

Dualism in Descartes and Swedenborg

Ian J. Thompson

Department of Physics, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH, United Kingdom
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Swedenborg used Descartes as a symbol of his desired resolution of the mind-body problem in favour of 'spiritual influx', but we see that Descartes' position was substantially different in a number of ways. We consider a number of modern objections and puzzles about dualism, and how Descartes and Swedenborg each might respond.

1 The Perennial Debate

Questions about the nature and interaction of mind and body have been much debated since Plato. In the eighteenth century, three views were held, associated the names of Aristotle, Descartes and Leibniz.

In his book 'Interaction of the Soul and Body' (Section 19) Emanuel Swedenborg stages a dramatic debate between the disciples of these three philosophers. First, "the Aristotelians, who were also scholastics, began to speak, saying, Who does not see that objects flow in through the senses into the soul, as one enters through the doors into a chamber, and that the soul thinks according to such influx?" Second, "the followers of Descartes, replied, saying, Alas, you speak from appearances ... Is it not perception that causes sensation? and perception is of the soul, and not of the organs." Finally, the supporters of Leibniz claimed "There is not any influx of the soul into the body, nor of the body into the soul, but there is a unanimous and instantaneous operation of both together, which a celebrated author has distinguished by a beautiful name, calling it pre-established harmony."

These three positions have many echoes today. The Aristotelian argument that "influx is from nature, or is physical" is maintained by nearly all professional biologists, psychologists and philosophy today, who allow at most that a mind 'supervenes' on physical processes, so there is no mental difference without a physical difference, and minds have no causal powers of their own. The Leibnizian case is not so popular, but reappears in arguments that something like 'quantum entanglement' has been pre-established between mind and body, so they are automatically correlated without direct causal connection. Descartes' position is widely believed by many scientists and philosophers to be commonly held by others, but that in itself is seriously wrong! Psychologists and philosophers typically begin their introductory courses and their own arguments with a refutation of Descartes.

So what is the idea of Descartes exactly, and is it really so wrong? It was the one favoured by Swedenborg. But did Swedenborg understand Descartes in his original sense, when he called it 'spiritual influx'? And do modern philosophers understand it properly as they almost ritualistically deny it? In this essay I address these questions by trying to understand in more detail the dualist views of both Descartes and Swedenborg, by seeing how they each might meet and answer some of today's objections to dualism.

2 Problems with Dualism

Some of the questions often raised against dualism are based on empiricism, that we never see minds in nature, and science has no need for nonmaterial causes. How could anything nonnatural have arisen during evolution? Some object from methodology that modern science must assume all causes are part of nature, and that in any case physics can be defined as the basic science of all causes. Others are puzzled when trying to understand dualism: how can there be a nonsubstantial substance, how do (can?) mind and body interact, and are minds really 'simple'? Some want to keep everything unified, and say that there must be unity at the heart of nature, not an irreducible multiplicity, and that we do not want to fragment our 'person' into multiple parts: we are a whole! Does not Descartes relegate our body to be mindless, feelingless?

Of course, there are equal or greater problems with materialism that lead us into the whole discussion, since our minds seem so obvious to us, but so obscure to science. What is mind? – that is the perennial debate. In the last decade there has been renewed interest in consciousness, but very often with the contexts of functionalism, supervenience or epiphenomenalism, so that the causal closure of the physical world is maintained. Many problems then arise as to how our ideas, decisions, affections etc have any influence in the world, not to mention a common closeminded denial about even the possibility of parapsychological or mystical processes.

There is yet another position not mentioned by Swedenborg in ISB 19, but which he would recognise in Spinoza, whose Ethics he is believed to have read. This is 'nondualism', of which another common form is advaita nondualism as imported from Hinduism, and is advocated today by people such as Ken Wilbur. Even the physicist Erwin Schrödinger found it agreeable, in his book 'What is Life'[1]. Spiritual progress consists of realising and acting on the fact that there is no real difference between creation and Divinity. Most nondualists hold that the manifest body of the world is ultimately found to be unreal and nonexistent compared with the Absolute. For Spinoza, however, God is not transcendent, but immanent, identical with all the objects of perception, and he does not claim intuitive knowledge beyond the minimal Aristotelian claims about first principles.

We may agree that a true account ought to be able to meet the objections placed before it! So let us try to redress a balance in modern philosophy by seeing how Descartes and Swedenborg might reply to some of the above questions, and deal with some common misconceptions. As well, there will be differences between the two of them to be elucidated.

