

Why does Descartes say that he is not his body in the second meditation?

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Abstract. This paper contests a standard interpretation of how Descartes comes to the conclusion that he is not his body in the second meditation. I propose an alternative interpretation in its place.

In the second meditation of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes searches for a belief that he cannot doubt. He thinks that he cannot doubt his belief that he exists. The reason why he thinks he cannot doubt this belief is because if he is doubting, then he must exist. Having found this indubitable belief, Descartes then goes on to ask a question: what does the “I” in his proposition “I exist” refer to? He comes to the conclusion that it does not refer to his body. The purpose of this paper is to explain how he comes to this conclusion.

1. The standard interpretation. According to the standard interpretation of how he comes to this conclusion, Descartes deduces it from two premises. I have worded these premises as if Descartes himself were saying them: (1) if my body and I are the same thing, then my body and I have identical properties; (2) my body and I do not have identical properties. Therefore my body and I are not the same thing.

It is understandable to find premise (1) of this argument true, or at least very plausible. But why does Descartes accept premise (2)? The standard interpretation says that Descartes accepts this premise because he thinks that he can doubt the existence of his body but not the existence of himself. According to the standard interpretation, Descartes thinks, “My body has the property of being something whose existence I can doubt. I cannot, in contrast, doubt the existence of myself. So my body

and I do not have identical properties.” (Why does Descartes think that he can doubt the existence of his body? He thinks this because he thinks that the evidence he has for the existence of his body is from experiences of perceiving his body and that he can doubt that any perceptual experiences, including these ones, reveal how reality actually is.¹)

An article on the interpretation of Descartes identifies different philosophers who propose the interpretation presented above or a variation on it.² The interpretation is attractive because it provides an explanation of how Descartes moves from two commitments of his to the conclusion that he is not his body. First, there is his view that he can doubt the existence of his body. Second, there is his view that he cannot doubt the existence of himself.

However, there is a major worry about the standard interpretation. At no point in the second meditation does Descartes say anything along the lines of “The reason why I am not my body is because my body and I have different properties.” If Descartes really were making the argument attributed to him by the standard interpretation, it is reasonable to expect a statement to this effect. Since Descartes does not make such a statement, the standard interpretation is a speculation. There is not enough evidence to support it.

2. An alternative interpretation. To understand why Descartes says that he is not his body in the second meditation, we need to go back to what he says in the first meditation. Descartes opens that meditation by saying that in his childhood, he formed a number of beliefs that are in fact false. He says that he feels it necessary to

¹ Descartes 1996: 13, AT 19. The first edition of Descartes’s text was published in 1641, the second in 1642. The date 1996 refers to an English translation of the text, while “AT” refers to the standard Franco-Latin edition of Descartes’s text.

² Downey 2002. See also Smith and Jones 1986: 35-38; Maslin 2007: 46-48.

start again right from the foundations.³ To start again, for Descartes, is to get rid of all the beliefs of his which he can doubt, even if some of those beliefs are true. Any beliefs that are left will be a solid foundation, from which further beliefs can be inferred.

But Descartes finds it difficult to get rid of all the beliefs of his that he can doubt:

My habitual opinions keep coming back, and despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom.⁴

It is his habit to have certain beliefs, even if he can doubt them, so he finds it hard to stop having these dubitable beliefs. To overcome this problem, Descartes decides to treat any belief that he can doubt as if the belief were false:

I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams... I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things.⁵

Maybe there are all the things which Descartes lists here, but he decides to treat belief in these things as false for the purpose of overcoming a habit of his, a habit that is an obstacle to starting again.

This material from the first meditation enables us to understand why Descartes, in the second meditation, denies that he is his body. In the second meditation, after coming to the conclusion that he exists, Descartes says that it is important to develop a better understanding of what the “I” refers to in his proposition

³ Descartes 1996: 12, AT 17.

⁴ Descartes 1996: 15, AT 22.

⁵ Descartes 1996: 15, AT 22-23.

“I exist.” He recalls that he used to think of himself as his body. But given that he can doubt the existence of his body and given that he has decided to treat every belief that he can doubt as if it were false, he cannot now say that he is his body. Given these two points, he must treat his body as if it does not exist. Hence he says that he is not his body.

If we turn to the second meditation, we find that Descartes reasons in this way. He writes:

Can I now assert that I possess even the most insignificant of all the attributes which I just said belong to the nature of the body? ... Since I now do not have a body, these are mere fabrications.⁶

Of course, Descartes had a body when he wrote the second meditation, but here he is treating his body as not existing, which is something he must do as part of treating every belief that he can doubt as false. In the second meditation, it is this way of treating beliefs which prevents him from saying that he is his body.

3. Remarks on the alternative interpretation. There are four remarks I wish to make regarding the alternative interpretation, which I have labelled A to D.

A. The interpretation that I have offered does not present Descartes as arguing that he should think that he is something other than his body even after he stops treating every belief that he can doubt as if it were false. The interpretation does not say that Descartes argues for the following claim:

What he is = what he should say he is while treating every belief that he can doubt as if it were false.

B. Descartes does not argue for this claim in the second meditation.⁷

⁶ Descartes 1996: 18, AT 26-27.

⁷ Descartes does make an argument regarding a piece of wax which also suggests an argument for the claim (1996: 20, AT 20). He tells us that, upon perceiving a fresh piece of wax, we should not identify

C. Without arguing for this claim, the material in the second meditation on what “I” refers to seems of limited interest for the question of whether a person is their body or not.

D. I believe that Descartes was aware that the material in the second meditation does not establish that he should think that he is something other than his body after he stops treating every belief that he can doubt as if it were false. But here I will not try to support this belief about Descartes. (His arguments for thinking this are made in the sixth meditation, not the second.)

References

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it with the sensory impressions it currently gives: the taste of honey, the odour of flowers, the colour etc. The wax can change in such a way that it loses these qualities and yet remains, so we must consider what can persist and identify the wax with that. A suggestion here is that his use of “I” refers to the same thing in any possible world in which he exists. If we combine this suggestion with the view that one such world is a world in which all his dubitable beliefs are false, we arrive at an argument for the claim. Descartes also suggests this view, late in the Second Meditation, when he writes of how he might not have eyes (1996: 22, AT 33), but the view itself is open to doubt.