

Phenomenality and the Reality of Mind in Descartes' Meditations

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In this essay, I will examine the role of phenomenality in Descartes' view that the mind and its thoughts are real in a way distinct from matter. Phenomenality arises in Descartes' formulation of the difference between bodies as they appear to our senses, and bodies as they really are. Phenomenality is also a defining characteristic of "thought" as Descartes see it. By its very logic, this phenomenality implies the reality of both thought and thinker, and establishes that these are of a different substance from matter.

First, a word about phenomenality itself. "Phenomenality" is related to the idea of "appearance": something has phenomenality if it has the property of *appearing to* or *seeming to* a subject. The idea of appearance, however, only makes sense as part of a distinction between appearance and reality. It is this dichotomy that gives the word "appearance" its meaning. If we did not have the appearance/reality distinction, all would simply be "reality" to us. Indeed, for the Aristotelian philosophy of Descartes' predecessors, many of the things we would now call mere appearances, such as colours or sounds in objects, were considered to be realities. It is only when we begin to sense that "things are not as they seem" that the word "appearance" has meaning.

The appearance/reality distinction is an old idea in philosophy, going back at least as far as Plato. It arises whenever we come to doubt that our immediate perceptions are correct. When we have such doubts, we give the name "appearance" to our immediate perceptions, and "reality" to our more reflective understanding. Very often this doubt arises when our perceptions are found to be contradictory. This dynamic can be found throughout Descartes' work, perhaps most famously in the example of the wax (111). As wax is brought near the fire, its appearance changes in contradictory ways: before it seemed hard, now it seems soft; before it seemed cold, now it seems hot; etc. Upon reflection, we come to understand that in reality the wax must be different from these appearances—the wax as it really is does not have these changing sense qualities in itself. In this way, Descartes separates the appearance of corporeal things, i.e. their sensible qualities, from the reality of these things as extension.

Most likely, Descartes' immediate motivation for establishing this appearance/reality distinction between sense qualities and bodies was to understand the nature of matter better, in order to pave the way for a mathematical science. However, this appearance/reality distinction also has ontological ramifications: it establishes the reality of both the thinking thing and thought.

Phenomenality is a defining characteristic of thought. Descartes lists the activities that he counts as thought: "But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses" (110). Clearly, the quality that unites all these activities is that they are all experiences; they are all meanings *for a subject*; they are all phenomenal.

The phenomenality of thought is exactly what guarantees its reality. Descartes' method in the *Meditations* is to subject every belief to doubt. By hypothesizing an "evil genius" that tries to deceive him, Descartes find that he can doubt nearly everything he once believed (107). But he finds that he cannot doubt that he is thinking: "What is there in all of this [i.e. thought] that is not every bit as true as the fact that I exist—even if I am always asleep or even if my creator makes every effort to mislead me?" (110). The indubitability of thought that he discovers is, in fact, an implication of thought's phenomenality. As I described above, to doubt a belief is to admit the possibility of a difference between appearance and reality—but in doing so, we discover that there is an inherent limit to doubt. For everything that seems to be true to us, that is presented to us as being a certain way, we can imagine the possibility that the appearance is different from the reality. There is, however, one exception: experience, or *appearance itself*, cannot be different from reality. This follows necessarily from the appearance/reality distinction whence the concept of "appearance" arises. For if we conceive of the world in terms of appearance and reality, there must be something we take to be the appearance; and this appearance cannot itself be "merely an appearance," or else the appearance/reality would dissolve into the absurdity of an infinite regression. If everything is merely an appearance and not reality, then nothing exists at all. For the appearance/reality distinction to make sense, there must be things that *are* simply appearances, things for which their appearance is their reality, things of which we cannot say "that is merely the appearance." Thus, the very logic of doubt implies that the experiences we are doubting must themselves be real as phenomena. In this way, the phenomenality of thought is the very thing that makes its reality indubitable.

Descartes' distinction between the appearance and reality of bodies also establishes the reality of the thinking thing, i.e. the self. For to say that sense qualities are phenomenal is to say that they exist as an appearance to a subject. Appearances need to be appearances *to someone*—this is inherent to the meaning of the word "appearance." Descartes makes this point in *Meditation II* in reference to the faculties of sensing and imagining (which he calls "modes of thinking"): "I can clearly and distinctly understand myself in my entirety without these faculties, but not vice versa: I cannot understand them clearly and distinctly without me, that is, without a substance endowed with understanding in which they inhere, for they include an act of understanding in their formal concept" (135). Descartes is saying here that the very concept of sense perception implies the existence of a self, a "substance endowed with understanding." In this way, the phenomenality of thought implies the existence of the thinking thing.

Furthermore, the appearance/reality distinction implies that the mind is a different substance from matter. Just as phenomenality is essential to mind, being *non*-phenomenal is essential to matter. Matter is not the "appearance," but the "reality." It does not exist as an appearance; it exists apart from being an appearance. Therefore, mind and matter exist in different ways. The Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles, or more exactly its converse, the Indiscernibility of the Identical, states that for two things to be identical, they must share all the same properties. Therefore, since mind and matter differ in the property of phenomenality, they cannot be the same substance.

One might make the objection here that the above principle is being misapplied. For couldn't we argue that since candy canes are sweet and lemons are not, candy canes must be a different substance, i.e. a separate reality, from lemons? And so there are four substances in the universe: mind, matter, candy canes, and lemons! Hume makes an objection similar to this, using perceptions instead of candy canes: "since all our perceptions are different from each other, and from every thing else in the universe, they are also distinct and separable, and may be consider'd as separately existent, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing else to support their existence. They are, therefore, substances, as far as this definition explains a substance" (233). Hume shows that if difference between things, as between our various perceptions, implies a different *substance*, we are lead to the false conclusion that every thing is a different substance.

Hume is right to point out the absurdity that results if all differences are taken to imply different substances. However, if the property wherein two things differ is a property not merely of the thing, as sweet is of candy canes, but of the thing's *existence*, then the difference does imply different substances. This is the case with the difference between mind and matter. The phenomenality of mind and the non-phenomenality of matter are properties of the *existence* of mind and matter. Phenomenality is a property that explains the manner in which thought exists: thought exists *as an appearance*. For this reason, it needs to be seen as a different kind of substance from matter, not just a different type of the same substance. "Substance" means simply "that which is real," so having different types of "realness" implies having different types of substance.

In this essay, I have examined the role of phenomenality in Descartes' view that the mind and its thoughts are real in a way distinct from matter. Descartes' claim that the reality of matter is different from its appearance reiterates the distinction between appearance and reality that arises whenever our perceptions are called into doubt. I found that the phenomenality of our perceptions entails the reality of both thought itself and the thinking thing. Furthermore, by the Principle of the Identity of Indiscernibles, the phenomenality of thought implies that mind is of a different substance than matter, which is essentially non-phenomenal. Since the property of phenomenality describes the manner of a thing's existence, the difference between matter and mind in this property implies a difference in the way in which these two things are real.

Works Cited

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