3 Descartes

In recent years there has been further re-evaluation of René Descartes' views, in particular in the book "Descartes' Dualism" by Gordon Baker and Katherine J. Morris[2]. This book reminds us of the following differences between the 'Cartesian Legend' and what René Descartes actually wrote.

The Cartesian account today is commonly taken to be a "Two Worlds View": that there is a private, inner world of mental objects that parallels the public, outer world of physical things. The inner world is a world of 'ideas', the outer world is a world of bodies, while the mind is identified with consciousness. What Descartes said, however, is

that there are two (finite) substances, each with its own modifications. Thinking or having a thought is not an object or thing in a mental world, but a mode of a substance. It is, in fact, an activity or operation of a substance. Ideas are not objects or substances to be perceived, but states of the mind.

Descartes is commonly held to believe that anything that we would now call a 'state of consciousness' or subjective experience, concepts, beliefs, sense perceptions, bodily appetites, pains, pleasures, emotions, etc. qualifies as a cogitatio and is placed by him in the mind. However, he was clear that the mind is thought; it is intellectus, the rational soul. The activities of the mind, therefore, are all modalities of rational thinking: judgements, in effect, and thus propositional. Any noncognitive event is a non-mental event. Having a sense perception, therefore, is not to have some qualium or sense-datum hovering before the introspective soul. It just is to have a thought with a particular content, and the content describes a possible state of the body ('my eyes are being stimulated by light', for instance). To feel pain (again, in the restricted sense) is to believe or think or judge that one's body is in a certain condition.

Today's legend about Descartes misconstrues the central opposition within his dualism by setting up a contrast between consciousness and clockwork. However, his true dichotomy is between rationality and sentience, or the moral/intellectual and the animal. Thus, rather than the body being nothing but an unconscious, insentient machine, "a complicated bit of clockwork", and any being not endowed with a human soul (including all nonhuman animals) therefore lacking consciousness, even sentience, Descartes in fact allows that nonhuman animate bodies (and, in theory, even the human body without the soul) are sentient, conscious bodies. While they may not be capable of thinking (since they lack soul), they are capable of feeling and consciousness, in sum, of all those processes which do not require rationality. Brutes do not have conscientia (the self-knowledge that rational beings have of their actions) and thus they are not moral agents, but "they do share with human beings many of the things now called 'states of consciousness' " [2].

Traditionally, the Cartesian view has a union and interaction of the two substances in a human being, so that bodily events are the real efficient causes of mental events (such as sensations) and mental events (such as volitions) are the real efficient causes of bodily motions. However, Descartes is clear that the mindbody relationship is not one of efficient causal interaction. What their mutual relationship does consist in can be called "occasionalist interaction": motions in the brain "occasion" the soul to have (i.e., to efficiently cause or generate in itself) certain perceptions, while the mind's volitional activities are the occasion for certain bodily movements. This cannot be efficient causation, as the model for this is contact interactions, as only occur in the world of extensive bodies.

4 Swedenborg on Descartes

Emanuel Swedenborg, in our initial quotation, used Descartes as a symbol of his desired resolution of the mind-body problem in favour of 'spiritual influx'. However, Descartes never used this phrase. Toward the end of his life he moved in favour of 'occasionalism', arguing that God is known to be the cause of all events, so he is also the cause of those that depend on human free will. He has ordained 'natural correlations' between mind and body for our welfare, and these are 'necessary' henceforth. Swedenborg agrees with this, but goes much further with his proposals for spiritual influx.

Swedenborg has a number of criticisms of Descartes, which we may now use to clarify the differences between their positions. Some come from different understandings of the relation between the will and the intellect, others concern soulbody interaction more directly.

The foremost difference between Descartes and Swedenborg, is that Descartes saw the essential activity of the soul as thinking, since this was the one activity that he could not doubt was occurring, and he wanted to believe as existing only those things of which he had a 'clear and distinct idea', and all such ideas, he takes to refer to reality. Swedenborg would argue that this is to ignore the central role of love in the will as underlying all intellectual activity, and that though the understanding does not see love and will clearly and distinctly in themselves, only by inference from their effects, that does not make them any less real. Descartes asserts that 'the will consists in this alone that we bring ourselves to affirm or deny, to seek or avoid, whatever is proposed to us by our intellect', but, according to Swedenborg, this reverses their true roles. Rather, it is the intellect which decides on proposals or desires from the will, in order to affirm or deny an intention.

