

Mind and Body Problem: From Plato to Sadra via Descartes

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In The Name of God The Merciful The Compassionate.

Praise only be to Him, The Lord of The Universe, The Absolute Truth.

Peace and blessings be upon Thy messenger, the guiding light, and to his family, noble and purified.

Soul has been a great controversy since the dawn of civilisation. Its existence is questioned, its relation with the body is put under investigation and there are numerous other related issues that have been discussed. Many philosophers, scientists, researchers have tried to figure the answer.

This essay, however, is modestly trying to discuss the idea of soul and body especially in their relation to each other. Due to the certain limitations including the writer's knowledge, this essay may not be as comprehensive as it may suggest. First part of the essay will go to explain the core of this problem; that is Plato's dualism. Having done that briefly, it will go to provide dualism's major supporters and its development to the present.

However, brief major objections and arguments against dualists are also presented with emphasis on the relation of mind and body. This essay will be ended with an investigation of an alternative view to the problem contributed by Mulla Sadra in light of his transcendent theosophy (hikmah al-muta'aliyah).

In this essay I try to avoid terminology confusion by regarding mind, soul and spirit as the opposite of the body, as in immaterial substance is the opposite of material substance, and hence considering them as the same.¹ It is also assumed that form other than body does exist.

What is dualism? Basically dualism which is introduced by Plato is a theory that there are two kinds of substance; physical and mental substance. Physical substance means something that is material which is known as our body while mental substance, in human being, is what is considered as immaterial self or the soul.

According to Plato even when human, as pictured by Swinburne, imagine a cat his soul imagines cat. Dualist thinks that souls do feel and believe.²

The soul and body are two different substances and are separate with no substantial and natural connection characterising a unity. Their relation, however, can be described only accidental and nominal. Henceforth, essential connection and interaction between the two are merely superficial.

Aristotle comes to the rescue to fill in this blank by forwarding his own opinion that human being actually has two countenances which are body as matter and soul as form. He believes that one can understand that relation between body and soul is more than just interrelation and interdependence of two different

separate substances. He points out in De Anima:

So every natural body which partakes life would be a substance of the composite kind. And since there exists such kind of body, the soul would not be a body; for a body is not something which belongs to a subject but exist rather as a subject or as matter. Accordingly, the soul must be a substance as the form of natural body potential with life, and [such] substance is an actuality. So the soul is the actuality of such a body.[3](#)

So based on his opinion, the soul is a function of an organised body and therefore is not a subject of independency and separate existence. Aristotle has to some extent provided a more sophisticated understanding of the soul-body relation. However, as a result of his opinion, the soul is not eternal but generated and therefore a subject of time and corruption. It may be right to say that Aristotle may have been the first functionalist.[4](#)

Functionalism is antithesis of dualism which states that mind is not something that exists apart from physical and denies that mental states are identical to physical states.[5](#)

This idea is widely accepted among contemporary philosophers such as Putnam and Shoemaker. Since they are so concern about physical substance and how it is organised, they seem to avoid the core of the problem; the mental substance itself and its relationship with the physical one. This is indeed a big hollow of their thoughts.

Enlightenment brings about a new phase in the controversy. Descartes argues that human being consists of soul and body. What he means by body is:

All that can be terminated in a certain figure, and so fill a certain space as there from to exclude every other body [6](#) and he conceives that the soul is a thinking substance and has intelligence but not space as he says:

I rightly conclude that my essence consists only in my being a thinking thing [or a substance whose whole essence or nature is merely thinking]. And although I may, or rather, as I will shortly say, although I certainly do possess a body with which I am very closely conjoined; nevertheless, because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in as far as I am only a thinking thing and unextended thing, and as, on the other hand, I possess a distinct idea of body, in as far as it is only an extended thing and unthinking thing, it is certain that I [that is, my mind, by which I am when I am] am entirely and truly distinct from my body and may exist without it.[7](#)

In contrast to Aristotle's idea, Descartes argues that our minds are intimately united with our bodies but it is not our bodies that make us what we really are. This idea consequently compels Descartes to accept that beings other than humans , who are the only conscious animals, are but machines.

However, it seems that Descartes is actually proposing no clear elucidation of in what manner soul

actually relates to body because he claims that mind is not directly affected by body, except the pineal gland in the brain.[8](#)

Yet we know that there is causal interaction between mind and physical world. Then, would it be right to suggest that mind is actually a physical thing? Descartes and his predecessor, Plato, fail to explain the natural and essential relation of body and soul.

The question above raise another opposition against dualism, namely materialism which in our age has been the core of civilisation and adopted by most of philosophers and scientists. Materialist considers that a person is his body, nothing else but that, and what we understand as mind is nothing but bodily phenomena. According to them, human being should be studied in terms of physical methods. This opinion is held by philosophers as early as Lucretius to Darwin and La Place.[9](#)

Descartes dualistic idea combined with materialism give birth to behaviourism.[10](#) Identity theory as part of materialism objects behaviourist and proposes that sensations, mental states, and processes are identically the same with those of the brain's.[11](#)

However, materialism possesses ambiguities and difficulties more than that of dualism. One classic objection is how can we explain the presence of thoughts.[12](#) Are thoughts, pains, love, and hate merely blend or reactions of material products taking place in our body ? Can we, imaginatively, clone a complete physical human being and then ask it to show love? Suppose materialism is true, can we measure dimensions of pains, thoughts, love and other mental states as what we do with spatiotemporal substance such as kidney, brain or heart? Materialism then is caught into the same problem as previous theories.

