

The Connection between Mind and Body

The philosophy of the mind is a subject that encompasses questions about the nature of the mind and the ways in which the mental and the physical are related. One prominent theory is that of dualism, which asserts that the mind and body are two distinct entities. The most important dualist theorist of our time was Rene Descartes. His famous quote, "I think, therefore I am," meant that because he could conceive of his being, he was a being. He concluded that the mental and physical are distinct for a few reasons: we are sure of the mental (we know we think), but we cannot be as sure about the physical; one is not able to divide the mind, but one is able to divide the body; and finally, because one can imagine oneself living without a body, the mind and the body must be separate entities. These dualist ideas that Descartes' proliferated were, and still are, very influential, but they are widely rejected as well. One important figure who has rejected Descartes' dualist ideas is Antonio Damasio. Damasio presented an argument that emotion and reason are connected and not separate. He said that the body is the origin of thought, and not vice-versa. One cannot gain acceptance of one's body through thought, because the body is the origin of thought. To Damasio, dualism was flawed because body comes before mind, and therefore they must not be distinct (Chalmers, 2002: 2). This essay will serve to describe what Descartes' error was, according to Damasio; what were its implications regarding medicine; what alternative Damasio offered; whether his criticisms seem valid; and whether Damasio's alternative theory is convincing. From this it will be clear that Descartes did err in his theory of dualism.

Damasio's theory conflicted with dualism, in fact he was very concerned with the implications that dualist beliefs might have, especially on the way the scientific medicine

was approached. Descartes' served to take issues of biology out of the mind, and this was a bad thing, as we must seek to understand the mind in biological terms, or in terms of the way it interacts with the body. In fact, if we resolve to understand the mind without taking into consideration biological factors, this is cause for alarm (Damasio, 247).

In deconstructing Descartes, Damasio conceded the important role he had in crafting the study of philosophy of the mind, and the fact that he was specifically deconstructing it is a tribute to his work. His concern over Descartes' work was that he separated the mind and the body; whereas Damasio believed them to be connected. According to Damasio, Descartes' error was the way he had convinced biologists to view the body without relating it to the mind. In doing so, biologists regarded the body much like they do a clock, as a series of interconnected mechanical processes that can be tinkered with and fixed. To Descartes, the body was the machine and the mind worked separately, as the "thinking thing" (Damasio, 248).

As already highlighted, the essence of the difference between the two theorists was which comes first, the body or the mind. If we think about a baby who is just brought into the world, their physical being comes before their thought, which implies that their thought is a product of their being. This was Damasio's view, whereas Descartes' looked to divinity to legitimize his belief that the mind comes before body, and the mind convinced itself that the body it perceives is real (Damasio, 248).

Descartes' made many assertions in his writings that seem to be even more impossible to agree with. For example, he asserted that heat is what moved our blood. But Damasio was not concerned with these ideas that have been uncovered and accepted

as false. He is concerned with those ideas that Descartes' espoused which still hold influence, notably the idea that "I think, therefore I am" (Damasio, 250). He was concerned with the implications it might have on the medical sciences. In fact, the notion that a disembodied mind exists has shaped the foundations of Western medicine, and this was troubling to Damasio. It is so because it opened up the way to ignore the effects that ailments of the body had on the mind, and also the effects that ailments of the mind have on the body. These, according to Damasio were important facets of medicine, and we were neglecting them because of our incorrect interpretation of the mind-body dynamic. The error in Descartes' work was that he obscured the origins of the human mind, and this led society to regard it in a completely inappropriate way (Damasio, 251).

It is clear what Damasio thought, that was that an understanding of the mind "requires an organismic perspective; that not only must the mind move from a non-physical cogitum to the realm of biological tissue, but it must also be related to a whole organism possessed of integrated body proper and brain and fully interactive with a physical and social environment" (Damasio, 252).

Damasio gave an alternative approach, though. He did not want to give away all aspects of the mind to a line of thinking that broke down everything into its most organic form. He wanted to respect the uniqueness and impressiveness of every individual's mind and how it operates. To do this, we must acknowledge to ourselves that the mind is a complex, fragile, finite, and unique mechanism, and can be regarded with rules of spirit not biology. This preserves the dignity of the idea of the mind which may or may not have been Descartes' broader intention.

Damasio's explanation of Descartes' error was very accurate. He broke down the weaknesses in his argument, while also understanding the conditions under which Descartes came up with these ideas. It is true that the mind does develop from the body, and as such, Descartes did err in his theory of the mind, and "I think, therefore I am."

Works Cited

Chalmers, David J. *Philosophy of Mind – Classical and Contemporary Readings*.
Oxford, Oxford University Press: 2002.

Damasio, Antonio. *A Passion for Reasoning*.