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# Obviously, Descartes Did Not Run: I am, therefore I ran.

By Erin Dempsey



**I**n the *Discourse on Method*, metaphysician Rene Descartes states that the mind and body are radically separate entities which are only distantly connected through the pineal gland. Two of the most important influences on my intellectual development as a university student—my major in biology and my passion for running—have led me to question the validity of Descartes' claims.

As a biology major, I learned that the pineal gland is much less important than Descartes claimed; this small endocrine gland just regulates sleep-wake cycles. More importantly, through my experiences as a competitive runner, I have observed a fundamental, very powerful connection between the mind and body, which has caused me to reject the dualism which formed the basis of Descartes' metaphysics.

As a student in a rigorous pre-medical and philosophy honors program at the University of Scranton, I originally focused most of my time on intellectual endeavors. When I integrated running into my daily routine during my second year at the university, I believed that this physical activity would provide the perfect

complement to my studies. Running, I believed, would serve as my "mental break" for the day because my attention would be focused solely upon the movements of my body rather than the thoughts of my mind. As I strove to quicken my pace and become a better runner, however, I realized that competitive running was ultimately a mental activity.

The Philadelphia Distance Run Half Marathon, which I ran in September 2007, best exemplifies how this intensely physical activity was fundamentally rooted in my mental state. The 13.1 mile race began well, but as I reached mile 10 of the race, I was in excruciating pain. My feet felt numb, my entire body ached, and every step hurt more than the last. My mental motivation to complete the race, however, allowed me to overcome these signals of pain from my body urging me to stop or slow down. I reminded myself that I had properly conditioned myself for this race and that my current pain was no greater than the pain that I had experienced during previous training runs. My mental disposition, therefore, allowed me to rationalize and rise above my physical pain so that I could finish the race.

Just as my mental state was crucial to my physical excellence as a runner, my experiences as a runner have also greatly aided my ability to excel mentally. I have primarily experienced this effect by observing

the difference in my mental state following runs. Typically, I run in the morning before my classes begin.

Early morning classes, poor weather conditions, or tests for which to study, however, sometimes postpone my runs until later in the day after my classes have ended. On those days in which I do not run in the morning, I notice a radical change in my mental state. The philosophy and biology lectures that I understood perfectly the previous day become much more difficult to pay attention to and comprehend. I soon realized that my lack of physical activity in the morning was the cause. The physical activity of my body, therefore, had a profound, very beneficial effect on my mental state. I even joke that running is my substitute for morning coffee—it mentally prepares me for the day ahead.

My experiences as a runner, therefore, have led me to conclude that not only was Descartes not a runner (or else he would have reached the same metaphysical conclusions that I have!) but also that dualism is an erroneous philosophy. The mind and the body are inextricably linked, even in the activities of running and learning which appear to be solely based in physical and mental states, respectively. ■

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