

Why is the Mind-Body Problem Both an Ancient and a Medieval Problem?

Zihin-Beden Problemi Neden Hem Antik Hem Orta Çağ Problemidir?

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Abstract: The present article aims to contribute to ongoing scholarly debates by examining the similarities and differences between the conceptualization of the soul-body relationship in early philosophical traditions and the formulation of the mind-body problem in the post-Cartesian framework. To achieve this objective, the article is organized into two primary sections. The first section presents the central arguments of scholars who assert that the soul-body problem of ancient and medieval philosophy is distinct from the mind-body problem emerging in the modern period. The second section of the article critically evaluates these arguments, highlighting the continuities between the soul-body relationship in ancient-Hellenistic and medieval thought and the mind-body relationship in modern and contemporary philosophy. This article contends that the soul-body and mind-body problems, alongside the various approaches developed across different historical periods, should be understood as exhibiting a problematic continuity. It argues that, despite differing terminologies, a persistent duality problem can be traced from antiquity through to the modern era.

Keywords: Antiquity, Middle Ages, modern and contemporary period, soul-body relationship, mind-body relationship.



Introduction¹

Despite the prevalence and extensive discourse surrounding the mind-body problem in contemporary philosophy, Herbert Feigl, a seminal figure in this philosophical discourse, contends that numerous philosophical positions since the 18th century have primarily sought to evade it. Feigl asserts that despite advancements in logical analysis and epistemology, the fundamental question of how subjective experiences relate to behavioral or neurophysiological states remains persistent. As Schopenhauer famously referred to the mind-body problem as a "world knot" (*Weltknoten*), Feigl similarly describes it as a multifaceted puzzle encompassing scientific, epistemological, syntactical, semantic, and pragmatic dimensions (Feigl, 1958, pp. 372-373). The question thus arises: Is the avoiding of the mind-body problem truly a motivation unique to philosophical positions developed after the 18th century? Alternatively, could it be argued that what we now term the mind-body problem—post-Descartes—has been one of the central philosophical challenges since antiquity? Can the problem be articulated in such a way that philosophers from ancient to contemporary periods are considered within a continuous problematic framework? However, comparing early philosophical approaches to the soul-body relationship with modern and contemporary discussions of the mind-body problem is not always regarded as a fruitful or appealing line of inquiry. Historians of philosophy may be particularly resistant to such analyses, as they tend to emphasize historical context over philosophical continuity. This reluctance stems, at least in part, from the fact that examining the mind-body problem philosophically, as opposed to historically, necessitates engagement with the novel conceptual developments the issue has undergone in the modern era. This undertaking is particularly challenging in the context of contemporary academic work, which frequently involves collaboration across distinct disciplines. Contemporary philosophers of mind, in turn, may be hesitant to engage in this broader historical analysis, as it imposes

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the additional burden of tracing the problem's origins through extensive historical scholarship.

This article will not analyze the details of the views of a particular philosopher such as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Ibn Sīnā, Thomas Aquinas or Descartes on the soul/mind-body relation or problem. Similarly, the details of the debates about whether Aristotle's or any other philosopher's views on the soul-body relation are compatible with one or the other of the contemporary theories of the mind-body relation are beyond the scope of this article. The existing literature on these philosophers' views is sufficiently comprehensive, making it unnecessary to reiterate such analyses here. Instead, this article primarily aims to react to the debates that can be traced through the contemporary literature on whether the views of any philosopher from the early periods of the history of philosophy on the soul-body relation and the approaches developed in contemporary philosophy of mind to solve the mind-body problem can be considered together. In accordance with this general framework, firstly, the discussion and distinction between those who are in favor of examining the problems related to the contemporary mind-body relation in connection with an Ancient or Medieval philosopher and those who think that such readings are not possible will be analyzed. By doing so, the article aims to demonstrate that approaches to the soul-body or mind-body problem, though articulated with different terminologies across historical periods, can be seen as part of a continuous dualistic framework extending from antiquity to the present. Accordingly, the first part of the article will evaluate the key arguments of scholars who assert that the views of ancient or medieval philosophers on the soul-body relationship cannot be easily integrated with the problem known as the mind-body problem, which emerged after Descartes. The second part of the article will seek to show why the position of scholars who analyze the continuity between ancient, Hellenistic, and medieval approaches to the soul-body relationship and modern and contemporary approaches to the mind-body relationship is more compelling.

I. Historical Context and Fundamental Arguments

Recently, there have been a number of general studies that examine the views of Ancient-Hellenistic or Medieval philosophers on the soul-body relationship together with the approaches proposed to solve the



