

The Prince of the Nullibists: Descartes and the Location of the Mind

Abstract

In his *True Notion of a Spirit*, Henry More attacks two views concerning the location of spirits (minds), the Holenmerism of the scholastics and a view he calls ‘Nullibism’. Nullibism is the view that the mind altogether lacks location; the mind is in no place at all. According to More, Descartes is “the Prince of the Nullibists”. Moreover, More’s reconstruction of a Cartesian argument for Nullibism seems to accurately capture Descartes’ basic ontological picture. However, More’s confidence about Descartes’ nullibist view is peculiar because it is in correspondence with More that Descartes comes closest – and *very* close indeed – to stating that the mind has a location.

In this paper, I shall argue that More’s confidence is fully justified, and that there is no question that Descartes is a Nullibist. After a very brief survey of the more obvious reasons to think that Descartes is a Nullibist, I present two important considerations in detail: (1) Mind and body are not merely different kinds of substance, rather they have ‘contrary’ natures; and these contrary natures preclude even a ‘derivative location’ of the mind.¹ (2) Descartes thinks that confused and obscure perceptions are only *contingently* confused and obscure. However, if Descartes were not a Nullibist, and he thought that the mind was located in the body (or in some part of the body), then confused and obscure perceptions would be *necessarily* confused and obscure. This is contrary to Descartes’ stated official position.

In the final section of the paper, I address an important and difficult objection to a Nullibist interpretation of Descartes, an objection put forth by More. Although More intends the objection as an objection to the truth of Nullibism, his objection may also be seen as an objection to a consistent interpretation of Descartes as a Nullibist. Here is the objection:

Descartes holds that modes of my mind can cause motion in my body, and modes of my body can cause modes in my mind.² That is, at the very least, the mind has some sort of ‘operational presence’ in the body. However, the operations of a substance are inseparable from the substance. Therefore, if the mind operates in the body, then the mind is present in the body. And if that is true, then Descartes is not a Nullibist.

In reply to this objection, I argue that More’s objection rests on a confusion of the operations of a substance with the *modes* of a substance. It is the latter that are inseparable from the substance, but the former are not. I conclude by explaining *how* Descartes thinks that the mind can operate in the body without being present in the body or *in any place at all*.

¹ The mind is derivatively-located where the body is really located.

² Please ignore occasionalist and semi-occasionalist readings of Descartes. More did not take Descartes to be an occasionalist of any sort (neither do I).