

Is the Mind Distinct from the Body?

It seems like we have minds. We are constantly aware of our inner world of conscious experiences. But, is there a "mind over matter"? Are human beings really made up of "body AND soul"? That is, are our minds something over and above the mere physical material that makes up our brains?

1. Substance Dualism: Descartes thought so. Descartes believed that the existence of the immaterial mind as something distinct from the material body was intuitive, and could not be doubted (Meditation Two). "I exist" was the one certain thing, and this "I" was the thinking thing, distinct from body, of which we could NOT be certain.

When he considered bodies (the existence of which could be doubted), he found that they were inseparable from *extension*. (Recall the wax that, when melted, loses every property that it originally had except one: Being extended in space.) On the other hand, when he considered his mind (the existence of which could NOT be doubted), he found that it was inseparable from *thought*.

He concluded that there are actually TWO kinds of substances in the world; namely, he proposed that there are both mental, non-extended, immaterial thinking things AND physical, extended, material things. This is the view known as "Substance Dualism."

Substance: A "substance" is something that can exist on its own; i.e., something that does not require anything else in order to exist. Contrast this with properties like red, heavy, fast, etc. These things cannot exist on their own. They require some substance in order to exist. For instance, we might have a red *ball*, a heavy *rock*, a fast *horse*, etc. If I asked you to bring me some redness, you would only be able to bring me a red *thing*.

The Argument for Substance Dualism: In *Meditation Two*, Descartes offers something like the following argument for substance dualism:

1. I can coherently doubt the existence of body.
2. I cannot coherently doubt the existence of mind.
3. If two things are numerically identical, they must share all and only exactly the same properties.
4. Therefore, body is not numerically identical to mind (because one has the property of being doubttable, while the other lacks this property).

Objection: But, is premise 3 true? Consider someone who knows what water is, but has never heard of H₂O. Though it is true that Water= H₂O, can't this person still know, or believe, or think that water will quench her thirst, but nevertheless NOT know, or believe, or think that H₂O will quench her thirst? If premise 3 is true, then it is either the case that this difference in thought is impossible, or else water≠H₂O. But, both of those options are absurd.

To illustrate, consider the following "argument" which parodies the above:

1. Lois Lane doubts that Clark Kent can fly.
2. Lois Lane does not doubt that Superman can fly.
3. If two things are identical, they must share all of the same properties.
4. Therefore, Clark Kent is not identical to (i.e., is not the same individual as) Superman (because a property is doubted of one but not the other).

Clearly, the argument is unsound, for Clark Kent IS identical to Superman.

What is wrong with it? Answer: Premise 3 should be restricted to not include what are called "intentional" properties ("intentional" here means something like "directed towards" rather than the more common usage which means something like "on purpose"). These include properties like beliefs about, desires for, and knowledge of things. For example, if someone believes that I live in Canada, this perhaps is not strictly speaking a property of MINE; i.e., not a property that *I* have.

In Descartes's argument, the property that supposedly differs between the body and the mind is that Descartes's body has the property of 'being doubted by Descartes', while his mind lacks this property. But, perhaps this does not prove conclusively that his mind and his body are not numerically one and the same thing (just as the argument about Lois Lane clearly does not prove that Clark Kent and Superman are not the same thing).

2. The Mind-Body Problem: The prospects for Dualism look even worse once we consider a problem that arises once the Dualist accepts another claim: Namely, the claim that the mind interacts with the body, and vice versa; this view is called '**interactionism**'.

HOW do these two fundamentally different sorts of things interact? How does the **soul**—an immaterial, non-spatial, unobservable thing—affect the **body**—a material, spatial, observable thing (and vice versa)?

In physics, it is thought that all physical effects require a physical cause. But, the Dualist's claim is that, when I move my arm, it is my MIND that causes the movement. In short, the Dualist must claim that, contrary to what the scientists say, physical effects can have NON-physical causes. But how?

In the face of this problem, historically, philosophers have toyed around with giving up one of the two tenets that give rise to it; that is, they propose that we give up either Dualism or Interactionism. For those who agree that the problems that Descartes faces are insurmountable, there seem to be 3 choices available:

- (1) Dualism + NON-Interactionism: This is the view that there ARE both minds and matter, but they never interact. When you think, "Move my arm," and your arm moves, it only SEEMS like your mind caused this to happen. In reality, something else caused it to happen (e.g., laws of physics, or God). (Malbranche and Leibniz both held forms of this view in the 1600's)
- (2) Immaterial Monism: This is the view that there is only ONE sort of substance in the world, and it is NON-material. That is, *only minds exist*. So, it turns out that we don't have material bodies at all! (This was George Berkeley's view in the 1700's)
- (3) Physicalist Monism: This is the view that there is only ONE sort of substance in the world, and it is material. That is, *only matter exists*. You are nothing more than a body with a brain. What SEEMS to be an inner "mental" world of immaterial consciousness is nothing more than neurons firing. (see: Thomas Hobbes, 1600's)

Views (1) and (2) seem absolutely absurd to most people, so the trend in philosophy has been toward view (3); i.e., the view called **Physicalism**—the view that there are no such things as immaterial souls or minds, there is only physical stuff like matter and energy.

This is a "reductive" view. Physicalism takes what were THOUGHT to be TWO sorts of things and reduced one of them to the other so that there is only ONE sort of thing. Reducing mental phenomena to physical ones is certainly attractive. LOTS of reduction has already taken place in science. Heat is just molecular motion. Colors are just wavelengths of light. Lightning is just energy. Thunder is just a vibration in the air. Perhaps consciousness is just a collection of neurons and neurological events?