mind-body problem in the modern and contemporary period and aim to show the problem together with its transformations in the historical process (Crane & Patterson, 2000; MacDonald, 2003; Martin & Barresi, 2006; Knuittila & Sihvola, 2014; Lapointe, 2018; Sisko, 2019; Cameron, 2019; Schmid, 2019; Copenhaver, 2019; Kind, 2019). In addition to these general studies, a substantial body of literature has emerged that specifically compares various philosophers' theories of the soul-body relationship with various contemporary mind-body theories. The focus of this second group of literature has mostly been on Aristotle's views on the soul-body relationship. This literature has largely focused on the relationship between Aristotle's views on the psyche-body or nous-body relationship and contemporary approaches to the mind-body problem. The debate has mainly stemmed from different answers to questions such as whether there are any similarities or differences between Aristotle's or any other Ancient-Hellenistic or Medieval philosopher's theory of the soul-body relationship and modern or contemporary theories of the mind-body relation such as Cartesian dualism, materialism, functionalism, determinism, identity theory, or panpsychism. Indeed, the articles by Wallace Matson and Peter King (Matson, 1966; King, 2007) can be seen as two of the most important examples of this debate. In the context of these debates, some approaches (Sorabji (1974); Burnyeat (1995)), who adopt an attitude similar to that in these two articles, claim that the above-mentioned comparisons are dysfunctional and useless and advocate a more orthodox Aristotelian interpretation of the soul-body relationship. Some approaches, on the other hand, have favored such comparisons (Wilkes, 1978, 1995; Wedin, 1988; Heine-man, 1990; Shields, 1993, 2021; Nussbaum & Putnam, 1995; Cohen, 1995; Robinson, 1983; 2021; Caston, 1997, 2012, 2021, 2023; Sisko, 2001, 2019; Lagerlund, 2004, 2007; Pasnau, 2007, 2012; King, 2012; Dillon, 2009, 2013; Jaworski, 2016, 2018; Gasser, 2010; Boeri, 2018; Ward & Polanski, 2019; Gregoric & Fink, 2021). Proponents of this approach have found comparable aspects between the soul-body approach of any Ancient-Hellenistic or Medieval philosopher, Aristotle in particular, and the various approaches that emerged in later periods to solve the mind-body problem, and some have even claimed that the Aristotelian interpretation of soul-body is a strong alternative to the problems posed by Cartesian mind-body dualism. Of



course, there may be other works on both positions that are not mentioned here. However, in terms of the argument of this article, this opposition is sufficient for now.

The theses of scholars who emphasize the differences between Aristotle and Descartes can be classified into three theses. These theses, all of which agree that there is a difference between Aristotle and Descartes but differ on where the difference lies, are as follows: 1. Discontinuity Thesis: Descartes' theory is a radical departure from Aristotle's theory and gave rise to the main problematic of modern philosophy of mind. 2. Expansion Thesis: Descartes extended the functions of the rational soul to include all spiritual functions. 3. Consciousness Thesis: Descartes, unlike Aristotle, believed that all thoughts are conscious states (Anstey, 2000, 240-241).

Scholars who argue that there is a radical difference between the problem of the soul-body relationship in the Ancient-Hellenistic period and the Middle Ages and the mind-body problem in Descartes and later also present their claims in a way that supports the aforementioned theses. Firstly, these scholars approach specific issues, such as sensation and perception, and determine the presence or absence of a mind-body problem based on how philosophers from different periods addressed these particular concerns. Secondly, they emphasize the terminological shift from "soul," prevalent in the ancient-Hellenistic and medieval periods, to "mind," which gained prominence with Descartes. Utilizing this shift as a point of departure, they contend that the soul-body problem and the mind-body problem are distinct issues. Thirdly, they view the mind-body problem as one specifically introduced by Cartesian dualism, asserting that philosophers from earlier periods, even those who may be classified as dualists, did not confront a mind-body problem analogous to that posed by Descartes.

1. The Corporeality of *Sensation*

A key argument presented by scholars who assert a radical distinction between ancient and medieval philosophers and Descartes, and who posit a necessary connection between the mind-body problem and Cartesian dualism, centers on the issue of *sensation*. Matson and King emphasize the second thesis mentioned earlier. They argue that in antiquity and the Middle Ages, there was a close or transitive relationship between sensory and rational faculties, with sensation being situated within the corporeal



domain. In contrast, Descartes' philosophy confined activities such as sensation and perception exclusively to the realm of the mind.

Matson acknowledges that while the Greeks were not entirely devoid of a notion of the mind as separable from the body, they did not grapple with the mind-body problem as we understand it today. Matson asserts that, from Homer to Aristotle, the conceptualization of the boundary between mind and body was such that sensory processes were situated within the corporeal domain. As a result, questions concerning the relationship between sensation and the mind or soul, as framed in modern discourse, would have been difficult to express in Greek. According to Matson, this is because the Greek concept of *aisthesis*—which may be seen as an equivalent to *sensation*—does not correspond to the modern meaning of the term. The Greeks, therefore, lacked the motivations we have today, such as the desire to discuss phenomenal experience or raw feelings. Consequently, where there is no concept of sensation in the contemporary sense, there is no mind-body problem (Matson, 1966, pp. 100-102)

King, on the other hand, argues that there was no mind-body problem in the Middle Ages, similarly grounding his claim in the concept of sensation. According to King, mind-body dualism presupposes a strict separation between sensation and its bodily correlates. In contrast, medieval thought did not conceive of sensation as occurring independently of the body. Thus, for medieval philosophers, as with the ancient Greeks, the question of how sensation relates to both body and mind, or soul was not a pertinent issue. King extends Matson's analysis of the Greek terms related to sensation by applying a similar examination to Latin terms. Utilizing a systematic approach, he methodically excludes potential Latin equivalents that might correspond to the contemporary concept of sensation. King notes that the term *sensatio*, which could have served as the Latin counterpart to sensation, only emerged in the late Middle Ages. Furthermore, he points out that this term does not appear in the works of influential medieval philosophers such as Augustine, Boethius, Eriugena, Anselm, Abelard, Grosseteste, or Albert the Great, and thus was not in use prior to the 13th century. According to King, the term *sensatio* was first employed by Michael Scotus in his Latin translation of Averroes' commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima*, between 1220 and 1230. However, even in



this context, the term *sensatio* does not carry the connotations it later acquires, particularly after Descartes and in contemporary philosophy of mind. King emphasizes that in none of these early uses does *sensatio* refer to the intrinsic or phenomenal aspects of sensation. This terminological analysis indicates that medieval thinkers did not grapple with issues such as the phenomenal content of sensation or perception. Consequently, King contends that while certain philosophers, such as William of Ockham, might be seen as anticipating elements of the mind-body problem, their focus on situating sensory and perceptual processes within the bodily realm precludes any alignment with Cartesian dualism. Thus, King concludes, the mind-body problem as it is understood in modern philosophy did not exist in the Middle Ages (P. King, 2007, pp. 187-205).