'Clear perception' with Descartes is that 'present and accessible to the attentive mind', and 'distinct perception' is that which is 'disconnected from all other perceptions, so it evidently contains nothing not clear'. Descartes holds that clear and distinct perception is infallible, and 'incapable of tending toward what is false', but Swedenborg would observe that almost everyone thinks this of their own thoughts, and that not a few are thereby deceived! Even clear and distinct perceptions need to be questioned, because of influence arising from spiritual influx which we cannot tell in advance to be either truthful or deceptive. Swedenborg talks of many people convinced in their errors even though they have clear and distinct perceptions by their own standards.

The reason for these differences may be traced back to the lack of 'motivational' or 'dispositional' properties in Descartes' metaphysics. His natural world consists only of extended bodies, but there is no mention of dispositional properties such as causes or powers in nature that inhere in these bodies. His view of soul similarly neglects the dispositional or motivational factors associated with love or will. Descartes takes the essence of nature to be extension, and the essence of the soul to be thought, but Swedenborg (at least in his later years) takes both of these as incorrect: the essence of nature is the conatus to activity, and the essence of soul is love in the will, which is a conatus to thought. Swedenborg says that the relation of love to wisdom is similar to that between substance and form, and would note that Descartes draws only half the picture, and makes the same mistake in allowing only the existence of wisdom (thought) and form (extensiveness) of these pairs, for his soul and body respectively. Descartes position has the well known summary 'I think, therefore I am', whereas Swedenborg's, by contrast, should be 'I love, therefore I am.'

Finally, Descartes cannot distinguish any parts of the soul. Indeed, he says 'it is an imperfection to be divisible', and holds the soul to be simple and indivisible. This leads him to the ideas that the mind influences a part of the body which is single (not doubled), suggesting a role for the pineal gland. Swedenborg had postulated what he called 'cerebellula' ('little brains') as the smallest functionally autonomous units in the brain, and, against Descartes, became convinced that psychological functions were mediated by the cerebellula themselves. Various observations convinced Swedenborg of the primacy of the cerebral cortex, and also that different regions of the cortex were specialised for

particular functions (this is the beginning of the theory of cerebral localisation). Later Swedenborg develops the general principles which I would encapsulate as ‘there is no function without structure, and no structure without substance’ (even Aristotle would agree with this). However, applied to the present case, this requires a detailed structural understanding of the soul – not as ‘simple’ – if we are to understand its function.

5 Swedenborg’s own Dualism

It is sometimes believed that Swedenborg is essentially nondualist, because he has eliminated the ‘great gulf’ between soul and body. He has found that the soul is itself a spiritual body, and that this is essentially united to nature to give it have a permanent home or container. Asserting the substantiality of mind may appear to be nondualist, but Swedenborg uses the essential idea of ‘discrete degrees’ to explain how the soul and body may be deeply intertwined at many levels of structure and function, yet remain substantially distinct. As he puts it, the soul and mind are contiguous, but not continuous with each other. The same principle of discrete degrees operates between the Divine and creation, so that creation is distinct from the Divine though continually interwoven, sustained and enlivened by it. This dualism of God and nature is not the same as a state of fragmentation that many nondualists assert arises from any dualism, because the perpetual spiritual influx serves to coordinate and functionally unify all separate creatures.

Let us next see how Swedenborg would reply to some of the above questions often raised against dualism. The first set of questions from empiricism are that ‘we never see minds in nature, and science has no need for nonmaterial causes’. These arise from not knowing about the different kinds of ‘sight’. Swedenborg found in his life that there are two kinds of sight, namely internal sight₁ and external sight₂. With our mental understanding, everyone can see₁ their own ideas and feelings; Swedenborg was unusual in being able to see₁ the ideas and feelings of other people when in his transformed state of spiritual sight. External sight₂ sees people in the physical worlds, whereas external sight₁ (if you have it) sees people in a different spiritual world. And there, he found that rather than science having no need for nonmaterial causes, all true causes arise in fact through the spiritual world from the Divine Source. Admittedly this is not part of present science, and it never will be, unless we have a detailed and alternative theistic theory that can be tested. Until then, the statement of ‘no nonmaterial causes’ will continue to be repeated.

Some today object from methodology, that modern science must assume all causes are part of nature, and that in any case physics can be defined as the basic science of all causes. This is the oft-quoted ‘presumption of naturalism’. However, modern science is quite capable of postulating and understanding that which it cannot see or feel, as long as it has a rigorous intellectual structure that enables us to make deductions, and eventual partial testing. Many scientists say that they will follow ‘wherever science leads them’, and that ‘perhaps we will gradually get used to the weird ways of our cosmos and find its strangeness to be part of its charm.’[3]. If we are to have a unified account of discrete degrees that brings together theories of mind and physics, then there will definitely be predictive power and testable consequences. The fact that there is no fully-fledged scientific account including dualism tells us merely that we lack the imagination to make even a possible such theory. We thus need a specific theory: one that could be verified or refuted like other scientific theories, and fail or prevail. A theory would link disparate pieces of evidence together, and then scientists think they begin to properly understand.

