

Substance and property dualism Michael Lacewing

Introduction

Substance dualism is much better known than property dualism. A substance is traditionally understood an entity that does not depend on another entity in order to exist. Substances are also those things that have properties. Substance dualism holds that there are two fundamentally different types of such entities – material substances, or bodies, and mental substances, or minds. If minds do not depend on bodies in order to exist, e.g. if minds can exist separated from any body, then minds are separate substances. Substance monism is the view that there is only one sort of substance, either mental (idealism) or matter (materialism). According to materialism, everything that exists must be dependent on some material thing to exist. For example, mental properties (including mental states, such as holding beliefs and mental events, such as having a thought) are properties of a person, and a person is necessarily a material object.

If you think that matter is the only form of substance, and all properties are properties of something that is material, you may still believe that mental properties are quite different sorts of properties from physical ones. Materialism, as a theory about substance, does not need to be committed to the claim that mental properties are physical properties. If you hold that mental properties can't be completely accounted for in terms of, or 'reduced to', physical ones, you maintain 'property dualism'. You may claim that mental properties are properties of a person, not a brain; or you may even claim that they are properties of the brain, but not physical properties.

Descartes' argument for substance dualism

Descartes argues there is one thing he can be completely sure of, even if the evil demon exists: that he thinks, and from this, that he exists. 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. 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.

Descartes claims that 'I am a thinking *thing*, a substance. Many philosophers have thought he means to show that I am the *same* thing from one moment in time to the next. The same 'I' persists from one thought to another. But how can Descartes be certain of this? Philosophers have objected that, with the hypothesis of the evil demon, Descartes cannot know that there is anything that persists in time which is a unity. There is *only a succession of thoughts*, no 'I'. When this objection was presented to him, Descartes' response, in the appendix to the *Meditations* called 'Objections and Replies', is to say that thoughts logically require a thinker. This claim, he thinks, is clear and distinct, so we can be certain of it.

But if he means a subject that persists over time, then this is not obvious. It doesn't seem to be contradictory to deny it. Perhaps the evil demon is simply creating a series of false thoughts, among which is the thought that a thinker, a substance, an 'I', exists. How could Descartes know otherwise?

Having argued that he knows he thinks, Descartes then asks what kind of thing he is. Discussions of identity seek to establish the essential properties of something, what makes it the thing that it 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.

He remarks that he can continue to doubt whether he has a body; after all, he only believes he has a body as a result of his perceptual experiences, and so the demon could be deceiving him about this. But he cannot doubt that he has a mind, i.e. that he 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 is essentially a mind, not 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.

Descartes' argument so far is that minds can exist without bodies. However, on its own, this doesn't establish dualism. For this, we need to know that bodies exist and that their nature is quite different from that of the mind. Descartes argues in *Meditation* II that the nature of body is different from mind. He doesn't present arguments for the existence of bodies until *Meditation* VI, when he also argues explicitly for substance dualism, the claim that there are two distinct types of thing which can exist independently of each other.

Most philosophers believe Descartes' argument that the mind can exist without the body, as it is given above, doesn't work. 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. Or again, just because he knows he exists, but doesn't know if his body exists, this doesn't mean he 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. If materialism – the claim that everything that exists depends on something material in order to exist – is correct, then I cannot exist as a mind without also existing as a body. Descartes has used a test of what he knows and doesn't know as a test of what is possible. But the test is flawed, and so he hasn't shown that minds can exist independently of bodies.

Property dualism: the knowledge argument

Frank Jackson put forward a now-famous thought experiment to argue for property dualism. A neuroscientist, Mary, has been kept in a black and white room all her life, and has never seen any colour other than black and white. However, she knows every physical fact there is to know about colour vision, everything that happens with light reflecting off objects and of processing in the brain. One day, for the first time, she is allowed to see the colour red. Has she learned something new, viz. what it is like to see red? Jackson argued that she does, and that this entails that not all facts are physical facts, i.e. truths about physical properties. The fact of what it is like to see red is not a fact about any event in the brain; and what it is like to see red is a property of consciousness which is therefore not a physical property.

The argument has been much discussed, and a variety of rebuttals put forward. Michael Tye suggested that Mary gains new knowledge, but of an old fact; she learns about a particular property of the brain in a new way. She already knew what physical property seeing red was (i.e. what happened in the brain); she simply learns about this property through introspection. But there is no non-physical property that corresponds to what seeing red is like that she encounters for the first time. The generally accepted view,

among materialists, is that Mary's gain in knowledge is to gain a new *concept* of red. She previously had only a theoretical concept of red, now she has a phenomenal concept of red as well. The new concept has many implications, e.g. she can now classify red things by sight, which she couldn't before. However, the properties in the world are all physical. It is, after all, not uncommon to think of the same property in two different ways, e.g. 'water' and 'H₂O'.

One objection to this solution is to ask why it is that we cannot know everything about a purely physical world using only physical concepts? If the properties of experience are entirely physical, why must we use distinctively experiential concepts in order to do justice to our understanding of experience?

Zombies

A different argument for property dualism is given by a different thought experiment. A 'zombie', in the philosophical sense, is a physical replica of a person, but without any experiential consciousness. It therefore has identical physical properties to a person, but different mental properties. It seems that zombies are at least conceivable (I've just described them), and some philosophers argue that they are therefore possible (obviously not physically possible, i.e. in this universe with these physical laws; but 'metaphysically' possible). But that means that mental properties aren't physical properties.

The standard objection is that, although zombies are conceivable, they aren't in fact possible. For example, it is imaginable that water is not H₂O; however, given that water is H₂O, it's not in fact possible that water isn't H₂O. There could be something *just like* water that isn't H₂O, but if it isn't H₂O, it isn't water. So it's not possible for water not to be H₂O. Likewise, we might argue that if zombies are physical replicas of people with mental properties, they cannot lack mental properties themselves. But we can respond: so what are we imagining when we imagine zombies? The analogy with water doesn't apply – here we are imagining something *very like* water. But zombies with consciousness are not *very like* zombies without: to be in pain is nothing like not being in pain.