UNIT 7: DESCARTES THEORY OF MIND-BODY RELATION

UNIT STRUCTURE

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7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain Descartes' view on mind-body relation
- describe the concept of interactionism

7.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces to you different theories forwarded by different philosophers regarding the problem of Mind-Body relation. We will discuss here the theories like Interactionism given by Descartes, Parallelism by Spinoza, Pre-established harmony by Leibnitz, Russell's view on Leibnitz's concept of Mind- Body relation, and Strawson's view on Mind-Body relation etc.

7.3 DESCARTES VIEW ON MIND-BODY RELATION

Descartes concept of mind and body necessarily follows from his self-imposed doubt, which is the stepping stone of his philosophy. As a rationalist philosopher, Descartes opines that Mind and Body are two independent substances. Regarding the concept of Mind-Body relation, we find the different theories like Occasionalism, Parallelism of Spinoza, Pre-established Harmony of Leibnitz and Subjective Idealism of Berkeley. This

problem still persists in the philosophical viewpoints of modern philosophy in a different style.

Now, we will discuss Descartes philosophical viewpoints in the problem of Mind- Body relation. Descartes was a dualist because he divides knowledge into ideas and ideas of things. Locke was the first philosopher to have introduced this epistemological dualism in philosophy which to be followed by Descartes and was to be criticized by Berkeley. Apart from this, Locke as a dualist also divides ideas into primary and secondary ideas and was criticized by Berkeley. Now let us turn our attention to Descartes concept of interactionism.

7.3.1 Interactionism

As a staunch dualist Descartes holds that the mind which possesses the quality of consciousness need not refer to extension. In the same way, the body which implies the quality of extension need not refer to consciousness. So, mind and body are the two independent substances.

Human beings have both body and mind. Human body is compared to a machine. Just as a machine moves with the help of energy, so also the body moves with the energy produced in the heart. The death is due to the destruction of some valuable parts of the body machine. Apart from body and mind, God in his Creation additionally puts soul in case of human beings. That is why, it can be said that there can be no real relation between body and soul. Body and soul are diametrically opposed to each other. However, the relation between body and mind can be compared to the nature of relation between the pilot and his machine.

Descartes, in this context, introduces the concept of Interactionism where he speaks of the interaction between the mind and the body. In case of Interactionism, the bodily activities are sometimes influenced by the mind. Similarly, mental activities are sometimes influenced by the body. As for instance, although sense perception, imagination, memory, and act of remembering are all

considered as mental activities, yet these acts also refer to material objects which we observe in human beings. Similarly, we observe that the bodily acts like eating, playing, working etc. also refer to mental acts which we cannot ignore. As for instance, when we write something it is not only our body that is associated with this particular action, but also our mind or reasoning power, having an equal participation in this action. Therefore, it can be said that the mind and the body interact with each other. Just as we cannot simply talk of mental activities apart from the bodily activities so also we cannot talk of the bodily activities apart from mental activities. We perceive the intimate connection between the two but Descartes is not absolutely clear about the relationship between the two within the framework of dualism. Rather, he warns us against the confusing or mixing of mind and body with one another. In contrast to the opinion supposing the intimate relation of mind and body Descartes opines that the mind (thought) and the body (extension) are combined only in unity of composition and not in unity of nature. So, the union of mind and body should not be compared with a mixture of two bodies. Descartes shows that although thought (mind) is affected by sense organs still it cannot be said to be the product of sense-organs; however, sensations, feelings, and appetites are the products that originate in the soul because of their union with the body. Descartes holds that in spite of the union of soul with the body the two remain distinct and therefore, he brings the concept of God to put them together. He holds the position that the mind and the body are not such that one becomes the cause of the other or vice-versa. But Descartes sometimes also accepts the theory of causal connection in the context of mind and body. Although the soul is united with the body, still it has its principal seat in the pineal gland of the brain. Descartes considers the pineal gland to be the only undivided portion of the brain. The bodily affection moves the animal spirits in the nerves, so the movements in the animal spirits are the results or causes of sensible objects and which are finally transferred to the pineal gland. And in this way sensations are produced in the

