

# Q&A: CARTESIAN DUALISM

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## What is Cartesianism?

So, what exactly is Cartesianism? I hope I am understanding it correctly that Cartesianism is sort of dualistic view - believe that immaterial mind and material body are separate but somehow connected. But it is not interactionism, epiphenomenalism, or parallelism. I am lost here.

Cartesian linguists believe that mind and language and thoughts and words are separate but inseparable. Humboldt concluded that “the force that generates language is indistinguishable from that which generates thought.” What is this “force” he is referring to? Please elaborate.  
—Syeda

You’re right that Cartesianism is a dualistic view. Specifically, it is sometimes described as “interactionist substance dualism”, which is the view that minds and bodies are two fundamentally different kinds of substance, but that they (somehow!) interact with each other. So it is (a form of) interactionism.

I agree that Humboldt’s reference to a force is mysterious. For Descartes, the “force” in question is the mind, which is a non-physical entity. Many people have found that view quite mysterious too. Chomsky thinks that the force in question is part of our brains, and that we should think of our brains as a information-processing devices, like computers. Some of our brains’ “software” comes pre-installed, thanks to our genes. Some of it has to be installed through learning. Much of Chomsky’s career (and much of modern linguistics) has been devoted to the task of explaining how this “software” works and how it gets to be installed in our brains. Personally, I think this is about as good as anyone has done when it comes to turning Humboldt’s “force” into something that we can actually understand, even if the project is far from finished.

## Questions about Descartes

I found both Descartes' meditations to be confusing. In the first one he focus on trying to find undeniable truths that cannot be falsified. It does make one reflect on what one believes in. What beliefs does one possess that are not based on any facts but rather experiences? Descartes points out the importance of one's senses and how they affect how people perceive the world and themselves. He acknowledges that human senses could be deceiving. This also ties up to the limitation of the human body. An example of this is how human are not able to see every color because the eye is limited by the amount of cones it contains. How could one truly know anything if the way one acquires that knowledge is also deceiving?

The second meditation deals with proving the existence of oneself. He is able to prove that he exist because he thinks. Is existence the same as being alive? He still exist outside of himself

thinking because as a philosophy students we are learning about him but he is not alive anymore therefore he is not thinking. Is existence a very subjective personal experience that each person have to deal with individually? When a person dies, everything ceases to exist to them. —Emmanuel

It's important not to take Descartes' Mediations too literally. Descartes doesn't tell us that he wants to destroy science, but that he wants to put science on a stable foundation. In order to do this, he wants to wipe the slate clean and start from scratch. Eventually (in the later Meditations) he tries to show that we really can trust our senses, at least most of the time. But it's important for Descartes that he gets to that conclusion in the right way, via a step-by-step process where he trusts each step. This is his way of filtering out his false beliefs from the ones that he can trust.

I think Descartes does not take a stand on what happens when we die. And I think your question about whether existing is the same as being alive is unclear, because "alive" could mean a couple of different things. If we think of being alive in the biological sense, then Descartes thinks that it is at least possible that someone could exist without being alive (i.e., without having a biological body). But there's another sense of "alive" on which someone in that state might want to count themselves as still alive.

After completing the readings, the main questions that come to mind are how Descartes would have doubted things that seem to be a natural understanding. He explains how he doubts his body, but I question if the doubt would truly remain in your mind. I also question how that doubt would have applied to knowledge of the sciences. —Emily

Right, as I said to Emmanuel, I think it's best to think of his doubts as a pretense that Descartes engages, as part of the process of deciding which of his beliefs he can really trust. It's a bit like when we assume something for the sake of argument, to see what would follow. By assuming for the sake of argument that he can't trust his senses, Descartes wants to see if he can eventually reason his way back to a stable foundation for human knowledge. In the second meditation, he takes himself to have found it: he can know that he exists, that he is a mind, and that his mind is a distinct substance from his body. In later Meditations, he slowly builds on this foundation, eventually taking himself to have shown that he really can trust his senses after all.

In regards to Descartes "Meditations on First Philosophy", I disagree with the idea that we must erase everything in our minds in order to start over. I don't believe it would be physically possible because it would still linger in the back of our minds. Descartes says that we should doubt everything because we can't know what is true. While we can be doubtful in situations, not everything is untrue or unreal. The reasoning is that not only can we judge what we see or feel, but there are other considerations that enable us to know its true. For example, I was thinking of "phantom limbs". If a person loses a limb, sometimes they can still feel the sensation of the limb still there. In their mind, they can still feel it as if the limb was still a part of them. But they know that the limb is gone by seeing, touching, having pains that show it's just lasting effects from the amputation. Having those effects and feelings show that there is no doubt and helps them know their mind distinctly. —Elizabeth Quinto

As I said in response to Emmanuel and Emily, I think it's best to see Descartes' skepticism as a kind of strategic pretense rather than genuine doubt.

