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"Given that the soul of a human being is only a thinking substance, how can it affect the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions."

Letter from Princess Elisabeth to Descartes, May 6/16 1643. – In: The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes (The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe), Transl. and ed. by Lisa Shapiro, Chicago University Press 2007, p. 62.

The Mind-Body Problem and Free Will

Introduction

In this letter from Princess Elisabeth to Descartes, Elisabeth brings up the mind-body problem: How can something non-physical, such as the human soul, affect how something physical, our body, behaves? To ask this question, Elisabeth makes a few assumptions:

1. Humans have a soul, which is "only a thinking substance".
2. Our soul does affect our "bodily spirits".
3. Humans can take voluntary actions.

I will first define some important terms here, as the terms we use today differ a bit from the terms Elisabeth uses. Firstly I will not speak of soul in this essay, but instead of consciousness, which I define as "that which experiences". I do this to better be able to approach the mind-body problem from a modern standpoint, where the connection between our consciousness and our body is what is in question. This changes the first assumption to:

1. Humans have a consciousness, which is "only a thinking substance".

I would also like to change the words "bodily spirits" with the word "body". As I believe the intention of the quote is to question the nature of how our consciousness can affect our physical body, I believe I retain all meaning in the quote by making this change. Hence, the second assumption would now be:

2. Our consciousness does affect our body.

Lastly I would like to build a little more on the third assumption. For the notion of humans being able to take voluntary actions, requires some sort of free will. Therefore I will add a part to the third assumption:

3. Humans have free will, and can therefore take voluntary actions.

As the main concern of the quotation is with the mind-body problem, I will also be examining this problem in this essay. However, I will also examine the problem of free will, as I believe the two problems are deeply intertwined. I will approach these problems by examining the three assumptions I believe Elisabeth makes in the quote. Throughout the examination I will also argue for my view of the mind-body problem: that the mind (our consciousness), actually does not affect our physical bodies in any way, and that we as such do not have free will. In the end I will examine two logically sound theories which, if true, refute my view.

1. Humans have a consciousness, which is "only a thinking substance".

The first part of this assumption is true by the logic of Descartes "I doubt, therefore I am". However I disagree with the second part of this assumption, regarding the nature of human consciousness. Namely, I do not think that the process of thinking should be regarded as part of consciousness itself, but merely a phenomenon appearing in consciousness, in the same way all other feelings appear and disappear. As mentioned, I would define consciousness as "that which experiences". So the part of us which makes it so that we, presumably in difference from inanimate objects, have experiences, is what consciousness is. But is there anything more to consciousness than this?

Instinctively, humans think of their thoughts, feelings and desires as part of themselves, and therefore part of their consciousness. However, feelings such as the pain one feels when putting ones hand on a hot stove, are merely brief appearances in consciousness. They arise in your consciousness as feelings and experiences, but does not actually affect your consciousness in itself. Touching a hot stove hurts your physical body, which sends signals to your brain which (somehow) gets a certain feeling of pain to appear in your consciousness. The feeling of pain resides once your body stops sending the signal, and so the experiences in consciousness are merely based on the signals sent from your body. However these experiences are only temporary, and may never be experienced again. Therefore I believe these appearances are not fundamental to consciousness, and therefore not a part of consciousness itself.

I would argue that this is the same with thoughts. When you think a thought, you (as in your consciousness), are in fact only observing the thought which your brain provides you. You did not know what thought you would think before you thought it, and so, just like other feelings and experiences, it is just a brief appearance in consciousness, and therefore not part of consciousness itself. In the same way you have no control over whether or not you feel pain when you put your hand on a stove, I believe you do not have control over which thoughts you think. Someone might argue against this by saying:

"What if I think the thought "Now I am going to think of my favourite books.", followed by me thinking of my favourite books. Would not that thought be more than merely an appearance, but also a willed appearance, as it was "summoned" by the previous thought?"

I believe this is false, as since the first thought, the "thought before the thought", was just an appearance, I believe the next one also is. If the first thought was just an appearance, not willed into being, it follows that the thoughts based on that thought are also not willed into being, as they are merely caused by the first thought. Hence there is no logical way to show that you have free will by an argument of "now I am going to think X thought", and then thinking it. Even if you

think that you are going to think the thought to think the thought and so on, you end up with an infinite regression of thoughts about thoughts, and never free will. Therefore, even though it might seem like you have the free will to think the thoughts you want, they are merely appearances in consciousness of which you have no control.

Hence, since thoughts just pop up as brief appearances in consciousness similar to feelings, I believe they too should not be considered an intrinsic part of your consciousness, which is why I think the second part of the assumption is wrong.

In this part of the essay, I critiqued the notion that thinking is a fundamental part of what our consciousness is. However, Elisabeth's definition of a soul is that it is exactly "only a thinking substance". It is clear that what Elisabeth thought of as a soul is very different from what I think of when I think of consciousness. But when discussing the mind-body problem and free will I think it is more constructive to think of how consciousness by my definition affects our body, than it is to think of how thoughts affect our body. With a viewpoint of modern science it seems clear to me that experiences in and of themselves do not affect our body. When touching a hot stove makes you move your hand, there is a scientific explanation of how the signals in your body made the appropriate muscles contract. As I think the feeling of having a thought stem from neurons firing in certain patterns, thoughts become physically explainable in the same way as feelings in that regard. That is why I am using my definition of consciousness instead of Elisabeth's soul in this essay.

2. Our consciousness does affect our body.

3. Humans have free will, and can therefore take voluntary actions.

I will discuss these two assumptions at the same time, as I believe they are deeply intertwined.