2. Differences Between the Terms *Soul* and *Mind*

A key aspect of the argument that the mind-body problem did not exist in antiquity, or the Middle Ages concerns *the terminological shift from "soul" to "mind" that is often attributed to Descartes*. This shift is seen as integral to the formulation of the mind-body problem. Matson, for instance, has critiqued the employment of the term "mind" in this context, citing its strong Cartesian connotations. Instead, he proposes an alternative framing of the problem. To illustrate this point, Matson draws on Feigl's two formulations of the mind-body problem.

The first formulation is a material one: "How are raw feelings related to behavioral (or neurophysiological) states?" The second is a formal version: "What is the logical relation of talk about raw feelings (in phenomenal terms, if not in phenomenal language) to talk and terms in the language of behavior (or neurophysiology)?" Matson contends that these formulations offer a higher degree of precision than traditional inquiries into the reciprocal influence of the mind and body, and the mechanisms underlying this interaction. He argues that these latter questions presuppose certain causal relationships, which cannot be addressed adequately without first solving a range of theoretical issues related to the mind (Matson, 1966, p. 93).

Matson critiques questions about the mind-body problem that assume interaction between mind and body, viewing them as inherently biased due to their reliance on causal explanations. Instead, he endorses Feigl's formulations as better suited to the problem because they avoid using the



term "mind" altogether. By focusing on the relationship between raw feelings and behavioral states, these questions circumvent the risk of imposing the concept of "mind"—a concept that arose specifically with Cartesian dualism and is central to modern mind-body discussions—onto philosophical frameworks from antiquity and the Middle Ages.

From this perspective, examining the problem in the early history of philosophy through the lens of the soul-body or mind-body dichotomy appears problematic, particularly in light of the claim that Descartes shifted the discussion in a new direction by employing the term "mind" in place of "soul." Descartes equated the soul with the mind, a shift from the classical view in which the mind was merely a part of the soul. As Descartes himself famously declared, he conceptualized the mind not as a constituent of the soul but as the thinking soul itself. This ostensibly simple terminological shift may, in fact, portend profound conceptual transformations. With Descartes, *nous* or intellect came to represent thinking or mental activity exclusively, rather than being one of many activities of the soul, as in classical philosophy. Descartes deliberately excluded automatic and mechanical bodily functions from the domain of the soul, instead restricting the term "mind" to intellectual activities. He likely chose to employ the term "mind" to avoid associations with earlier philosophical notions of the soul. In this new framework, the Aristotelian explanation that the soul, as the principle of life, governs the behaviors of non-human creatures was abandoned. Instead, Descartes argued that both the behaviors of non-human creatures and the physical and bodily functions of human beings operate mechanically, without the involvement of a soul responsible for vital functions (Wright & Potter, 2000, p. 9)

In this sense, Descartes' shift represents a radical transformation, as modern explanations for physiological processes such as digestion, respiration, excretion, and cerebral activity—rooted in medicine and neuroscience—can trace their origins to this Cartesian distinction. Although Descartes may have sought to demonstrate the immortality of the soul or spirit, he seems to have done so in alignment with Church doctrine. What he ultimately demonstrated was the immortality of the mind or intellect. For Descartes, the mind could err, but its errors were no longer considered sinful or immoral, in contrast to the traditional view in which the fallacies



of the soul carried moral or religious weight. However, assuming that the concept of the soul is subsumed under the mind does not resolve the issue entirely. It is a common but mistaken belief that Descartes used "soul" and "mind" interchangeably, with no loss of meaning. Scholars emphasizing the terminological distinction between "soul" and "mind" argue that Descartes was acutely aware of this difference. He was the first philosopher to explicitly reject the conceptual baggage associated with the term "soul" and replace it with the radically new concept of the "mind" and its fundamental attributes (MacDonald, 2003, pp. 1-2), (Martin & Barresi, 2006, pp. 126-131), (Broadie, 2007, pp. 101-106), (Hatfield, 2008, pp. 1-25), (De Boer, 2019, pp. 208-209), (Pasnau, 2016, pp. 3-20).

3. *Cartesian Dualism as the Sole Paradigm of the Mind-Body Problem*

A key argument for asserting that the mind-body problem did not emerge in antiquity, or the Middle Ages *is the notion that this problem is uniquely associated with Cartesian dualism*. According to this view, philosophers from the ancient-Hellenistic period or the Middle Ages did not encounter such a problem. Matson's analysis predominantly engages with Aristotle, while King examines figures such as Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, John Buridan, and William of Ockham. In Matson's work, the focus is on materialist philosophers of antiquity and those, like Aristotle, who conceptualized the relationship between body and soul, senses, and intellect as inherently interconnected. However, Matson does not evaluate the views of Plato and Plotinus, probably because they are counterexamples to his own interpretation.