Still, I think there is something to your criticism. Many modern epistemologists have given up on the kind of "foundationalism" that Descartes espoused—the idea that all of our knowledge is organized into a hierarchy, with our most important knowledge making up the foundation and everything else build on top of that. The main alternative is "coherentism", which is the view that there is no basic knowledge, but that all of our knowledge is organized into a kind of web, with many connections between the different things that we know. For example: even Descartes' reasons for doubting his senses depend on other things that he knows (in part from using his senses). On this view, Descartes method of doubt might be seen to be self-undermining.

## **Criticisms of Descartes**

Let's take Descartes' animal-human distinctions according to the article. Suppose that animals are behaving systematically like clocks, what about human babies and kids? It may be said just like animals (I'm not saying clocks) like the article states. However, roughly speaking, 1-year-old Rene is, roughly speaking, the same as 22 years old Rene after growing up. Is that 'the former' is "entirely material" and the latter has a "mind?" It sounds weird (even if those, 1 and 22, are different entities for me). Then, I guess that might memory-functions play some roles there? That is because if we do not have memory functions, say, we were not able to store even 1-second memory, could we think of or reason anything? Or even, is there any concept of comparison, thereby making any difference/distinctions (which one factor of recognizing/reflection/cognition)? —Chateldon

I agree that Descartes will have trouble explaining both childhood development and the evolutionary history of humanity. It looks like there's no single moment in either process when intelligence begins, but having a mind, for Descartes, seems to be an all-or-nothing matter. Of the two cases, the childhood case is perhaps easier: I suppose he would have to say that we are all born with minds, but that they take some time to develop and "turn on". Or perhaps it takes time for the body to properly establish its connection with the mind. Still, like many questions that arise from dualism, this one looks like it would be difficult for Descartes to say anything more concrete about.

## **Questions about Materialism**

However, for the arguments depending on some scientific theories, such as the physical law or the conservation laws, if their foundational premises fall/break down, the arguments would not keep standing. And, in actual, theories have been changing depending on the development of science, thereby discovering new notions of possibilities. Science is not the 'God' or 'omnipotent tools,' but it is, as it were, the history or selected track of observed principles, and also it is our extremely useful and helpful practical method. Because P is not explained by scientific ways/methods does not confirm that P is not true/correct. —Chateldon

It's certainly possible to be skeptical of physics in this case, and choose dualism in the hope that physicists will eventually discover that the conservation principles were false after all. It's a question of what we trust more: current scientific consensus, or the arguments of substance-dualist philosophers. Personally, I think it's more likely that the dualists are making some kind of mistake. I just don't think that the kind of reasoning that they're engaged in is as reliable a way to find out about the world as the one that modern physics uses.

I do have a question about the idea of, "If something slows down, something else has to speed up by a corresponding amount" in the book "Mind" by Andre Kukla and Joel Walmsley. Does this always apply to something that speeds up or slows down? I think of the example of biking on a flat road. If you are biking and want to increase your speed, you must increase the rate of which you peddle must of the time and in this scenario what is it that is slowing down. There can be wind that can effect your rate of speed, but that is independent and nothing necessarily is slowing down. Maybe I am looking at it wrong, but I will definitely look further into this law of the conservation of energy. —Miguel Paz

When you bike on a flat road, you exert some force on the surface of the earth. This force makes you move forward relative to the earth, but it also makes the earth rotate backward and away from you. It's just that the earth is SO big and SO massive that this force on the earth is undetectable. But imagine riding your bike inside of a big hamster wheel. Now the wheel is less massive than you, and can move more freely than you can push yourself upward, and so it is the wheel that moves backward, you hardly move at all. So even in your example, the conservation principles apply, it's just that the results are so minuscule that they are hard to measure.

Is there an explanation for the possible physical nature of mental or emotional phenomenon?

What about sensations and emotions? These require sensory organs, heart muscle, etc. (material)— which cause the sensation or emotional response (immaterial)?

