

Anton Matytsin (Stanford University)

The Skeptical Consequences of Cartesian Dualism: The Decline of Metaphysics and the Rise of Probability

Cartesian dualism changed the way philosophers thought about the soul and the body, but it also created a set of philosophical, theological, and physiological problems that stimulated heated debates for over one hundred years. The fundamental tension between substance dualism and inter-substantial interaction elicited various attempts to resolve the apparent difficulty, producing theories that often undermined existing philosophical assumptions and theological doctrines. While the disciples of Descartes and their various opponents attempted to explain how it was that an immaterial soul could interact with an extended and material body, skeptical philosophers used the drawn out debates to their advantage. Skeptics, such as Simon Foucher, Pierre Bayle, and Pierre-Daniel Huet, emphasized the inability of contemporaneous philosophy to explain adequately either how sense experiences resulted in the formation of ideas or how an immaterial substance could direct the body to perform various activities. The problem of mind-body interaction thus served as a prime example of the weakness of the human mind that, in their view, not only could not know the surrounding world with certainty but could not even account for its own operations.

This paper will offer a historical examination of the debates concerning the nature of sense perception and the operations of the mind that took place among Cartesians, Malebranchians, empiricists, and Pyrrhonian skeptics in the Francophone world of the early 18th century. It will begin by analyzing the philosophical and theological consequences associated with the problem of mind-body interaction. It will consider the ways in which the skeptics exploited the question to provide evidentiary support to their claims about the weakness of the human mind. It will then briefly examine the various attempted solutions to the mind-body problem and consider the reactions to those solutions. Finally, the paper will investigate the reactions of the anti-skeptics and of some of the *philosophes* in the mid-18th century in order to highlight the philosophical consequences of these continuous disputes.

By considering the evolution of the debates about the mind-body interaction, this paper will explore the influence of skepticism on the nature of philosophical explanations. It will investigate the criteria of certainty that anti-skeptical thinkers, such as Jean-Pierre de Crousaz, Jean Henri Samuel Formey, and Jean-Bernard Mérian, offered to undermine the claims of the Pyrrhonians, and it will explain how the attempts to overcome skeptical critiques altered the assumptions about the powers and limits of human knowledge. The paper will thus describe the fundamental shift from a search for metaphysical certainty to a gradual disenchantment with metaphysics and an increased emphasis on moral certainty and probability. It will also reveal the transformation of skepticism and show how Pyrrhonian claims became increasingly mitigated and reserved. By considering the debates about epistemology from a historical perspective, it will illuminate the ways in which philosophers of the early Enlightenment attempted to establish new criteria of doubt and certainty.