

Substance dualism

A substance is traditionally understood as an entity, a thing, that does not depend on another entity in order to exist. Substance dualism holds that there are two fundamentally different types of such entities – material substances, or bodies, and mental substances, or minds. It claims that minds do not depend on bodies in order to exist, e.g. that minds can exist separated from any body. People who believe that the mind is the soul, and the soul can continue to exist without a body after death, are substance dualists. If mental substance exists, it will be very unlike matter. For instance, we shall see that Descartes argues that it does not exist in space and does not have any parts.

We can contrast substance dualism with materialism, the view that there is only one sort of substance, matter. According to materialism, everything that exists either is a material thing, or it is dependent on some material thing to exist. For example, a materialist might claim that mental properties (including mental states, such as holding beliefs and mental events, such as having a thought) are properties of a person, and that a person is necessarily a material object (a body). Or again, a more contentious view, they might claim that mental properties are, in fact, properties of the brain.

REASONS FOR HOLDING THIS VIEW

Plato's arguments

In the *Phaedo*, Plato argued that death is the separation of the soul from the body. He gave two arguments for thinking that the soul could exist separately from the body.

First, he argued that souls cannot be destroyed. All unseen things are unchanging and 'simple', i.e. they don't have parts. If they don't have parts, they cannot be broken up. To destroy something is to break it into parts. And so something without parts cannot be destroyed. The soul is unchanging and simple. So it cannot be destroyed.

We can object that perhaps there are other types of destruction than breaking into parts. For example, if souls were created out of nothing, then perhaps they could be destroyed by being annihilated.

Second, Plato argued that everything comes about from its opposite. Whenever you change something, you change it from what it is into what it (currently) is not, e.g. if you paint a wall red, you change it from not-red to red. Likewise, life changes into its opposite, not-life, or death, the separation of soul and body. But to become alive is therefore also a change from not being alive. Life must come from 'death', i.e. it must be the *joining* of soul and body. So our souls must exist in another world first and then are born, or reborn, here.

We can object that there are types of change, such as 'coming into existence', which doesn't involve change from one opposite to another. If I come into existence, it is wrong to say that I change from not existing to existing. Because if I didn't exist, then I didn't have any properties at all, including that of 'not existing'. If death is the

destruction of the soul, rather than the separation of soul from body, birth could be its creation (from nothing) rather than the joining of a soul to a body.

In both these arguments, Plato assumes that souls exist. But this is exactly what we want to prove.

Descartes' knowledge argument

Plato's views on the soul were very influential, and were combined with Christian doctrine as this emerged 2000 years ago. In the seventeenth century, when Descartes lived, the view that humans are part angel, part beast was almost deemed an orthodoxy. But unlike many of his contemporaries, Descartes defended dualism not (in the first instance) on the basis of theology, but by epistemology.

In his *Meditations*, Descartes raises the question of what kind of thing he is. The question 'what am I?' can be answered by considering the question of what it is for me to exist. Descartes is trying to identify his essence, those properties which, if he lost them, would mean he was no longer what he is. (An island, for instance, must be surrounded by water. If the water dried up, joining it to the mainland, it would cease to be an island.)

He remarks that he can coherently doubt whether he has a body; after all, he only believes he has a body as a result of his perceptual experiences. However, suppose these experiences were actually hallucinations caused by an evil demon. He could be mistaken, deceived into thinking he has a body. But, he continues, he cannot doubt that he has a mind, i.e. that he thinks. He cannot doubt that he thinks, because doubting is a kind of thinking. If the demon were to make him doubt that he is thinking, that would only show that he *is* thinking. Equally, he cannot doubt that he exists: if he were to doubt that he exists, that would prove he does exist – as something that thinks.

So he knows he exists even though he doesn't know whether or not he has a body. From this Descartes concludes that it is possible for him to exist without a body. He would not necessarily cease to be himself if he ceased to have a body, but he would necessarily cease to be himself if he didn't have a mind.

