organized around rigid oppositions is in the process of giving way to more detailed studies of the overlapping conceptions of masculinity and femininity that run through philosophical debate, especially in the early modern period. I believe that a finer-grained examination of past ideas that emphasizes loyalty and faithfulness to the philosophical texts may yield a different and more complete picture of feminist philosophy.

Notes

1 This paper was presented at the Women’s Worlds Congress 2005 hosted by Ewha Womans University, Seoul, Korea, in June 2005.


5 For Descartes’s monistic theory of material substance, see John Cottingham,
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7 *Discourse*, part iv, CSM I, 127.


10 *Discourse*, CSM I, 142–3.


12 *Discourse*, CSM I, 141 (emphasis added).


14 *Sixth Meditation*, CSM II, 56.

15 *Principles*, part I, art. 32, CSM I, 204.

16 *Discourse*, part v, CSM I, 140.

17 Letter to Elizabeth, 28 June 1643, CSMK, 227.

18 It needs to be noted that I am not advocating a "trialist" interpretation of Descartes's metaphysics. That is, I am not claiming that the mind-body union is a third metaphysical substance. However, I am proposing that we investigate Descartes's dualistic metaphysical notion of human beings as pure thinking things inhabiting, but distinct from, the body-machine separately from his moral notion of humans as "genuine human beings," that is, as union of mind and body, capable of having sensations, appetites, and emotions—modes of the mind-body union.


21 This interpretation seems to have set in the nineteenth century, alongside a conception of Descartes as an epistemologist. See Bruce Kuklick, 'Seven thinkers and how they grew' in Rorty et al., eds., *Philosophy in History* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 130; Stephen Gaukroger, *Descartes: An Intellectual Biography* (Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 2–7. Its influence on the twentieth-century