King, by contrast, demonstrates a more nuanced approach, acknowledging that figures such as Plato and Augustine may have influenced the early formation of the mind-body problem. Nonetheless, he contends that Platonic dualism was not dominant during the medieval period, and thus did not significantly impact medieval philosophical thought. King further argues that medieval Christian philosophers, unlike some of their Greek predecessors, were doctrinally committed to the notion of distinct human souls, which aligns with a soul-body dualism that might have paved the way toward mind-body dualism. Despite this, King maintains that medieval philosophers, akin to Matson's perspective, associated the mind-body



problem with issues of sensation and perception being attributed or not attributed to the body. Consequently, he concludes that medieval thought did not engage with a mind-body problem akin to Cartesian dualism, thereby reinforcing the idea that Cartesian dualism represents a distinct and unprecedented formulation of the problem (King, 2007, pp. 187-188, 199-205).

The description of the three claims outlined here and the argument that Descartes' philosophy represents a significant departure from preceding traditions may prompt skepticism regarding attempts to trace the historical development of the mind-body problem before Descartes. Does highlighting these transformations initiated by Descartes imply undermining the historical continuity of the problem? This article contends that such a conclusion is not warranted. Rather than viewing Descartes' innovations as severing the philosophical lineage, we must consider whether Descartes was merely enacting a radical shift or if he was engaging with a perennial mind-body problem that had been unresolved in previous philosophical traditions and continues to be unresolved today. The second part of this article will explore these questions in depth, assessing whether Descartes' contributions reflect a genuine discontinuity or if they signify a continuation of an enduring philosophical challenge.

II. Sensation and Perception, Nous/Intellect-Body Relationship, and Non-Cartesian Dualisms in the Ancient-Hellenistic Period and the Middle Ages

Scholars who assert that the Cartesian mind-body problem is distinct from the soul-body problem in the ancient-Hellenistic and medieval periods advance three principal arguments. To address these claims, it is crucial to investigate whether alternative positions in the ancient-Hellenistic period or the Middle Ages might challenge these assertions. Specifically, we need to examine whether there were views in these earlier periods that integrated sensation and perception not solely within the sensory faculties of the soul, but also as part of the rational or intellectual faculty. Were there perspectives in these periods that did not regard sensation and perception as activities independent of rational judgment, but rather as aspects of intellectual activity, thus aligning them with the intellect rather than the soul, as seen in Cartesian dualism?



Additionally, it is important to question whether the criteria used to define the mind-body problem in Cartesian terms are applicable universally. Are the criteria for understanding the mind-body problem specific to Cartesian dualism, or can they be expanded to encompass a broader range of philosophical issues? If terminological differences between the concepts of "soul" and "mind," or distinctions related to sensation, are seen as barriers to viewing the mind-body problem as a continuous thread from early philosophical traditions to contemporary discussions, what alternative criteria might facilitate such a broader interpretation?

Lastly, assuming the framework proposed in the previous points is valid, it is necessary to explore whether there are non-Cartesian dualisms addressing dualistic issues comparable to the mind-body problem post-Descartes within the ancient-Hellenistic and medieval periods. Can we identify approaches from these earlier periods that engage with a broader mind-body problem beyond the confines of Cartesian dualism? The forthcoming section of this article will address these questions and contest the three primary claims discussed in the first part of the article.

1. The Role of the *Soul* in the Process of *Sensation* and *Perception*

Matson and King have proposed that, in contrast to the prevailing view in antiquity of a general distinction between the soul and body, activities such as sensation and perception were situated at the bodily level, whereas Descartes uniquely associated these activities with the mind. According to their argument, the concept of sensation as belonging to the body, alongside the absence of concerns regarding phenomenal content—a core issue in contemporary philosophy of mind—supports their claim.

However, the presence of Platonic views that can be interpreted as forms of dualism, as well as specific Platonic perspectives on sensation and perception, challenge the radical nature of Matson and King's assertions. The Platonic tradition, with its nuanced understanding of dualistic elements, complicates the claim that ancient and medieval thinkers did not grapple with issues related to the phenomenal content of sensation. Furthermore, the philosophical contributions of medieval figures such as Ibn Sīnā, whose thought is influenced by both Platonic and Aristotelian traditions, demonstrate a sophisticated engagement with the relationship between sensory and rational faculties. This engagement undermines the



assertion that ancient and medieval thinkers lacked a nuanced approach to sensation and perception, thereby providing significant counterpoints to Matson and King's arguments.

A comprehensive analysis of the problem of sensation and perception in ancient or medieval philosophy exceeds the scope of this article. Nonetheless, a general examination reveals that a significant controversy concerns the relationship between sensation and perception and their connection to intellect and rational judgment. In non-Aristotelian approaches to the soul-body relationship from antiquity and the Middle Ages, the distinction between sensation and perception as belonging to the body and thinking as pertaining to the intellect was not sufficiently sharp to entirely separate these processes from intellectual functions. Amongst the various schools of thought that emerged during this period, notably Platonic, Plotinian, and Stoic philosophies, there is a recurring emphasis on the interplay between sensation, perception, judgment, attention, and reflective awareness. These traditions suggest that rational judgment accompanies the processes of sensation and perception. Thus, Matson and King's assertion that sensory and perceptual processes in antiquity and the Middle Ages were entirely independent of the intellect is contentious, especially when considering the contributions of Plato, Plotinus, and their followers.

One pertinent debate in ancient and medieval discussions of sensation and perception involves the problem of psychophysical interaction. Late antique Platonists, following Alcibiades, proposed that bodily organs and parts serve as instruments of the immaterial rational soul. Additionally, Stoic theories of perception emphasize that understanding external appearances requires inner reflection and reasoning. Plotinus characterized perception as a judgment rendered by the soul under the influence of the sensory system. Augustine integrated the notion that sensible forms influence the sense organs with the idea that perception is an act of the soul's attention, asserting that in vision, the soul's active intention directs the process. Similarly, Aristotle's Neo-Platonist commentators frequently noted that the reception of forms is crucial for perception, but they often identified perception with rational judgment (Tuominen, 2014, pp. 52-54).

