

## Cartesianism

Written by K B Napier  
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It often amazes me that many theologians tend to base their thoughts on the ideas of secular philosophers. It does not matter how close to truth secular philosophers get – they are still secular, without God. As Cartesianism is still referred to in theological circles, we should at least outline what it is.

Cartesianism is named after the French philosopher, René Descartes, (1596-1650). See our series on philosophy. He was influenced by Augustine of Hippo, Aristotle and Stoicism. It is to Descartes that we attribute his famed saying; “I think, therefore I am” (It is variously put). He was trained as a child at a Jesuit college, before entering Poitiers University, that was founded by King Charles VII and pope Eugene IV. If for no other reason, this Roman Catholic background should serve as a warning. Even so, his philosophy is still regarded as required text in many modern universities.

For Descartes both doubt and certainty are proofs that we exist. What intrigues him was not so much existence but how we *know* we exist. He was not keen to say that he knows through his senses, because the senses can deceive. So, he concluded that he can know he exists because he thinks, because when we are aware of our thoughts we prove we are conscious. For him, perception is unreliable, so only deduction is useful. However, he tended to alter his position with time.

Even his contemporaries were suspicious of his work, and theologians at the time warned against his ideas. Pascal once accused him of secret atheism: “I cannot forgive Descartes; in all his philosophy, Descartes did his best to dispense with God.” Others say he was a devout Catholic. This is why his theology is bound to be deficient. A Catholic can be both atheistic and ‘religious’!

‘Cartesianism’ is a term used specifically for one of Descartes’ theological ideas. Descartes worked on a mechanistic interpretation of physical nature and believed matter and mind were fully separate entities. His philosophy was rationalistic. God, he said, was yet another, third, infinite substance. When God combines body and mind, it becomes ‘man’. Descartes produced the idea called ‘dualism’. He advocated that without a soul a being cannot think (which I agree with).

However, he thought of animals as mere machines. It is more correct to say that animals have

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mental attributes designed to suit their own sphere of operation. I do not see this as 'thought' but simply as courses of action, suited to the particular animal; that is, programmed reactions rather than thought-out responses, each reaction triggered by a specific stimulus: instinct, not thought as we know it.

The idea that mind is totally separate from the body is debatable. I say this because the operation of the mind requires a host body; when the body dies the mind seems to die with it. Yet, there is a compelling argument that the mind does not die, but is carried forward to one's future eternal state. Or is it? Will it be new? Or, as the spirit is made alive, or 'regenerated', and communes with the Holy Spirit, does it mean the made-alive human spirit transfers from old body to new body when we are resurrected?

Where is the mind sited? No-one knows if it is within the body or outside it. If outside it – where is it? And if within the body – where? The brain? Is the brain a mixture of cells and thought? Or, is the brain separate from the mind? I doubt if anyone will ever know the answer!

On the other hand, we were created with body and mind, or, body and soul. The two are intrinsic to each other's existence, even though we have no idea how they exist. One difficulty may be the way 'soul' and 'spirit' are used interchangeably in scripture. Throughout the Bible 'soul' and 'spirit' are used about 50% of the time each, though the word for each is the same. This is important, because we are told that the spirit is dead in the unsaved person. Yet, each unsaved person is capable of using his mind!

We can say, then, that though the mind cannot be located specifically in the body, we do know that God made us with a mind (which is a function of the soul) as well as a brain. An unstimulated brain is virtually dead because it has accumulated no input and therefore has no, or little, output. The newly-born eye, for example, requires a wide range of input from external sources, otherwise its cells in the eye and in the brain receptors will not grow properly and will distort future stimuli.

Thus, the brain will misperceive what it is seeing, and this, in turn, will cause poor or wrong brain function, and this will produce inaccurate thoughts. The same can be said of all the senses. So, it would appear that brain and mind are related in some way. This appears to reject Descarte's idea that mind is totally separate.

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It has been acknowledged that Cartesianism and the then new Biblical critical methods both combined to produce irreligion (for example, 'Problems of Cartesianism', Lennon, Nicholas, Davis; McGill-Queen's Press, 1982). As always – beware of “the psychologies of men”.

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