

General Philosophy: Mind and body

The relation between mind and body

How does the mind differ from the body? On the face of it, consciousness seems to be a very different kind of thing to physical matter—and yet we, as conscious agents, seem to be able to have some control over physical matter. So there are questions of (a) what *is* the mind?; (b) how does it relate to physical matter? Focussing for now on the first of these two questions, various possible answers have been articulated:

1. *Substance dualism*: There exist two distinct kinds of substance—the physical and the mental—which are not reducible to one another.
2. *Property dualism*: There exists only one kind of matter—physical matter—but it has two properties: mental properties and physical properties.¹
3. *Physicalism*: There is only one kind of matter—physical matter—and it has only one kind of property: physical properties.

Descartes' argument for dualism

Descartes presents an argument for the distinctness of the mind and body as two different kinds of substance—that is, an argument for substance dualism. Roughly, the argument runs as follows:²

P1: I can clearly and distinctly conceive of the mind without the body.

P2: God is capable of realising that of which I can clearly and distinctly conceive.

C1: So, there is some possibility in which the mind exists apart from the body.

¹Cf. Quine's distinction between ontology and ideology: this is one way of distinguishing substance dualism from property dualism. A view closely related to property dualism is Nagel's *dual aspect theory* (see his *The View From Nowhere*).

²We're eliding some details here—for the full story, see the excellent (Wilson, 1976).

P3: If there is some possibility in which the mind exists apart from the body, then the mind and body are essentially distinct.

P4: Two things which are essentially distinct are distinct.

C2: So, the mind is distinct from the body.

There's lots of room to question this argument—in particular, **P1**, **P2** and **P4** are all suspect (on the second, cf. the *Cartesian circle*).

Princess Elizabeth's challenge and the pairing problem

In a letter to Descartes written in May 1643, Princess Elizabeth of Bohemia challenged Descartes' substance dualism, soliciting him to explain

how the mind of a human being, being only a thinking substance, can determine the bodily spirits in producing bodily actions. For it appears that all determination of movement is produced by the pushing of the thing being moved, by the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else by the qualification and figure of the surface of the latter. Contact is required for the first two conditions, and extension for the third. [But] you entirely exclude the latter from the notion you have of the soul, and the former seems incompatible with an immaterial thing.

(Here, we're clearly moving onto the second of the two questions presented in the introduction.) The point here is: if the mind and the body fall into two distinct substantial categories, how is the one supposed to causally interact with and influence the other? One reply would be to invoke Leibnizian pre-established harmony, but that might rightly be subject to the charge of being *ad hoc* and implausible.

Another problem for Cartesian dualism is the *pairing problem*: the world consist of many minds and many bodies. But, with no explicit connection between the two, how is it that a particular mind (e.g., my mind) comes to be associated with a particular

body (e.g., my body), rather than another? There doesn't seem (the charge goes) to be a good answer to this question...

Epiphenomenal qualia

'Qualia' are the immediate objects of phenomenological perception—e.g., the qualitative experience of *redness*. If one believes that qualia exist and are distinct from material substances, then it seems that one cannot be a physicalist. And philosophers such as Jackson have given ingenious arguments for the existence of qualia. Consider, for example, Jackson's parable of Mary:

Mary is confined to a black-and-white room, is educated through black-and-white books and through lectures relayed on black-and-white television. In this way she learns everything there is to know about the physical nature of the world. She knows all the physical facts about us and our environment, in a wide sense of 'physical' which includes everything in completed physics, chemistry, and neurophysiology, and all there is to know about the causal and relational facts consequent upon all this, including of course functional roles. If physicalism is true, she knows all there is to know. For to suppose otherwise is to suppose that there is more to know than every physical fact, and that is just what physicalism denies.

... It seems, however, that Mary does not know all there is to know. For when she is let out of the black-and-white room or given a color television, she will learn what it is like to see something red, say. This is rightly described as learning—she will not say "ho, hum." Hence, physicalism is false. (Jackson 1986b, p. 291)

It seems that, when she leaves the room, Mary has learned about extra things which exist in the world—namely, *qualia*. How is the physicalist to respond?

Lewis (1990), a physicalist, suggests that, when Mary leaves the room, she doesn't *learn* anything—she merely acquires a new *ability*—the ability to recall what interacting with (say) red objects is like. This is Lewis' 'ability hypothesis', which he deploys in an attempt to save physicalism from Jackson's arguments.

References

- [1] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (trans. John Cottingham), Meditations II and VI.
- [2] Elizabeth of Bohemia, Correspondence with Descartes, in Margaret Atherton (ed.), *Women Philosophers of the Early Modern Period*, pp. 19-21, Hackett.
- [3] Margaret D. Wilson “Descartes: The Epistemological Argument for Mind-Body Distinctness”, *Noûs* 10, pp. 3-15, 1976.
- [4] Jaegwon Kim, *Philosophy of Mind*, 2nd edition, Westview Press, 2005. Chapters 1 and 2.
- [5] Frank Jackson, “Epiphenomenal Qualia”, *Philosophical Quarterly* 32, pp 127-136, 1986; reprinted in Peter Ludlow, Yujin Nagasawa and Daniel Stoljar (eds.), *There’s Something About Mary*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.
- [6] Frank Jackson, “What Mary Didn’t Know”, *Journal of Philosophy* 83, pp. 291-295, 1986; reprinted in Ludlow et al., *There’s Something About Mary*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.
- [7] David Lewis, “What Experience Teaches”, in William G. Lycan (ed.), *Mind and Cognition*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990; reprinted in Ludlow et al., *There’s Something About Mary*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004.