Is imagination an example of a quality that defies a neat category, neither mind nor body alone?  
—Donna

These are topics that we will spend a lot of time on later in the course, but for now I will briefly say that most contemporary psychologists and philosophers think that emotions, sensations, and imagination are all grounded in physical processes in the brain, even we can't yet say exactly how they work at the neural level. Contemporary cognitive science is the project of reverse-engineering how this could be so. The basic premise is that the brain is a kind of information-processing device, like a computer, and the mind is a kind of software that is running on it. We might think of emotional states, for example, as things that happen in our operating system that have a variety of effects: sadness causes us to produce certain behavior, to make certain inferences differently, and to feel a certain way. If there is one part of all of this that many philosophers still doubt can be grounded in a brain process, it is that last bit—the feeling a certain way. Many philosophers think that there could be no good explanation of how subjective experience could be grounded in a physical brain process. This is sometimes called "the hard problem of consciousness".

## Determinism and Voluntarism

The section about voluntarism vs. determinism in André Kulka's *Mind* reminded me of a neuroscience study that I had seen in a documentary. American physiologist Benjamin Libet conducted a study to monitor electrical activity in participant's brains as they randomly tapped their fingers. The purpose of this experiment was to look for signals in a volunteer's brain that preceded each finger tap. The study showed a build up of brain activity before the participants were even aware of their conscious decision to tap their finger. This implication of this study is that it would refute the philosophical ideas of voluntarism and of interactionism. Interactionism is the dualist belief that mental events cause physical events, but in the study it is shown that the build up of brain waves, a physical event, preceded the mental event of the participant's urge to tap their finger. Voluntarism states that the mind makes decisions which in turn controls the body, but in the experiment, conscious intentions were the consequence of antecedent brain activity rather than the cause of it. While it seems extraordinary to reject the idea of free will based on this experiment, the Libet study challenges the dualistic view of mind body causation.

—Casey

This is a really cool study that has been discussed extensively by philosophers. The consensus, however, is that it doesn't tell us as much about consciousness as Libet thought. After all, one possibility is that there is some delay between when the mind makes a decision and when it notices itself making the decision. So perhaps the mind makes a decision at time  $T$ , this causes the brain activity to begin, and then the mind becomes aware of the decision it has made and sends the signal to the body to look at the clock only a little while after  $T$ , at which point the brain has already been preparing to execute the decision.

In short: Libet's argument depends on a lot of assumptions about how the mind interprets the precise timing of its own activities, and some of these assumptions may be false. For a more sophisticated version of this point, see Daniel Dennett's discussion, either in [this paper](#) with Marcel Kinsbourne or in his book, *Consciousness Explained*.

## Questions about Chomsky

Cartesian Linguistic – pg 74: “For modern structuralism, the dominant assumption is that “a phonological system [in particular] is not the mechanical sum of isolated phonemes, but an organic whole of which the phonemes are the members and of which the structure is subject to laws.” Can you please explain further? —Syeda

Very basically, the idea is that when your mind/brain identifies the sound-patterns in someone's speech, how it classifies a particular sound depends on that sound's relationship to all of the other sounds in your language, and perhaps also in relation to the other neighboring sounds that it hears. Just from knowing the acoustic properties of the sounds that someone makes, it is impossible to



know how that sound will be classified for linguistic purposes without knowing about the entire phonological system of which it is a part.

Language is a form of communication that is extremely complex and allows humans to not only express their most simplistic needs but also their emotions. There are a plethora of languages that humans speak but one question does come to mind; Does the language one speaks hinder/limits a person's thinking capabilities? Are certain concepts more difficult to think about depending on the language. There are certain words that don't always have a one to one translation. Indicating that maybe certain concepts that come natural and are easier to describe in a specific language. An example of this would be the German word "Waldeinsamkeit" which does not have a word that replaces it in English. It refers to the feeling of being connected to nature when one is alone in the forest. —Emmanuel

This is a widely debated question among linguists and psychologists. In the mid-twentieth century, it was widely thought that the language we speak shapes every aspect of our worldview. This is sometimes called "the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis". Almost nobody believes the extreme version of this idea anymore, but some researchers have found results that are consistent with a less extreme version. For example, the Spanish word for "bridge" is a masculine noun, whereas the German word for "bridge" is a feminine noun. These gender features of nouns are more-or-less randomly distributed by different languages, and some languages have many more than two grammatical genders. Nonetheless, a team led by the psychologist Lera Boroditsky has found that German speakers are more likely to use stereotypically feminine adjectives, like "elegant", when describing bridges, whereas Spanish speakers are somewhat more likely to use stereotypically masculine adjectives, like "strong", when describing bridges. So this is one well-supported effect of language on thought, but it is a pretty minor one. You can learn more about this sort of research by watching [Boroditsky's Ted Talk](#). On the other hand, to read a relatively skeptical take on this theory, check out John McWhorter's book, *The Language Hoax*.