Here lies the core of both the mind-body problem and the problem of free will. Can our consciousness affect our body? If it cannot, and consciousness is the part of us we truly care about, the notion that humans have free will seems to fail.

Certainly, most people believe that their consciousness, the part of them which can observe experiences and thoughts, somehow affects their body. This view is based on observing events like the following:

You are sitting in your (home-)office, at work. Suddenly, you feel a sense of hunger creeping into you. You think "I am hungry, maybe I should take a break to get something to eat?", after which you move into your kitchen and make yourself a sandwich.

This seems like an event where your consciousness, upon feeling the displeasure of hunger, made your body go eat, and therefore affected your body. It also seems like you made it happen with your free will, through choosing to take a break. However, where in this scenario does your consciousness, which is only observing the feelings and thoughts you have, actually affect the physical atoms in your brain/body to make it move to the kitchen? To me the prospect of your consciousness changing the state of atoms in this event seems unlikely. It is not just hard to envision a process in which this could happen, but it seems to be near impossible. Additionally, there is no reason why a human could not follow this causal chain of events completely without a consciousness. Such a philosophical zombie has been proposed many times before, and

science has given us no reason to believe that this is not a conceivable option, given the physical laws of the universe. Clearly there is no need for consciousness to be able to affect the physical world for it to be as we perceive it to be. Consciousness might merely be a byproduct of evolution or something which arises through the processing of information, which are some of many theories which have been proposed. But is there a possibility that consciousness does in fact affect our body, even though we could function without one?

To me, it seems very likely that we humans do not have free will, and that our consciousness does not affect our body in any way, simply because it seems like the easiest solution. By the principle of Occam's Razor, I believe that is the most logical viewpoint to take, even though our intuitions scream that it has to be wrong in some way. However, I think there are a few ways to attack this viewpoint in ways which makes the notion of consciousness affecting our body, and humans having free will, be logically sound. To do this I believe one has to refute the notion of determinism through alternate metaphysical theories about the world, of which I will present two here.

Refutation - Panpsychism

The theory of panpsychism or theories like it opposes the metaphysical view of materialism, and states that everything that exists are consciousnesses in some form. Some versions of panpsychism, as the one proposed by Donald Hoffman, claims that the material world we observe does not actually exist, but is merely a framework in which different consciousnesses interact. Hoffman explains this through an argument based on mathematics and evolution in his book "The Reality Illusion". The argument uses mathematical models to model which creatures survive in a thought environment with competition between the creatures. Hoffman shows, that even by making almost no assumptions about what types of creatures and what type of environment they are in, the ones who merely see fitness, a measure for the things which make them able to survive and reproduce, outcompete those who see the world as it is. This makes sense:

Imagine two monkeys: one, who only sees two colors connected with two feelings - green with happiness, when eating a banana, and red with suffering, when not eating - and one who has to render a model of the whole jungle with all its details to get to the banana. In this scenario the monkey who only sees green and red will probably outperform the one who sees the world as it is, as it uses way less energy to do what it needs to do to survive. Now, Hoffman says, let this type of evolutionary pressure continue for billions of years, and you end up with us humans experiencing a model of the world so extremely simplified beyond imagination, that nothing we can think of it can be actually true. For Hoffman, time and causality are also part of this illusion, and so we are in a really grim situation in terms of finding out how the real world is. This sort of argument is of course not a new one, as it is basically only a more mathematically rigorous version of Plato's allegory of the cave. However, the consequences of the argument, which is a dissembling of all our most intuitive metaphysical theories, and also notions like determinism, opens up for both free will and the mind-body problem. To explain the world in spite of this argument, Hoffman proposes a theory of panpsychism. As the physical world is merely a model generated by our consciousness, the arguments derived from our model seemingly making free will impossible lose their relevance. In terms of the mind-body problem, such theories also make the problem go away, though in a completely different manner than I did in my previous arguments. Instead of it being irrelevant because of consciousness not being able to affect the body, it is irrelevant because there is no body, there is only consciousness.

Refutation - Many Worlds

The many worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics provides a scientific (much disputed) and logically sound metaphysics in which free will is possible, and the mind-body problem relevant. The theory makes sense of quantum uncertainty (the fact that it is impossible to decide exactly where a particle is and how it behaves, you can only calculate probabilities) through proposing that any time we make an observation of a particle, rolling this quantum probability dice on where it will be, it is actually in all the places it can be. When we make the measurement, the universe splits into universes with all of the different probabilities (infinitely many universes), which preserves determinism on a multiverse-scale, though not on the scale of individual universes. This opens up the possibility of our consciousnesses affecting our body in some strange unknown way, in that when we make a choice, our universe becomes one of the possible universes where the choice we made was made. Hence we have free will, and our consciousness affects our body, in a logical sound scientific system. This also makes the mind-body problem relevant, in that it would still be a mystery how our consciousness affects our body, and how this is connected to the splitting of the universes.

Conclusion

My argument that consciousness does not affect our body, and that the mind-body problem raised by Elisabeth therefore is not a problem, mainly relies on my definition of consciousness as merely the thing which is experiencing. This conclusion also lead me to believe that we do not have free will, as the part of us that we are, our consciousness, cannot have an effect on the physical world. While there are logical sound theories where free will is possible, and the mind-body problem is a real problem, I think these should be avoided by the principle of Occam's Razor. Until we have better theories, I believe we should stick with the simplest, probable solution, of us not having free will, and of the mind-body problem not being a real problem. It is worth mentioning that questions regarding identity and the self are also highly relevant in this discussion, though I have steered away from them as best I could in this essay for simplicity's sake.