

Abstract

Could Descartes' body be a "straddling mode"?

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We all know Descartes thought human bodies were "conjoined" to minds. But what does this say about the ontological status of the human body? Does it mean that Descartes' body is not "really distinct" from his mind? A close look at the argument in favor of the real distinction in Meditation Six shows that the real distinction exists between Descartes' mind and only body in general, not his body in particular. Still though, you might think that if his mind is really distinct from body in general then his mind must also be really distinct from his body. Ultimately, however, no. A close look at what Descartes says about the individuation and identity of the human body indicates that the human body depends on its being "conjoined" to a mind. This implies that his mind and his body are only "modally distinct", with his body requiring the mind in order to exist but not vice versa. But does his body exist solely as a mode of his mind? Not entirely. The human body is composed of ever changing matter, and as such it must also be conceived through the attribute of extension; i.e., it must be a mode of body in general. Altogether then Descartes' body seems to exist as a mode of both corporeal and incorporeal substance – what Paul Hoffman once dubbed a "straddling mode".

In an effort to show the plausibility of this claim, I begin the paper by summarizing Descartes' mature substance-mode ontology as well as the sanctioned promiscuity of "substance" when used for subjects other than God. As part of this summary I also discuss the obstacle that the real distinction presents to the existence of straddling modes between mind and body. After this, I discuss Descartes' views about the ontological status of particular bodies. Focusing on the *Synopsis* to the *Meditationes* – which has been of special interest to Spinoza scholars – I maintain that properly read the *Synopsis* contains a short yet definitive argument against the substantiality of particular bodies. Although Descartes' sanctioned promiscuity leads him to sometimes call particular bodies "substances", this should not lead us to think that particular bodies are created substances. In the following section I expand on the status of the human body, and show that Descartes' test for a modal distinction coupled with his claims to Denis Mesland about the individuation and identity of the human body imply that the human body is, in fact, a mode of the mind. Putting together the results of sections two and three I conclude in section four that the human body must be a straddling mode of mind and body. In the final section I provide a partial list of the difficulties I have overlooked in formulating this conclusion, as well as some possible responses and advantages it retains after all is said and done.