The medieval period saw a continuation of the ancient theories of sensation and perception that had been discussed above. Medieval discussions



on these topics were significantly influenced by Ibn Sīnā, who adhered to the Neo-Platonic notion of the soul as an active perceiver employing material instruments—a concept that was further disseminated in the Middle Ages through the works of Augustine. Augustine's Neo-Platonic followers similarly viewed perception as an active process rather than a passive reception. They maintained that perceptions involve the apprehension of physiological changes and their causes, and that the content of perceptions, as formulated by the soul, accurately reflects external objects without relying on external causality (Knuittila & Karkkainen, 2014, pp. 61-62). Robert Kilwardby's work exemplifies an attempt to reconcile Aristotle's view of passive perception with Augustine's notion of active perception. Kilwardby connected Aristotle's conception of perception to physiological processes, while relating Augustine's perspective to the immaterial soul's formation of accurate representations of external objects based on its attentiveness to the body. In contrast to Augustine, who emphasized the soul's activity in perception, Kilwardby more explicitly argued that the content of perception is an image shaped by the soul (Knuittila & Karkkainen, 2014, pp. 72-73).

The various emphases within medieval philosophy underscore a recognition of both facets of the perceptual process. Medieval philosophers not only analyzed the reception of perceptual qualities but also delved into the more intricate psychological processes involved in perception, employing a theoretical framework commonly known as faculty psychology. This approach aimed to clearly delineate the different faculties of the soul and to allocate specific aspects of the complex perceptual process to these faculties. Such a method facilitated a systematic examination of the distinct, well-defined processes that contribute to human and animal psychology. However, this approach also tends to produce a fragmented view, wherein perception is often considered as a separate entity from memory, estimation, and other mental processes. Consequently, modern scholars frequently discuss medieval theories of perception in isolation from theories concerning higher cognitive functions. This separation obscures the reality that a comprehensive understanding of medieval psychology of perception necessitates an integration of higher cognitive activities of the soul—such as internal senses and rational faculties—as they also contribute to



perceptual experiences. To comprehensively grasp the holistic nature of perceptual experiences, it is imperative to consider the intricate interplay of all pertinent cognitive faculties involved in perception (Toivanen, 2019, pp. 134-135), (Perler, 2008, 151-169).

This discussion also challenges Matson's claim regarding the non-existence of a mind-body problem in Ancient Greece due to difficulties in translating questions about sensation into Greek. Matson suggests that the conceptual term 'sensation' lacked a precise Greek equivalent, thus rendering the inquiry into its relation to the mind or soul problematic (Matson, 1966, p. 101). However, the crucial issue extends beyond the availability of exact Greek terms for 'sensation.' The more significant point is whether Ancient and Medieval thinkers engaged in exploring the relationship between sensory or perceptual faculties and rational faculties. When framed in this manner, there is substantial evidence demonstrating that key philosophers from both periods actively engaged with this problem.

2. The *Nous/Intellect-Body* Relationship as an Aspect of the *Mind-Body* Problem

The ambiguity in defining the mind-body problem, as highlighted by Matson and King, reflects broader uncertainties within philosophical discourse. Specifically, Matson contends that while the Greeks did entertain the concept of a mind distinct from the body, they did not engage with a mind-body problem per se, given their conceptual framework situated sensory processes squarely within the domain of the body (Matson, 1966, p. 101). However, an examination of philosophical discussions from these periods reveals that the nature of perception, consciousness, the relationship between rational faculties and the body, and intentionality—issues central to contemporary philosophy of mind—were indeed subjects of rigorous inquiry. This historical continuity underscores that the mind-body problem, often associated with Descartes, has deeper roots. For instance, Leibniz's explorations into minds and machines, Ibn Sīnā's contributions to the discourse on mind-body interactions, and Democritus's considerations on perception all signify an ongoing dialogue that precedes and transcends Cartesian thought (Copenhaver & Shields, 2019, pp. 3-6). Ancient philosophers grappled with questions about why psychological faculties manifest in various bodily locations or why certain faculties, such as the intellect,



appear to be non-corporeal. These inquiries typically revolved around two principal questions: The nature of the soul and its relationship to the body (Sisko, 2019, pp. 3-6).

Similarly, medieval philosophers, while engaging with the relationship between the human soul, God, the material world, and the body, addressed problems central to the mind-body discourse. These include: 1) The challenge of explaining how distinct substances (mind and body) interact as efficient causes; 2) The problem of reconciling the mind and body within the unity of a single human being; 3) The question of whether sensations or sensory ideas can exist independently of the body, and if so, how; and 4) The issue of integrating efficient causality with material and divine causality in explaining the interactions between the physical and mental realms (Lagerlund, 2007, pp. 2-3).

When examining contemporary issues within the philosophy of mind, the focus often centers on the nature and attributes of mental phenomena. Key questions include: What does it mean for an entity to have a mind? What conditions must be met to attribute 'mind' to a living being or system? Is there a fundamental characteristic that differentiates mental phenomena from non-mental or purely physical phenomena? Additionally, the relationship between mental and physical phenomena, or between minds and bodies, is a crucial area of inquiry. This encompasses the exploration of mental causality—how mental states influence or are related to physical states (Kim, 2011, pp. 1-5), (Heil, 2004, pp. 1-4), see also (Chisholm, 1978), (McGinn, 1989). The challenge lies in explaining the interaction between what is sometimes referred to as the "psychic instrument" (the mental or cognitive aspects) and the physical or material structure of the body. This fundamental problem of the soul-body or mind-body relationship concerns how these two aspects are connected and influence each other. Therefore, confining the mind-body problem solely to issues of sensation while neglecting the broader debates about thought and intellect from antiquity through the Middle Ages limits our understanding and obscures the universal nature of the consciousness problem (Chalmers, 2020, pp. 3-4).