brain. In the same way, the soul also can move the gland and this movement is transferred to the animal spirits and in this way the movement is conducted by them (animal spirits) over the nerves into the muscles. Here, the relation between the mind and the body is considered as causal, but this causal relationship takes place through an interaction between the mind and the body of the pineal gland. But Descartes is not successful in showing how this interaction is compatible with his metaphysical dualism of mind and body.

Side Box: Pineal gland: A small gland at the back of the skull within the brain, producing a hormone like substance. n some mammals.

While discussing Descartes interactionism it will be useful to discuss epiphenomenalism which is also a dualistic theory.

- Epiphenomenalism is a dualistic theory which states that the mind is separate and distinct from the body. This theory allows that the mind is utterly dependent causally upon the body. So, everything which occurs in the mind is a result of events in the body and the mind in this regard is utterly powerless to affect the body. That is why it can be stated that the epiphenomenalist accepts one half of the interactionist contention, which holds that bodily events cause mental events. But, this theory denies the possibility of the other half, that is, the mental events can ever cause the bodily events. It allows that whatever happens in the mind is merely a by-product of bodily activity. This view is known as epiphenomenalism.

Although we observe an interaction between mind and body in cases like appetites of hunger and thirst, emotions and passions of the mind etc. still Descartes seems to conceal the relationship by putting an analogy of the rider and the horse. Just as the rider pushes on the horse to speed up the movement with his energy, so the mind affects the bodily movement without giving its own energy into the material bodies. However, this relationship of mind and body is not free from difficulties because like the metaphorical relation of the rider and the horse, mind and matter cannot not be discussed in concrete

terms. The relation between mind and body is not mechanical like the relation between the rider and the horse. Mind and body are different in nature; but the rider and the horse are essentially of the same nature. Although we fail to establish a direct interaction between mind and body still it can be said that there is a watertight relation between body and mind. As the discussion of mind and body deals with human being, so a partial interaction of mind and body cannot be ruled out. Mind and body influence each other through animal spirits. Interaction of mind and body occurs when we admit that the soul is excited to activity by the animal spirits or the soul moves the animal spirits. If the animal spirit is material that influences the soul, there is no problem in thinking of interaction of mind and body and vice versa. However, Descartes position in this regard is not clear because he takes help of mechanical and spiritual principles in order to explain the corporeal world.

Side Box: Gilbert Ryle: (19 August 1900- 6 October 1976) A British Philosopher

The difficulty involves regarding the division of the mind and the body. The concept of an analysis of a person into mind and body in Descartes philosophy fails to provide inclusive information about a person. Generally, we never discuss a human being by analysing into two parts, one is mental and the other is physical. By this division we invite the problem that the mind and the body are two different parts in nature because the mind which has the attribute of consciousness is not extended and the body which has the quality of extension is not conscious. Therefore, it will be difficult to make a bridge between the two diametrically opposed entities. So, Descartes seems to fail in this context to render a satisfactory answer regarding the concept of mind-body relation.

Gilbert Ryle holds that Descartes concept of dualism (mind and body) leads to a categorical mistake with the sense that while mind stands for consciousness and body for extension, the both belong to

two categories. The Mind which possesses the attribute of consciousness is mental and the body which possesses the attribute of extension is corporeal or physical. Therefore, the concept of direct or indirect interaction of the body and the mind by which we try to explain the mind through the body and the body through the mind leads to a fallacy which Gilbert Ryle calls categorical mistake.