Rather than Descartes and Swedenborg asserting that there are non-substantial substances (a contradiction in terms), they both held that there are different kinds of substances, with rather different properties and capabilities. Only if all substances are taken to be necessarily those of contemporary physics would we find contradiction in the substantiality of minds or souls. For both Descartes and Swedenborg this 'substantiality' is simply the statement that souls exist as individual beings in some world of similar beings, at least for a while, and that other aspects of mind or thought are properties or modes of action of these substances. Swedenborg goes further in making each discrete degree to be constituted by its own kind of substance, with the interesting result that, for example, sensory, scientific and internal rational minds are of distinct substances but still function together in one person. We see here that minds, according to Swedenborg, are not 'simple and indivisible', as Descartes had believed.

The biggest puzzle for everybody is how can mind and body interact, or at least influence each other in some way, in agreement with our abilities to perceive and act in the world. Descartes' 'occasionalist' view has been mentioned, but he was unable to give much more detail than this. By contrast, Swedenborg explains the connection between mind and body in terms of correspondences, which are similarities of functional forms. These correspondences are not magic, but each must have an explanation in terms of the constituent processes in each of successive discrete degrees, one producing the next. There is much detail yet to understand here, of how there are asymmetric links of 'downward' production and 'upward' constraint, but these features should already be discoverable within physics and psychology. Our challenge today is to formulate a theory of discrete degrees so that they may be recognised in detail.

Finally, many have the laudable aim to keep everything unified, and say that there must be unity at the heart of nature, not an irreducible multiplicity, and that we do not want to fragment our 'person' into multiple parts: we are wholes, and do not want to relegate our bodies to be mindless and feelingless. Swedenborg's reply would be that we are a 'whole' of many levels that are all intertwined with each other, in a way no less intricate than the molecular functions, cells & nerves of the human body. We are a finite image of an infinite God, so we have a large number of constituents whose function is unified. This unity arises from the Divine Source, and applies to the coordination of the actions, not the individual parts and actions themselves. The unity of the body is from the heart and brain, yet we have multiple cells and limbs which are capable of acting together in a unified way. Mind relates to not just pineal gland, according to Swedenborg, but all parts of the body, and in fact the body is formed so that there may be correspondences between all the many parts of the mind with all the many parts of the body.

The process of biological evolution is predated by Mind (in God), so we need to reinterpret the meaning of the evolutionary process. Swedenborg wants to show us how God creates the world by successive degrees, and by successive means, not by instantaneous creation of organisms and persons in all their detail as then they are not sufficiently independent of him. Swedenborg gives details of the many steps of spiritual regeneration, and we may presume that the steps of biological generation in phylogenesis are of similar complexity. There is even a sense in which we can see the 'survival of the fittest' as just the survival of those organisms with structures allowing good correspondences, so that subsequent forms become more in the image of the Human form. Again we have still very much to learn about our historical roots and the means of our generation.

6 Discussion

Descartes had confined the human soul to its rational part, with all other affections and sensations belonging to the natural body. Aristotle and the scholastics would have said that these later were part of the 'sensitive soul', but Descartes allowed no such intermediate soul. Swedenborg continued some of this division, as for example when he talks of 'natural' and 'corporeal' minds almost as if they were part of the body, in contrast to the 'rational mind' which is the true person.

Most often Swedenborg extended ideas derived from Descartes, this gives rise to a certain irony in part of the modern misunderstanding of Descartes. He was held to advocate the existence of a 'inner world of mental objects that parallels the public, outer world of physical things', but this view is not so much from Descartes as from Swedenborg! The spiritual world of Swedenborg is just that world that can be seen with sight₁ that rather closely parallels the physical sight₂. It thus appears that ideas from Swedenborg have without acknowledgement entered the concourse of ideas, only to be attributed to Descartes as the most prominently acknowledged dualist philosopher.

7 Conclusion

Both Descartes and Swedenborg have attempted to present and explain theories of the duality of soul (or mind) and bodies, and neither of their views are well understood today. Part of this misunderstanding arises from unknowingly attributing some of Swedenborg's ideas to Descartes. Nevertheless, many of the common objections to dualism are found to have yet responses from Swedenborg's viewpoint.

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References

- [1] E. Schrödinger, *What is Life?*, Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Gordon Baker and Katherine J. Morris, *Descartes' Dualism*, Routledge, 1996.
- [3] Mark Tegmark.