In the first section of this article, we examined contemporary assertions that René Descartes introduced a radically novel interpretation of the mind-body relationship, distinct from the ancient-Hellenistic and



medieval soul-body relationship, through his use of the term "mind" as opposed to "soul." However, alternative perspectives suggest that such terminological distinctions do not preclude the existence of significant continuities in the philosophical discourse. In this point of view, Descartes is presented not as a philosopher who merely cancelled everything that preceded him, but as someone who articulated a problem inherited from Aristotle, which philosophers such as Ibn Sīnā, Ibn Rushd and Thomas Aquinas tried to solve in the Middle Ages, but which could not be solved completely (Ariew, 1992, pp. 58-81), (Crane & Patterson, 2000, pp. 4-7), (Anstey, 2000, pp. 240-241), (Metzinger, 2005, p. 57), (Lagerlund, 2007, pp. 1-12), (Caston, 2012, pp. 316-317), (Pasnau, 2016, pp. 1-6), (Jaworski, 2019, p. 179), (Coyle, 2019).

When analyzed in this context, it becomes evident that the view of the mind-body problem as solely emerging with Cartesian dualism is contested by Descartes himself. He defends his use of the term "mind" by stating: "I, by contrast, recognizing that the principle by which we are nourished is entirely distinct in kind from that by which we think, have said that the term 'soul,' when it is used to refer to both these principles, is ambiguous. If we are to take 'soul' in its special sense, as the first actuality or principal form of a human being, then the term must be understood to apply only to the principle by which we think; and to avoid ambiguity I have generally used the term 'mind' for this" (Pasnau, 2016, p. 4).

In introducing the term "mind," René Descartes was not conceptualizing an entirely novel idea but rather rearticulating a concept with which earlier philosophers were already familiar, such as nous or intellect, which functioned as the principle of thought. Consequently, while the mind-body problem may not align precisely with the soul-body problem as conceived in Antiquity or the Middle Ages, it bears a significant resemblance to the nous/intellect-body problem. Examining the discourse on the relationship, interaction, and unity between disparate entities from antiquity to the contemporary period reveals that the problem of dualism persists, despite changes in terminological frameworks. Although Descartes' notion of the mind diverges from the ancient and medieval conceptions of the soul articulated by philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and Ibn Sīnā, it aligns with their concept of intellect. If we broaden our perspective



beyond mere terminological differences or specific issues such as sensation, and instead focus on the enduring problematic continuity, we observe that various forms of dualism—whether soul-body or mind-body—continue to surface throughout the history of philosophy. In contemporary discourse, this is reflected in discussions about mental qualities, states, and properties versus physical qualities, states, and properties, as well as the relationship between phenomenal consciousness and physical structures. From the early periods of philosophical thought to the present, philosophers have addressed perennial questions concerning the soul, such as whether it exists, whether it serves as the source of life or mind, whether it is material or immortal, whether it can be separated from the self or person, the criteria for individual identity, differences between animal and human souls, and the necessity of the concept of soul for understanding humanity (Wright & Potter, 2000, p. 7), (Crabbe, 2001, pp. 1-3), (Evans & Frankish, 2009, pp. 1-29), (Pasnau, 2012, pp. 492-494), (Long, 2015, pp. 1-5), (Ostenfeld, 2018, pp. 9-18), (Copenhaver & Shields, 2019, pp. x-xv), (Sisko, 2019, 1-22), (Schmid, 2019, p. 5).

Thus, even if the mind can be explicated solely in physical terms and Cartesian dualism is refuted, the relationship between the conscious mind and the unconscious body remains a fundamental issue that warrants philosophical inquiry (De Boer, 2019, p. 207). This assertion is substantiated by the diverse range of theories—ranging from materialist or monist approaches to Cartesian dualism—that have sought to address the problem of dualism through the various terminological, scientific, empirical, and experimental tools available to their respective eras. The enduring nature of philosophical questions, which often elude complete resolution yet persist over time, is evidenced by the continuous engagement with the soul/mind-body problem. This problem has been a subject of active debate since the earliest periods of philosophical thought and continues to be a significant topic of discussion in contemporary philosophy. The enduring nature of this problem, coupled with the ability to offer both affirmative and negative responses to the question of whether it is ultimately solvable, underscores its significance as a robust philosophical challenge rather than a purely scientific or empirical one (McGinn, 1989, p. 366).



3. *Non-Cartesian Dualisms in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*

Scholars such as Matson and King have posited that the mind-body problem is a construct of Cartesian dualism and that Ancient-Hellenistic and Medieval philosophers did not engage with such a problem. However, the issue of the mind-body relationship is a persistent and universal concern that seeks to understand and elucidate how mental phenomena—such as thoughts, feelings, and perceptions—integrate with the natural world. This includes explaining how non-conscious, physical components and their interactions give rise to complex conscious states and experiences (Jaworski, 2019, p. 179). While scientific and empirical research continues to advance our understanding of certain aspects of this problem, such as consciousness and qualia, significant issues remain unresolved. The dualities that were grappled with in antiquity and the Middle Ages persist into modern and contemporary discussions. Consequently, when defining the mind-body problem, we encounter a spectrum of approaches ranging from dualist to materialist theories, each attempting to address the relationships and interactions between mental and physical structures across different historical periods. If the mind-body problem were solely a post-Cartesian development, we would not observe the diversity of approaches to the intellect-body relationship that emerged prior to Descartes. However, the problem has spurred a variety of philosophical positions from the classical period to the present day. Despite the differences in detail and proposed solutions between ancient and contemporary approaches, they share a common essence in addressing the fundamental nature of the problem.