But the important question is, do the mental acts refer to material bodies? Descartes holds that mental ideas do not refer to material bodies. It simply represents the material objects. According to Descartes, there are real material objects or bodies which are based on the veracity of God. But to know a material body we at first know only the primary qualities of the particular material body. But the secondary qualities, which are so called confused ideas, are caused by the material bodies. That is why, Descartes holds the view that material bodies affect the mental states through human body.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: State whether the following statements are True or False

a) According to Descartes, Mind and Body are two independent substances. (True/False)

b) Locke introduced the concept of epistemological dualism. (True/False)

c) Locke advocates the theory of Interactionism. (True/False)

d) Descartes holds that the locus of Soul is the pineal gland of the brain. (True/false)

e) Ryle views that Descartes concept of dualism leads to categorical mistake. (True/False)

Q 2: What do you mean by Interactionism? (Answer in about 109 words)

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Q 3: Write a critical view on Descartes interactionism. (Answer in about 73 words)

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ACTIVITY 7.1

Do you support interactionism? If yes, give your reasons in support of your answer. Discuss

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7.4 LET US SUM UP

- Descartes introduces the concept of interactionism in case of mind-body problem. He holds that bodily activities are influenced by the mind. Similarly, the mental activities are also influenced by the body. So, mind and body are interacted to each other.
- Instead of being regarded as the two entities or substances Spinoza holds that mind and body are the two attributes of Substance or God. Therefore, Spinoza's theory of mind-body relation is known as parallelism.
- Descartes propounded the theory of occasionalism. It holds that matter is not the cause of thought and similarly mind is not the cause of matter and vice-versa. Rather, it is thought that God uses the occasions for his thinking and will.

- According to epiphenomenalism, the mind is separate and distinct from the body. This theory allows that the mind is utterly dependent causally upon the body. So, everything which occurs in the mind is a result of events in the body and the mind in this regard is utterly powerless to affect the body. That is why, it can be viewed that the epiphenomenalist accepts one half of the interactionist contention, which holds that bodily events cause mental events.



7.5 FURTHER READINGS

1) Russell, Bertrand (1900). A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibnitz. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

2) Goswami, S.P(2006). Persons: A Strawsonian Study. Guwahati: Anwesha

3) Thrilly, Mark( ). A History of Western Philosophy.

4) Shaffer A. Jerome(1968). Philosophy of Mind. U.S.A: Prentice-Hall, Inc., Eaglewood Cliffs, N.J.



7.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: a)True b)True c)False
d)True e)True

Ans to Q No 2: Interactionism holds that bodily activities are sometimes influenced by the mind; similarly, mental activities are also influenced by the body. As for instance, the act of sensing, imagination, memory, remembering are mental activities that refer to material objects. Similarly, the bodily activities like eating, playing, working etc. refer to mental acts which we cannot ignore. It can be shown that when we play a particular game (football, cricket, tennis ball etc.) not only our body is actively associated with this particular action, but our mind or reasoning power equally participates in this action. That is why it can be

stated that mind and body are interacted to each other.

Ans to Q No 3: Gilbert Ryle is a critic of Descartes concept of interactionism. To Ryle, Mind and body belong to two categories. The Mind which ascribes the attribute of consciousness is mental and body which denotes the attribute of extension is corporeal or physical. That is why the process of explaining the mind through the body and the body through the mind alone is erroneous. So, to Ryle, Descartes commits a fallacy that is categorical mistake.



7.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions

Q 1: Who propounds the theory of Interactionism?

Q 2: What is Interactionism?

B) Short Questions (Answer in about 100-150 words)

Q 1: Briefly explain the theory of Interactionism?

C) Write short notes on (Answer in about 150 words)

Q 1: Occasionalism

Q 2: Interactionism

D) Long Questions (Answer in about 300-500 words)

Q 1: What is interactionism? Explain

Q 5: What according to you are the limitations of Interactionism? Discuss

Q 6: Which one of the three theories like Parallelism, Interactionism, Pre-established harmony would you prefer most in case of the mind-body relation? Explain

Q 7: Is there any distinction between Interactionism and Parallelism? Discuss

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