There are other lines of thoughts criticising dualism such as idealism.[13](#) However, it is suffice to say that they are also having similar difficulties as others before in explaining the relation of soul and body. Moreover, some of them are not as significant and influential as those above mentioned thoughts.

An alternative theory then is needed to try to search for contribution to the controversy. Sadr al-Din al-Shirazi known as Mulla Sadra (d. 1641) was one of the most profound and influential philosophers in the history of Islamic philosophy among those canon names such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes). His view on the soul-body relation is quite distinctive compared to any other philosophers mentioned earlier.

However, his doctrine can only be understood in the cognition of his theory of substantial motion (harakat al-jawhariyyah). He postulates that there is a substantial motion unperceivable to the senses besides the overt, accidental and sensible motions governing the superficial phenomena of this world. This motion is the principle of those motions.[14](#)

He argues that any change in the accidents of an object requires a change in its substance since accidents have no existence independent of substance. It implies then that form and matter of an

existent become themselves the matter for a new form and this process goes on continuously.

All beings in this world are moving vertically as a result of this motion until they reach the plenum of their archetypical reality. [15](#) The soul is not exception to this law. The soul is formed within physical matter. Matter is able to nourish a substance in its lap that is on the plane of the supernatural.

There is no layer whatsoever exists between the natural and supernatural, and there is nothing to prevent a material being to transform into an extramaterial being through gradual evolution. [16](#)

By that he means that soul is created with the body but becomes immortal and spiritual through the spirit. Therefore, the soul cannot be totally material since the substantial change require substance be of higher level than that of which the change take place. Accordingly, every living thing then, including animal and plant cannot be themselves entirely material but rather they use their matter as their instrument to move from material to spiritual or extramaterial being. [17](#)

Thus this argument refutes materialism and proposes a more sophisticated approach to explain the soul-body relation against dualism. Against functionalists, in this case is represented by Aristotle, who consider mental substance as 'function' of a body, Sadra states that:

These powers [18](#) do not subsist in the (bodily) organs, but rather organs subsist through them. For the proof is conclusive that when something inheres in something else (as the bodily organs), such that the being of that first thing in itself is the same as its being in that in which it inheres, then it is impossible for its own being to be in one world and for the being of that in which it inheres to be in another world. [19](#)

Hence he is attributing the quality of having faculties to the soul. This idea is a revolutionary separation from Aristotle's. It elevates the soul from just physical form, as in Aristotle, to a form, although is in matter, which is capable to transcend itself because the extent of its immanence in matter is less than that of a simple physical form. [20](#)

Plato's dualism idea which acknowledges two entities in human body and supported by later modern philosophers including Descartes has tremendous opposition both philosophically and scientifically on its difficult issues. The relation of soul and body is then turning to possible other solutions to its problem. Functionalism comes to offer unitary solution but it is still having some major difficulties.

Materialism followed by behaviourism and identity theory and other lines of thoughts offering attack on dualism but apparently they posses greater difficulties than of dualism. Mulla Sadra's transcendent theosophy is offered to be as an alternative view which proposes quite distinctive points compared to others. Some of the difficult issues were dealt with by Sadra's theories. Therefore, it may be right to say that to some extent Mulla Sadra has accomplished great achievement in this controversy.

Glory be to Thou, My Lord, Exalted be Thy Name.

May Thy be pleased with this worthless service.

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[1.](#) There are many philosophers who try to distinguish and then give definitions to each of them. However, they are sometimes interchangeable which give me some sort of 'justification' to categorise them in the same meaning. George Berkeley in his The Principles of Human Knowledge, for example, defines mind, spirit, soul and self into the same category

[2.](#) Swinburne, R., Evolution of The Soul, 1986, p.145.

[3.](#) Aristotle, De Anima, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle, 1981, p.19 (book B 412a15–23)

[4.](#) This may be argued though, since many groups of thought tend to nominate that so and so philosophers belong to their group.

[5.](#) Beakley, B., Ludlow, P. et al., The Philosophy of Mind, 1992, p.3

[6.](#) Descartes, A Discourse on Methods, Meditations and Principles, trans. John Veitch, p.87.

[7.](#) ibid., p. 132–133

[8.](#) Descartes in Edwards p.107–108.

[9.](#) Edwards, p.23.

[10.](#) Behaviourism is a theory that says what we call as mind is just behaviour and this behaviour is recognisable. This idea is profoundly defended by Gilbert Ryle. See Edwards 1992 p.24–25 and Scruton p. 218–219.

[11.](#) This idea is put forward by J.J.C. Smart and David Armstrong. See Edwards p.25 and Scruton p. 219–220.

[12.](#) Paul Edwards in Immortality (1992) explains four critics to materialism which include privacy, qualia, intentionality, and immateriality . Briefly, privacy means that one has to observe his behaviour but also what's on his brain; by qualia he argues that there are some features of our experience that are left out in any materialistic world; he continues by elaborating that materialism is proven cannot accommodate the idea of intentionality; immateriality claims that it is absurd to regard mental states as having size and shapes.

[13.](#) Idealism is the opposite of materialism which argues that human being consists only of mental substance. This idea is put forward by George Berkeley. See Beakley et.al, p. 15–18.

[14.](#) Mutahhari M., Fundamentals of Islamic Thought, 1985, p.187.

- [15.](#) Nasr, S.H. et.al, History of Islamic Philosophy v.1, 1996, p.649.
- [16.](#) Mutahhari, p.187
- [17.](#) Rahman, The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra, 1975, p. 199.
- [18.](#) By that he meant the five senses and or mental substance such as perceptions, sensations, etc.
- [19.](#) Sadra in Morris, The Wisdom of The Throne, 1981, p. 134.
- [20.](#) Rahman, p.198

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