Historically, approaches to the soul-body relationship have been broadly categorized into monist and dualist frameworks (Sisko, 2019, pp. 6-8), (Crane & Patterson, 2000, p. 2), (T. M. Robinson, 2000, pp. 37-56), (MacDonald, 2003, 37-204), (Lagerlund, 2004, pp. 370-371), (Martin & Barresi, 2006, pp. 9-109), (Rapp, 2006, pp. 187-208), (Pluta, 2007, pp. 149-167), (Lorenz, 2009), (Sharples, 2009, pp. 155-166), (Long, 2015, pp. 88-124), (Nawar, 2016, pp. 25-37), (Ostenfeld, 2018, pp. 9-71), (Masi & Verde, 2019, pp. 236-257). In contemporary philosophy of mind, these approaches are often divided into dualist theories on one side and monist or materialist theories on the other (Heil, 2004, pp. 1-12), (Revonsuo, 2010, pp. 3-69), (Kim, 2011, pp. 1-27), (Dempsey, 2009, pp. 43-61), (Wolfe & van Esveld,



2014, pp. 371-421), (Lapointe, 2018, pp. 1-22), (Copenhaver, 2019, pp. 1-15), (Kind, 2019a, pp. 1-20), (Kind, 2019b, pp. 52-72).

These dualist and materialist theories often address whether states such as pain, love, and emotion should be interpreted as purely mental or spiritual phenomena, or as purely physical or bodily states. This dichotomy, with substance dualism on one end and eliminative or reductive materialism on the other, has generated sharp criticisms from proponents of both sides, leading to the development of intermediate positions. For instance, alongside Platonism or Cartesian dualism, there exist forms of dualism such as property dualism or naturalist dualism, which, while not substance dualism, still uphold a dualistic framework. Similarly, materialist approaches also encompass intermediate forms that navigate between reductive and eliminative stances.

The juxtaposition of various philosophical perspectives across different historical periods within the framework of the mind-body problem generates the resistance observed in this discussion. This resistance frequently originates from the supposition that particular issues are exclusive to specific philosophers or eras. A pivotal concept in the mind-body problem is that of the soul or mind. Approaches that postulate the existence of two distinct substances—one material and the other immaterial—and seek to elucidate their unity and interaction, whether causal or otherwise, as well as to account for our psychological inner reality in terms that transcend the physical, bodily, and material, can be classified as substance dualism. For analytical purposes, we may set aside the distinctions between intermediate forms of dualism, such as material/material dualism and property dualism. Conversely, approaches that reject the notion of two distinct substances, material and immaterial, and endeavor to explain our psychological inner reality solely in physical, material, and bodily terms from a monist perspective, are categorized as materialism. Materialist views, which consider humans, animals, and plants as complex machines and regard mental phenomena as mere mechanical interactions among material components, face the challenge of accounting for how consciousness and subjective experience emerge in a profoundly material world. Even within a materialist or physicalist framework, the mind-body problem persists, as such positions must address the question of how physical entities can



possess conscious perspectives and subjectivity. Consequently, materialists and physicalists are compelled to confront the predicament of elucidating the existence of consciousness within the confines of the material domain (Crane & Patterson, 2000, p. 8), (De Boer, 2019, pp. 207-208).

Thus, adopting a more inclusive definition of the mind-body problem necessitates moving beyond a simplistic association of dualism exclusively with Cartesian dualism. Instead, it requires recognizing the existence of various non-Cartesian forms of dualism that predate Descartes and sought to address this issue. Philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Augustine, Ibn Sīnā, Thomas Aquinas, John Peter Olivi, John Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, John Buridan, and Marsilio Ficino exemplify this broader spectrum of dualistic thought. Their contributions challenge the reductionist view that attributes the mind-body problem solely to Descartes and his successors. Moreover, when we examine the mind-body problem within a more comprehensive framework, it becomes evident that the problem of duality extends beyond non-Cartesian dualisms. Evidence from pre-Descartes materialist philosophers and those who adhered to non-dualist interpretations of the soul-body relationship indicates that the problem of duality was a subject of substantial debate in antiquity and the Middle Ages. This broader perspective underscores the persistence and complexity of the mind-body problem across different philosophical traditions and periods.

Conclusion

In this article, firstly, the background of the contemporary debate about the origins of the mind-body problem in Antiquity and the Middle Ages is presented. Then, centered on the articles by Wallace Matson and Peter King, the main claims and justifications of the position that the mind-body problem did not exist in Antiquity and the Middle Ages are identified and counterarguments are put forward. Matson and King argue that in antiquity and the Middle Ages, sensation and perception were attributed to the body, whereas thinking and rational activity were associated with the rational soul. In this framework, Descartes is depicted as having redefined sensation as a function of the mind, alongside rational thought and judgement. However, this characterization overlooks the nuanced ways in which sensation and perception were connected to the



rational soul in earlier philosophical traditions. Notably, Platonic and Plotinian philosophers did not treat sensation and perception as merely bodily processes. Instead, they emphasized that these processes involved the rational activities of the soul, such as rational judgement, attention, and reflexive awareness. Therefore, Matson and King's claim that sensation was solely a bodily function in antiquity and the Middle Ages fails to account for the complex interplay between sensory processes and the rational soul as depicted by these philosophers.

