REPLY TO BURGOS (2015)

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I appreciate the detailed attention Dr. Burgos has given my comments about Cartesian materialism in Burgos (2015), and I think he has some interesting things to say. However, he has made an important misinterpretation of my position, which creates an imaginary distance between us. Burgos quotes and replies to me in the following passage:

If the brain-body distinction is an “essential corollary of the mind-body distinction,” as the author claims, how could the former be kept without the latter? Something is amiss here: Either modern physicalists are incoherent for keeping the brain-body distinction without the mind-body distinction or the brain-body distinction is not really an “essential corollary” of the mind-body distinction (Burgos, 2015, p. 14).

The first confusion is that I am not claiming that the brain-body distinction is an essential corollary of the mind-body distinction. I am only saying that Descartes apparently believed this. However, even if I did agree with Descartes that the brain-body distinction is an “essential corollary of the mind-body distinction,” there is serious logical confusion in thinking that this would imply that the former cannot be kept without the latter. It only implies that the latter cannot be kept without the former. To conflate these two claims is to commit what Burgos calls "the fallacy of the converse" (Burgos 2016 p. 18). I am only saying that (Descartes') mind-body distinction implies a brain-body distinction. I am not saying the brain-body distinction implies a mind-body distinction. On the contrary, my point is that one can separate the brain-body and mind-body distinction, and that this is precisely what is done by the mind-brain identity theory (MBI).

Nor am I claiming that the MBI is logically incoherent because it makes this separation. I say several times in Rockwell 2005 that the MBI is an empirical possibility, so I acknowledge that the idea contains no logical contradictions. All I am claiming is that there is important evidence that it is not the only empirical possibility that deserves to be taken seriously. Most of chapters 2,3,8,9 and 10, are devoted to presenting some of that evidence, as are the Andy Clark books Being There and Supersizing the Mind. Nowhere do I say or imply that "Cartesian dualism is essentially the brain-body distinction." They are two completely different and fully separable distinctions.
At one point Burgos says that the brain-body distinction is a duality but not a dualism. I am fully OK with that semantic refinement. They are completely different, though closely interacting, dualities, and the only reason to apply the adjective "Cartesian" to both is that Descartes created both. My point is only that those people who have rejected Cartesian dualism ought to be willing to consider rejecting Cartesian materialism as well. The arguments against the two are very different, however. Cartesian materialism (a.k.a. the MBI) is an empirical theory, not a philosophical one, and there is no reason to assume Descartes was any more correct about that theory then he was about the function of the pineal gland. My book makes almost no arguments against Cartesian dualism, because that is well-worn territory. It is mostly concerned with criticizing Cartesian materialism.

Burgos could reply that even if I rejected the claim that the brain-body distinction necessarily implied Cartesian dualism, I was still explicitly claiming that the entailment went the other way i.e. that the brain/body distinction is an "essential corollary" of Cartesian dualism. My careless use of the phrase "essential corollary" was little more than a rhetorical flourish, whose implications I did not fully think out. In a loose sense, the brain/body distinction was "necessary" for Descartes theory, because he had no other way of answering Princess Elizabeth's questions about mind/body interaction. Even that loose sense of "necessary" overstates the case, because as Burgos and I both point out, Descartes' answer is incoherent. The mind can't be both non-spatial and connected to a point in the brain. Nevertheless, Descartes can't be accused of claiming that it is a necessary truth of logic that the mind interacts with the body through the brain. I think he believed that it was an empirical fact he discovered in the laboratory. I don't think he would've had any problems acknowledging that, prior to his research, it would've been coherent to believe the mind interacted with the body through some other organs, perhaps the heart. (In fact, he mentions that possibility, and dismisses it).

Burgos is also mistaken when he implies there is equivocation or weaseling in Dewey's use of the word "dualism". Dewey clearly acknowledges that he is talking about two different kinds of dualism when he says that one dualism replaces the other. If Burgos wants to say that one of these distinctions is a dualism and the other only a duality, I think Dewey would have had as little problem with that refinement as I do. Our point is only that this duality is an interesting and important one that ought to be questioned, because it can cause significant problems if it is unthinkingly taken for granted. The mind-brain duality does not suffer from all of the problems that bedevil substance dualism. Nevertheless, it has problems of its own: problems which are mostly empirical, not logical. It is those empirical problems which are the subject of my book and most other books that criticize what Burgos calls internalism. Consequently, although I am convinced by Burgos' arguments that substance dualism and internalism are incompatible, this fact is irrelevant to the issues I am discussing in Rockwell (2005). That work is titled Neither Brain nor Ghost because I am rejecting both internalism and substance dualism.
I used Dennett's term Cartesian Materialism in Rockwell (2005) because I believe that my usage was more consistent than Dennett's. I believed, and still believe, that he should use his arguments against locating consciousness in a part of the brain to also reject the idea that consciousness is located in that part of the body we call the brain. However, Dennett's original meaning of the term, which is itself a form of internalism, was too widely spread for me to single-handedly change common usage. Consequently, in most of my later writings on this topic, I have simply used the expression mind/brain identity theory or MBI, and that is what I will do in the future. Nevertheless, I think that recalling this concept's Cartesian roots reminds us of an important insight. As I say in Rockwell 2005:

...there is no longer any reason to assume that scientific facts can be independent from either philosophical "speculations" or the unstated assumptions of what is often called "common sense." It is thus possible for a highly effective scientific theory to be built upon concepts derived from everyday thinking, which are, from a philosophical perspective, vague and garbled. If these concepts form a useful structure for gathering and organizing data, they become enshrined, garble and all, as scientific truth. It then becomes tempting for philosophers who are materialistically inclined to demand that the presuppositions that have been used for gathering this data be regarded as scientific fact, and therefore not vulnerable to philosophical questioning (Rockwell, 2005, p. xx).

Most people believe that the mind/brain identity theory is a scientific fact, rather than a philosophical assumption that was brought to the facts. Pointing out the idea's Cartesian lineage was my strategy for showing that this assumption is legitimately questionable. Burgos' point that it was not even consistent with the rest of Descartes' philosophy makes it even more questionable.

The main thesis of Rockwell 2005 is actually quite similar to the last position considered in Burgos 2016, which he calls the mind-behavior identity theory. He quotes from Rachlin: "According to behavioral identity theory, mental states are identical not to specific neural events, but to behavioral patterns" (Burgos, 2016, p. 32). The term I use is behavioral field, which is similar to "behavioral patterns". The important difference between my position and Skinnerian/Rylean behaviorism is that the word "field" indicates that I expect these patterns to be understood by means of dynamic systems theory, and not by a laundry list of Stimulus/Response connections. Most of the problems with classical behaviorism sprang from the fact that it was hostile to any kind of abstract theory. It claimed that if we took care of the facts, the theories would take care of themselves. The internalism of the Mind/brain identity theory is a step in the right direction away from this naïve atomism, but the sort of theory it provides is somewhat crude by modern scientific standards. In post-Aristotelian science, we do not understand things by positing intrinsic internal qualities. We do not, for example, think that apples fall because gravity is stuffed inside of them. Instead we comprehend the falling apple by seeing gravity as one of many forces interlocked in a dynamic
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system of tensions. Similarly, I believe that we should start comprehending the mind as a complex dynamic field that fluctuates in a brain/body/world nexus, instead of a laundry list of stimulus/response connections, or a computer program stored in the head.

References


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