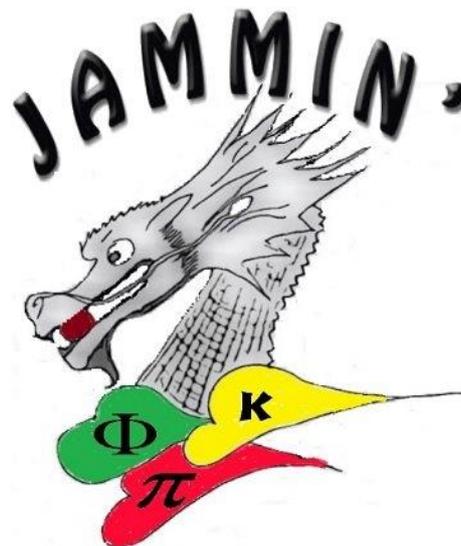




**WHAT IS IDENTITY?**  
**'IDENTITY' AND THE MIND AND BODY PROBLEM?**

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## INTRODUCTION

In this short essay the philosophical concept of 'identity' is used to demonstrate that Descartes method of demonstrating mind-body dualism is incoherent. The essay starts by looking at how identity is related to Descartes arguments and then it uses epistemogilolal and logical methods to show that Descartes argument is invalid.

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## IDENTITY

Identity comes from the Latin word *identitas* which means the exact sameness of things. This is true when things are not just similar or related but are the same thing. In fact, any difference means that things have a separate identity. Logically, something is identical when it fulfils the binary relation between a thing and itself, such that:

for all x and y,  
x = y" is true if  
x is the same thing as y

## IDENTITY AND THE MIND-BODY PROBLEM

The theory of identity is very closely bound up with the mind-body problem. For example, Cartesian dualism came about because Descartes reasoned thus about the identity of mind and matter (J., 1996):

“I have a body to which I am very closely united, nevertheless, because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself in so far as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and because, on the other hand I have a distinct idea of the body in so far as it is only an extended thing but which does not think, it is certain that I, that is to say my mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely and truly distinct from by body, and may exist without it.”

Descartes made many assumptions about identity here. He assumed that his body and mind were not identical. He also assumed that his consciousness was identical with him which was constant overtime. And Locke made a similar point when he said, "...personal identity consists: not in the identity of substance, but... in the identity of consciousness." However, others, such as Buddhists would disagree and state the view that there is not something distinct about consciousness (Digha Nikaya). In terms of the mind body problem there are several different theories. For example (where x = mind; and y = body):

Cartesian dualism	$x \neq y$
Materialism	$x = y$
Panpyschism	$x = y$
Christian philosophy	$x \neq y$
Buddhist philosophy	$x = y$

For a panpyschist only mind exists and so by definition there is only one substance, mind, and so there is an identity. For a materialist, it is visa-versa and only matter exists and so again, there is an identity. And for the dualist there is a relationship, but no identity between mind and matter.

However, all discussion thus far has assumed that we can even talk about mind, which Descartes claims that he is, can be considered identical with itself or constant over time. As Professor Strawson stated, *'If we are to talk coherently about individual consciousnesses or minds...we must know the difference between one such item and two such items.... "Suppose I were in debate with a Cartesian philosopher, say Professor X. If I were to suggest that when [he] speaks there are a thousand souls simultaneously thinking the thoughts his words express, having qualitatively indistinguishable experiences,...how would the man persuade me that there was only one soul?"* (Strawson, 1974).

Strawson doesn't stop there and considers several other feasible possibilities whereby it appears that there is one continuous consciousness but there is not. He then shows that Cartesian dualism is inconsistent (Strawson, 1974):

*"Either the concepts of identity and difference of individual human consciousness are derivative from the concepts of identity and difference or they are not. If they are, then our ordinary style of talking about human beings is not even in principle reducible in the way a Cartesian must hold that it is. If they are not, if a Cartesian reduction is in principle possible, then it must also be possible to make independently intelligible what is meant by identity and difference of human consciousness. But there is not the slightest reason for thinking that this can be done."*

In other words either i or not-i. If i, then the Cartesian cannot agree. If not-i, then the Cartesian must be able to do something which Strawson has shown cannot be done (where i is the identity of individual human consciousness and people). This claims that a Cartesian cannot agree that the a person is identical with consciousness because that is against his initial thesis; and also a Cartesian now needs to show, but cannot show, what it means to be an individual consciousness and not a series of souls transmitting experience from moment to moment or a collection of multiple souls. This means, to Strawson, that the method of reduction that Descartes used to deduce his dualism is invalid.

Professor Strawson also suggests that the fault of Descartes was his method of enquiry. In particular it was his insistence that there is a soul separate from the body and that this can be found from introspection. He asserted that it was the grammatical effects of language that can easily fool one into finding identity where there is none. Many other philosophers have made the same observation about identity and in fact it is often said that the entire philosophy of Buddhism for the past 2500 years has been nothing but the exploration of the key insight of the Buddha that there is no identity between the self of today and the self of tomorrow – that there is no permanent self, ego-identity or soul.

In fact, the whole purpose of Buddhist meditation is to realise that the identity of the self is a persistent and stubborn illusion. Meditation, for a Buddhist, is nothing but the goal of experiencing emotionally what Strawson is asserting intellectually. For the Buddhist enlightenment has been reached when non-identity of the self has been realised emotionally. And although this will not be convincing evidence for a non-Buddhist it is certainly noteworthy in this context since Buddhists spend their whole lives devoted to experiencing this egolessness whereas Cartesians only assume it in passing.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has tried to outline how the theory of identity shows that Descartes attempt at showing that there is mind-body dualism logically fails. That does not mean, of course, that dualism isn't true, but only that his attempt to prove it with logic failed. There are many attempted proofs aiming to show that there is no soul or ego identity and conversely that there is and this has been the biggest controversy in Asian philosophy since Buddha had his insight 2500 years ago.

## References

J., C. (1996). *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Strawson, P. F. (1974). *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*. Methuen & Co. Ltd .