The second claim posited is that the concepts of soul in Ancient and Medieval philosophy and the concept of mind in Cartesian and contemporary contexts are fundamentally dissimilar. Consequently, it is argued that the ancient and medieval periods did not encompass a mind-body problem in the modern sense. This assertion obscures the fact that the phenomena addressed as "mind-body" issues in contemporary discourse are fundamentally analogous to those examined as "soul-body" issues in earlier periods. It is argued that an excessive focus on terminological differences, particularly in relation to core philosophical issues such as the mind-body problem, can impede a proper understanding of the historical development of these concepts. A more pertinent question is to identify the essential human states conceptualized by Ancient and Medieval philosophers as the soul, and by modern and contemporary philosophers as the mind. If there exists an immaterial and immortal entity—such as the nous, intellect, or mind—that is irreducible to sensory, bodily, and physical attributes, and if there is a corresponding problem regarding its relationship to material, physical, concrete, and sensory entities denoted by the term body, then a fundamental mind-body problem persists despite terminological differences. Thus, the issue of whether sensation is attributed to the body or to the rational soul or mind, as debated by Matson and King, should be viewed as a secondary concern in the broader context of the enduring mind-body problem.

Matson and King's third claim exhibits two significant problems. First, they assert that there was no mind-body problem in Antiquity or the Middle Ages, based on an interpretation of philosophers such as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. This assertion, irrespective of the validity of their claims regarding these figures, largely neglects the dualist perspectives of



philosophers like Plato and Plotinus. While it is indeed possible to critique whether Aristotle's or other Ancient-Hellenistic or medieval accounts of the soul-body relationship align with modern or contemporary theories of the mind-body problem, such critiques do not render comparative analysis between Ancient or Medieval theories and contemporary theories inherently flawed. On the contrary, comparing the soul-body theories of Ancient or Medieval philosophers with modern mind-body theories can illuminate both similarities and differences. Such comparisons remain valuable as long as the objective is not to reduce historical approaches to contemporary frameworks but to elucidate the continuity and evolution of the mind-body problem across different philosophical traditions. Second, Matson and King's identification of the mind-body problem exclusively with Cartesian dualism is problematic. Cartesian dualism represents merely one approach to addressing the relationship between the material body and the immaterial mind or soul. Asserting that there was no Cartesian mind-body problem in antiquity and the Middle Ages does not necessarily imply that the mind-body problem, in a broader sense, was absent in these periods. Furthermore, the persistence of diverse approaches—ranging from various forms of dualism to materialist and idealist frameworks—that address the mind-body relationship in contemporary philosophy further underscores the inadequacy of reducing the mind-body problem solely to Cartesian dualism.

W. Jaworski, speaking of the little value philosophers of mind place on Aristotelian psychology on the grounds that it is a theory already familiar to specialists, had asked why we should turn to Aristotle, a figure separated from us in time and space, who wrote in an ancient language that is difficult to decipher both in translation and in the original, who lived before the scientific revolution and whose ideas on many subjects have been proven wrong by the advanced methods of studying the natural world introduced by the revolution. This question can be extended beyond Aristotle to encompass other pre-scientific revolution philosophers. Despite the advances in technology, empirical research, and scientific methodologies, the issue of duality, encapsulated by the mind-body problem, remains unresolved. When approaching this issue as a philosophical problem rather than solely a technological or empirical one, it becomes evident that we



engage with fundamentally similar concerns as those addressed by philosophers from various historical epochs. As Aristotle himself remarked, “here and elsewhere, we do not gain the best insight until we see how things develop from the beginning.” Aristotle was lucky. Because he benefited from a rich and relatively short-lived philosophical heritage, allowing him to perceive problems in their nascent stages. In contrast, we are not so lucky as contemporary scholars face the challenge of navigating a philosophical tradition that extends two millennia beyond Aristotle, often grappling with similar foundational issues within an evolved and more complex framework.

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Öz: Bu makale felsefe tarihinin erken dönemlerinde nefis-beden ilişkisi, Descartes ve sonrasında ise zihin-beden ilişkisi olarak incelenen problem arasındaki benzerlik ve farklılıklara dair çağdaş literatür üzerinden takip edilebilecek tartışmalara bir reaksiyon göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda makalenin ilk kısmında, Antik dönem ya da Orta Çağ filozoflarında nefis-beden ilişkisi olarak incelenen problemin Descartes'tan sonra zihin-beden problemi olarak adlandırılan problemle aynı problem olmadığını savunan araştırmacıların temel iddiaları ortaya konulacaktır. Makalenin ikinci kısmında ise bu araştırmacıların iddiaları eleştirilecek ve Antik-Helenistik dönemde ve Orta Çağdaki nefis-beden ilişkisi problemiyle modern ve çağdaş dönemdeki zihin-beden ilişkisi problemi arasındaki benzerlikler gösterilmeye çalışılacaktır. Makale nefis-beden veya zihin-beden problemi ile bu problemi çözmek amacıyla farklı dönemlerde geliştirilen



yaklaşımların problematik bir süreklilik içinde dikkate alınabileceğini ve antik dönemden çağdaş döneme kadar farklı terminolojilerle de olsa takip edebilecek bir ikilik probleminin olduğunun gösterilebileceğini iddia etmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Antik dönem, Orta Çağ, modern ve çağdaş dönem, nefis-be-den ilişkisi, zihin-beden ilişkisi.

