

Substance Monism

Materialism – Hobbes

1. Corpuscularianism: In order to understand Hobbes' Monist view on substances, it is necessary to understand that he was coming out of the Corpuscularian tradition. The Corpuscularian theory proposes that everything is composed of tiny material atoms, or "corpuscles". Everything that we observe can be explained in terms of these corpuscles. All events are just a matter of the size, shape, and motion/rest of bits of matter, which move around and collide with one another.

Descartes accepted a Corpuscularian view, but only for the extended, or material world. However, he ALSO accepted the existence of a non-extended, immaterial world of thought. Hobbes is merely the extension of Corpuscularianism to the extreme, saying that ALL that exists are material corpuscles. So, Hobbes' view is a form of Monism, or the view that there is only one sort of substance in the world; namely, a material one.

2. Materialism: Hobbes gives several reasons for rejecting the existence of immaterial substances. First, Hobbes understands that by "real" we just MEAN "located somewhere in the universe." But, whatever is located somewhere must be corporeal, since incorporeal things are not located anywhere. He concludes that "incorporeal" might as well just mean "non-existent."

In particular, for the soul, there is the question of how a soul inhabits a body. The soul is supposed to be immaterial, non-extended, and non-located, or "incapable of place"—and yet, somehow, the soul is said to be located in and "inhabit" the body.

Furthermore, there is the question of how the outside world—e.g., pain—affects the soul (and how the soul affects the body).

Finally, Hobbes believes that the mechanistic theory of Corpuscularianism is more than adequate for explaining everything that we observe. Tiny particles strike our eyes when we see things, for instance, stimulating nerves that then send particles up to the brain. In the brain, we find that the experience of sight and color is nothing more than the stimulation of tiny particles there. No further explanation is needed.

3. Objections: There were many objections against Hobbes. For one, it was thought that matter by itself was inert; that is, it could not move by itself. In order to explain motion, many thought it was necessary to postulate MINDS in order to account for motion. But, the primary objection against Hobbes was that his view was heretical and led to atheism. For, if ALL things are corporeal (made of matter), then even GOD must be corporeal. And that is absurd.

Hobbes responds that we should have no problem with this result. God is located in the world—in our hearts, in churches, and everywhere—therefore, He must be material. Though, Hobbes said, He is the “subtlest” (or sparsest) material object in existence.

Idealism – Berkeley

Another form of Monism, you may recall, is Berkeleyan Idealism. This is the view that material substances do not exist; rather, only MINDS exist.

He offered several reasons for this. To review, he said that “to be is to be perceived.” That is, all that exists must be perceived. It is, in fact, impossible to conceive of an existing thing that is NOT perceived—for, merely by attempting to conceive of it, you are in fact perceiving it.

But, all things that are perceived are ideas—that is, mental objects in the mind. It follows that nothing exists that is not a mental object. That is, all that exists is mental, or immaterial. Therefore, material bodies do not exist.

If there WERE material bodies, they would be completely unperceived (which is a contradiction in itself). If they were somehow possible, though, they would be completely mysterious and unnecessary. They are unnecessary because they serve no purpose. There are no material objects required in order for you to experience a world that looks as if it has material objects in it. Those objects COULDN'T serve any purpose. Therefore, it is better to do without them.

In this way, Berkeley has no Mind-Body Problem. There is no need to explain the interaction between bodies and minds because there ARE NO BODIES.

Dual Aspectism - Spinoza

1. God or Nature: Spinoza also solves the Mind-Body Problem by rejecting Dualism. For Spinoza, there is no need to explain how two different sorts of substances with fundamentally different natures—i.e., matter and mind (body and soul)—are capable of interacting with one another. This is because there is only one sort of substance, and that substance is an infinite one, called “God” or “Nature.”