This argument doesn't show that substance dualism is true, because it doesn't show that *bodies* exist. But let us assume that they do (Descartes argues for this later in the *Meditations*). In that case, if bodies exist, and minds can exist independently of bodies, then substance dualism is true.

Knowledge and reality

Does Descartes' knowledge argument establish that minds exist independently of the body? We can object that just because Descartes can *think* of his mind existing without his body, this doesn't mean that his mind *really can* exist without his body. Perhaps there is some metaphysical connection between his mind and body that would make this impossible that Descartes doesn't know about.

There are two difficulties facing Descartes' argument. The first relates to claims about whether one thing (e.g. mind) is the same thing as another (e.g. body), or whether they are different. We can illustrate this idea with a different example. Suppose I believe (rightly) that the Masked Man has robbed the bank. I also believe that my father has not robbed the bank. I conclude that my father is not the Masked Man. Is the conclusion justified?

No, and here's why. It is true that if two things (in this case, people) have different properties, then they cannot be identical. (Identical things must have exactly the same properties. This is known as Leibniz's Law of the Indiscernibility of Identicals.) If the Masked Man robbed the bank and my father didn't, then my father is not the Masked Man. But it is not true that if I believe that two things have different properties, then they cannot be identical. I could be mistaken about the properties things have. Suppose my father is the Masked Man. Then my father did rob the bank, and my belief that he didn't is wrong.

Descartes argues that the mind is independent of the body (and so not the body), because he can conceive of it existing without the body. Now if the mind can exist without the body, then it cannot be the same thing as the body. But from just Descartes' thought, we cannot infer this. If the mind is the body, then obviously it cannot exist independently of the body. In this case, Descartes' conception is wrong.

A second difficulty follows this one. Descartes is using his thought to infer what is possible. If the mind is the body, then it is impossible for the mind to exist without the body. So to know what is possible here, we first need some independent reason to think that the mind is something distinct from the body, such as the argument from indivisibility (below).

Even then, we need to be very cautious using what we can conceive of as a test of possibility. For example, if my father is the Masked Man, then it is impossible that the Masked Man robbed the bank, but my father didn't. Yet it is easy to imagine precisely this, that the Masked Man robbed the bank, but my father didn't. What I am imagining, though, is that the man who is the Masked Man is not my father; and it is questionable how coherent that is.

The mind as single substance

Descartes claims that he is a thinking *substance*. Many philosophers have thought he means to show that he is the *same* thing, the same 'I', persisting from one moment in time to the next. But how can Descartes be certain of this? Could it not be that Descartes (or any of us) is *only a succession of thoughts*?

Descartes' response was to say that thoughts logically require a thinker. Properties cannot exist without substances; thoughts are, logically, properties of the mind. But perhaps he is wrong. Perhaps thoughts are substances – things that can exist independently.

Indivisibility

Descartes argues, as Plato did, that, unlike the body, the mind does not have any parts and cannot be divided. He argues: 'when I consider my mind, that is to say myself insofar as I am only a thinking thing, I can distinguish no parts'. [Margin: *Meditations*, 164] It is with the *whole* mind that one thinks, wills, doubts, and so on. These are just different ways of thinking, not parts of the mind. By contrast, the body does have parts. You can literally lose part of your body, e.g. a hand.

Descartes argues that having parts is an *essential* property of bodies. Bodies exist in space, and they can therefore be divided. The essential property of minds, he said in the

knowledge argument, is thought. Since minds and bodies have different essential properties, they are entirely distinct types of thing.

Is Descartes' argument sound? It does seem right to say that we will, think, imagine, with the whole of our minds, not a literal part. However, cases of mental illness, e.g. multiple personality syndrome, might be used to suggest that the mind can be divided. In such cases, it seems that some aspects of the person's mind are unable to communicate with other aspects. Freudian ideas of consciousness and the unconscious suggest something similar: people may desire one thing consciously and the opposite thing unconsciously. While this doesn't make the mind *spatially* divisible, it makes sense of talking about 'parts' of the mind.

However, Descartes could respond that the *way* in which the mind is divisible is entirely different from the way in which the body is. So his argument that mind and body are different because they have different properties is still valid.