From the Chomsky excerpt, I did find a particular area of interest; Chomsky asserts the basis for human language to be a principle developed by Shlegel which states, the 'animal dependency' inhibited by species other than ourselves, is sharply opposed to the 'spontaneous principle' that defines our human mental life. Chomsky then states that this results in a human language that serves 'as the organ of thought, as a means of reflection' and then as 'social communication.' I thought it interesting for the writer to imply that human language saw its necessity within self-expression before it served its greater purpose of communication with others. —Brian

This is a controversial aspect of Chomsky's views about language. It is undeniable that we use language for things other than communicating with others. We also use it as an aide to short-term memory, and probably also as a way to practice and hone our ideas, for example when writing. What is controversial is the question of which of these uses is the "evolutionary function" of language: did it first evolve because it was useful for one of them or for a mix of several? Which one(s)? Chomsky is in the minority who claim that non-communicative uses of language came first. His actual arguments for this claim are pretty complicated and subtle, but they're interesting. If you would like to read more about this, you should check out his book with Berwick called *Why Only Us?*

## Criticisms of Chomsky

In terms of the reading for Noam Chomsky, I would agree that humans are much more complex and advanced due to the fact that we do not use communication simply for survival needs. Through words we express our thoughts, our emotions, etc. I do believe that animals are much more complex than we believe they are, yet I question if there is any knowledge of animals using linguistics to express emotion the way humans do. —Emily

In regard to Noah Chomsky's "Cartesian Linguistics", I don't necessarily agree that language separates us from the language of animals. I do think we have similarities and differences in language. Some similarities are that we have innate language that is used for survival and we also learn more from behavior and experience. But there are some differences because even though animals are very smart and have a high level of intelligence, human language is much more higher, complex, and sophisticated with the increase of knowledge being obtained. —Elizabeth Quinto

It's definitely true that some animals have systems for communicating that are more complex than Chomsky realized when he wrote this book in the 1970s. However, there are quite a few objective ways in which he is right that human language is much more sophisticated than anything else found in nature. Most importantly, all human languages allow for much more syntactic complexity than the signals used by any other creatures, and unlike other animals, we use the complexity of our signals to convey a correspondingly complex variety of thoughts. (By comparison, some birds sing quite complex songs, but the complexity appears to be mostly decorative, and does not let them say different kinds of things.) If you would like to read something about some of the things that make humans' ways of communicating more powerful than those of other animals, I would suggest this chapter of the book I am currently writing (a rare occasion on which my own work is directly relevant to one of these questions!).

Chomsky posits that "the urge for self-realization is man's basic human need". The way I understand it, self-actualization, according to Maslow and his theory of the Hierarchy of Needs is comparable to self-realization. They are even interchangeable. I find this statement of Chomsky's to be a point of contention for me, because not everyone has the ability to "self-actualize" — something that Maslow would agree with. If basic needs are supposedly unmet, self-actualization is a fruit that doesn't fare well in the physical world, under material circumstances. To invoke the idea of "human nature" is in itself problematic, because it presupposes some sort of grand narrative that is allegedly supposed to govern all of human existence. —Elizabeth

These are excellent points, but I think there's a more charitable interpretation of this passage from Chomsky's interpretation of Humboldt than the one you're giving. The thought is that insofar as the state creates a situation in which many of its citizens are so busy fighting for basic survival because their basic needs are unmet, the state has thereby denied its citizens a chance to explore important aspects of their humanity. This is not to say that the citizens are therefore inhuman, or less

deserving of basic rights and privileged. It's just to say that the state has an obligation to give its citizens opportunities to develop their human capacities, including ultimately the capacity to self-realize. On this view, Chomsky's point is best understood as a critique of the current political order. (And this fits with his usual political views, albeit perhaps with less emphasis on the state as a positive force.)

## **Chomsky and voluntarism**

Connecting this back to a compatibilist viewpoint, perhaps we are able to exhibit some degree of willed, rational thought in regard to the cultivation of “true individuality” or the spontaneity/creativity of language, but my fallacious human intuition tells me that this cultivation is more determined by a state of physical and non physical events influencing a person's value system and personality. Sadly, a self-actualized destitute person is a rarer encounter than the so-called “mechanical men” who “just do what they're told” about which Humboldt and Chomsky speak. — Elizabeth

Very nicely put. Again, I suspect that Chomsky might agree as well. I often find philosophical discussions of free will frustrating for precisely this reason. Instead of focusing on a narrowly metaphysical definition of freedom, it might make sense to think about forms of life that would give people the actual power and authority to actually do things.