2. The argument for Monism: Spinoza's basic approach is (1) to get to the conclusion that a substance must be self-caused. From there, he argues (2) that substances must be infinite; and furthermore, there can only be one infinite thing. Step (1) is reached in one of two ways. Here is one way (1A):

1. If two substances differ, then they must differ either in (a) attribute, or (b) affection (from proposition 4).
2. If two substances differ in attribute, then they are not the same type of substance (e.g., if body's attribute is extension, and mind's attribute is thought, these are two different TYPES of substances) (from proposition 5).
3. If two substances differ in affection, then the substances themselves are not really shown to differ, since substances are independent of and prior to their affections (from proposition 5).
4. Therefore, if there exists more than one substance, they are all different in type; i.e., there cannot be more than one substance of each type (e.g., there can only be one body, and there can only be one mind).
5. But, everything has a cause, either external or internal (from axiom 1).
6. But, no one type of substance can be the cause of any other type of substance, since they have nothing in common (from proposition 3).
7. Therefore, all substances have an internal cause; i.e., each substance must be caused by itself.

Here is another way (1B):

1. A substance is something that exists independently of anything else (from definition 3).
2. Anything that is caused by something external to itself is not something that exists independently; i.e., is not a substance (from proposition 7).
3. Therefore, no substance has an external cause.
4. But, everything has a cause, either external or internal (from axiom 1).
5. Therefore, all substances have an internal cause; i.e., each substance must be caused by itself.

From the above arguments, Spinoza argues to the conclusion in one of two ways. Here is one way (2A):

1. All substances are self-caused (from above).
2. But, no finite thing can be its own cause (from proposition 8).
3. Therefore any substance must be non-finite; i.e., infinite.
4. But, there cannot be more than one infinite thing (from proposition 14).
5. Therefore, there is only one substance, and it is infinite.

Here is another way (2B):

1. There cannot be more than one substance of each type (from above).
2. For a thing to be finite, it must be limited in some way (from proposition 8).
3. For a substance to be limited, it must either be limited by a substance of (a) the same type, or (b) another type.
4. There are not two substances of any type, so (a) is impossible.
5. A substance cannot be limited by a substance of another type, because substances of different types have nothing in common and so cannot affect each other.
6. Therefore, every substance is unlimited; i.e., infinite.
7. But, there cannot be more than one infinite thing (from proposition 14).
8. Therefore, there is only one substance, and it is infinite.

Cliff's Notes: Basically (because of the weird way that Spinoza thinks of causes), there can only be one infinite, first cause. And, (because of the weird way that Spinoza thinks of substances) no externally caused thing is a substance. So, there can only be one substance, and it is infinite.

[Some considerations: It seems that the controversial premise of the first argument is premise 3. Consider two completely identical bodies; for instance, two identical red, rubber balls. Why can't they differ? Wouldn't it be enough just for them to be in different places?

Both of the first two arguments also claim that everything has a cause. Is this true? Is it incoherent to suppose that something could be UN-caused?

In the final argument, it is supposed that only one infinite thing can exist. But, consider this: The set of even numbers is infinite. The set of odd numbers is infinite. Yet, both exist. How does Spinoza's special definition of "infinite" get around this sort of worry?]

3. Against Descartes: Notice some of the points that oppose Descartes:

First, Spinoza says that there is only one substance. This is Monism, a rejection of Dualism. Descartes was a Dualist, who believed that there were TWO distinct substances: the material (body) and the immaterial (mind).

Second, Spinoza says that substances with different attributes have nothing in common. This means that they could never cause each other, or even causally interact. This is a rejection of Interactionism. Descartes accepted Interactionism, as he believed that the mind and the body DO interact.

Third, Spinoza says that no substance has an external cause. This means that things like finite, created bodies and minds could not be substances. He writes, "if anyone asserts that substance is created, he at the same time asserts that a false idea has become true, than which nothing more absurd can be conceived." (1.8) This directly opposes Descartes, who stated that both extended and thinking substances are "created substances", and that God is the only uncreated substance (on this last point, Spinoza and Descartes are in agreement).

4. Dual-Aspectism: Spinoza concludes that there is only one substance, and it is absolutely infinite.

But, what of bodies and minds, which seem to be independently existing things? Spinoza claims that these things are NOT independent, but are all attributes of the one infinite substance. In other words, it is a mistake to call a person, or a table, or a house a "thing". Really, we are all just properties of God (or the universe). Body and mind are really just two aspects of the same thing. He writes, "the thing extended and the thinking thing are either attributes of God or affections of the attributes of God." (1.14) And later, "thinking substance and extended substance are one and the same substance, comprehended now under this attribute, now under that." (2.7)

This is extreme Monism. Only one thing exists (i.e., God), and we are all just parts of (or, strictly speaking, just aspects of) God.