We can respond, though, that the argument assumes that *minds exist*. If minds do not exist as things at all, then we cannot talk about 'their' properties. A materialist will claim that there are no 'minds', only mental properties, which are properties of persons or brains.

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THIS VIEW OF MIND

The mind-body problem

Substance dualism seems to make me, a person with both mind and body, essentially *two* things, connected together. This raises the question of how the two things relate to one-another.

We may first object that this idea, that we are two connected things, doesn't do justice to our experience of being just *one* thing, which we might call an 'embodied mind'. It 'splits' our experience, which fundamentally seems unified.

Second, modern work on the brain suggests that the mind is very dependent on the brain to function, and in the end, to exist at all. Damage to certain parts of the brain can make someone unable to think. So alterations in the body can affect the essential property of the mind; so the mind does not have even its essential property independently of the body. Since this property of thinking defines the mind, we can say that our minds are not independent of our bodies.

Descartes can respond to this that the dependency is merely *causal*, not logical. The mind is still logically independent of the body, i.e. it is metaphysically possible for it to exist without the body. Compare: your body needs oxygen to function, without it you die. Yet this does not mean that your body is not a separate substance from oxygen. It is logically distinct, even if there is a causal dependency.

However, third, substance dualism is most often rejected because it cannot give an adequate account of mental causation. Nothing seems more obvious than that the mind and the body interact with each other. I decide to do to phone a friend and move my body to do so. But how is it that something mental, which is not in space and has no physical force, can affect something physical, which is in space and moved by physical forces?

Solipsism

Descartes argues that he knows 'I think' before he knows anything else. He later remarks that he knows, too, *what* he thinks when he thinks it, e.g. he can identify a sensation of cold without mistake. In thinking about and identifying my experiences, I unite them under concepts. If nothing but me and my thoughts exist, then I need to be able to do all this, in language, without depending on anything else. Descartes' knowledge argument supposes that we can make sense of the idea of our minds existing on their own, independently of anything outside. The idea that only my mind exists is solipsism.

From Descartes' starting point emerges a picture of concepts and language that John Locke explicitly endorsed: 'Words in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them'. (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, III.ii.2) What I mean by 'red', for instance, is not, directly, the colour of the tomato, but the *sensation* I have of the colour of the tomato, or remember or imagine having. How does 'red' get its meaning? It's as though I associate the word with the sensation, saying the word 'red' in my head, while keeping the sensation of red in mind as I do so. It is like pointing to a colour chart, but where the chart and the pointing are mental, not physical.

Your sensations, of course, are yours alone; they cannot be experienced by anyone else. This means that what you mean by words is given by something that no one else has access to. Your language is a 'private' language, meaning it is logically impossible for anyone else to get at what you mean by words. Locke accepts this: for communication to occur, we must each mean similar sensations by the same words. Your 'red' must be similar to my 'red'.

Wittgenstein argued that if this understanding of language were right, then solipsism would be *inescapable*. If all words get their meaning by referring to my experience, then what I mean by 'experience' means 'my experience'. We have said that it is logically impossible that anyone else could have my experiences. But that means that it makes *no sense* to think of other people having experience – because 'experience' refers to my experience alone. But if no one else has experience, then solipsism is true.

Descartes assumes that we can ascribe mental states to ourselves. But what does this ability require? We can argue that, for instance, a child cannot learn that it is angry without also learning what it means to say, of someone else, that they are angry. The ability to ascribe mental states to oneself is learned, and is interdependent with the ability to ascribe mental states to other people. To learn the meaning of 'anger' is to learn its correct application to both oneself and others, simultaneously. In general, a sense of self (of oneself as a self) develops as part of the same process as the sense of others as selves. If there can be no knowledge of oneself as a mind without presupposing that there are other minds, the problem does not arise. The argument entails that it is impossible to give an account of the mind, even one's own mind, starting just from one's own case. Solipsism supposes that my thoughts exist independently of anything else. But I could not have these thoughts without other minds existing.