

Substance dualism

A central question in philosophy of mind is ‘is the mind a substance?’ Substance dualism argues that it is. According to a traditional metaphysics, a substance is an entity, a thing, that does not depend on another entity for its continued existence. It has ‘ontological independence’. For example, this handout is a (physical) substance.

1. Substances are also understood by contrast with properties.
2. Substances are what possess properties. The chair (substance) is solid (property). Properties can’t exist without substances - they depend on substances to exist. Solidity depends on things being solid; the property ‘being 1 metre long’ depends on something being that long; and, Descartes claimed, thoughts can’t exist without a thinker.
3. Substances persist through changes in properties - something can change from being 1 metre long to being 1.1 metres long, e.g. by growing. Obviously, the property ‘being 1 metre long’ does not persist through this change. Or again, a thinker can think a series of thoughts - the thinker persists, the thoughts do not.

Substance dualism holds that there are two fundamentally different types of substances: physical (or material) substances (‘bodies’, physical objects) and mental substances (minds). It claims that minds do not depend on bodies in order to exist, i.e. minds can exist separated from any body. Minds and bodies are ontologically distinct and independent. People who believe that the mind is the soul, and the soul can continue to exist without a body after death, are usually 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.

DESCARTES’ CONCEIVABILITY ARGUMENT

Dualism claims that both minds and bodies - physical objects - exist. It is common in contemporary philosophy of mind to assume that bodies exist, and since we are not discussing idealism, we shall share that assumption. Dualism is more controversial, therefore, in claiming that the mind is an ontologically distinct substance.

In *Meditation VI*, p. 29, Descartes presents the following argument for substance dualism:

1. I have a clear and distinct idea of myself as something that thinks and isn’t extended.
2. I have a clear and distinct idea of body as something that is extended and does not think.

3. If I have a clear and distinct thought of something, God can create it in a way that corresponds to my thought.
4. Therefore, God can create mind as something that thinks and isn't extended and body as something that is extended and does not think.
5. Therefore, mind and body can exist independently of one another.
6. Therefore, mind and body are two distinct substances.

In (1) and (2), Descartes appeals to his concepts of mind and body. Earlier in the *Meditations*, he analyzed mind as something that thinks and body as something that is extended (has a size and takes up space). We can understand (1) and (2) to entail the claim that it is conceivable that mind can exist without body. Nothing in our concepts rules this out.

In *Meditation VI*, Descartes adds (3). Assuming that God is omnipotent, the only reason for thinking that God cannot make something is that the concept of it is contradictory. The concepts of mind and body aren't self-contradictory. So God can create the mind and the body just as Descartes conceives of them - a thinking thing and an extended thing. We can summarize (3), (4) and (5) in terms that don't refer to God: it is possible that mind can exist without body.

Finally, a quick reminder helps in understanding the inference from (5) to (6). A substance, we said above, is something that does not depend on another thing in order to exist. In other words, a substance can exist independently, on its own.

We now have a simpler form of this argument:

1. It is conceivable that mind can exist without body.
2. Therefore, it is possible that mind can exist without body.
3. Therefore, mind and body are distinct substances.

It is important for Descartes' argument that our clear and distinct ideas of mind and body are *complete* and *exclusive*. The mind is *nothing but* thought; the body is *nothing but* extension. We know this to be true, he says, because the ideas of mind and body are clear and distinct.

DESCARTES' DIVISIBILITY ARGUMENT

Descartes claims that mind and body have different properties - thought and extension. This provides another argument that they cannot be the same thing: if they were the same thing, they would have the same properties. Leibniz later formalized this claim in his principle of the indiscernibility of identicals: if two things are identical (i.e. are just one thing), then they share all their properties. Why? Because one thing cannot have different properties from itself. So if two things have different properties, that proves that they cannot be one and the same thing.

In case we aren't convinced that mind and body really do have different properties, Descartes provides an additional argument (p. 32). The mind does not have any parts and cannot be divided:

When I consider the mind - i.e. consider myself purely as a thinking thing - I can't detect any parts within myself; I understand myself to be something single and complete ... the faculties of willing, of understanding, of sensory perception and so on, these are not *parts* of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, understands and perceives.

Willing, understanding and perceiving are properties of the mind, different ways of thinking. By contrast, the body does have parts. You can literally lose part of your body, e.g. a hand. So the body (physical substance) is divisible into parts, but the mind (mental substance) is not. So mind and body are entirely distinct types of thing.

THE UNITY OF MIND AND BODY

If the mind and body are two distinct things, how are they related? Descartes says that

Nature also teaches me, through these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst and so on, that I (a thinking thing) am not merely *in* my body as a sailor is in a ship.

Rather, I am *closely joined to it - intermingled* with it, so to speak - so that it and I form a unit. (p. 30)

Because 'a unit' doesn't sound like 'two separate things', this claim and its implications are puzzling.

Reflecting on perception, sensation and feeling, we notice that we perceive that we have bodies, and that our bodies - this particular physical object that we have a close and unique relationship with - can be affected in many beneficial and harmful ways. This is brought to our attention through our bodily appetites, like hunger and thirst, through emotions, such as anger, sadness, love, and through sensations, like pain, pleasure, colours, sound and so on. All these experiences have their origins in the body.

However, this doesn't mean that mind and body are united as one and the same thing. Descartes carefully considers what the idea of the mind really involves. He argues that we can still conceive of ourselves existing complete without imagination or feeling, i.e. without those ways of thinking that are informed by the body.

Nevertheless, our experiences of our bodies through bodily sensations and emotions show that the connection between the mind and body is very close: 'These sensations are confused mental events that arise from the union - the intermingling, as it were - of the mind with the body' (p. 30). If mind and body were not intermingled, then 'I wouldn't feel pain when the body was hurt but would perceive the damage in an intellectual way, like a sailor seeing that his ship needs repairs' (p. 30).

Furthermore, this union of mind and body is a union between the mind (the whole mind - it doesn't have parts) and the *whole* body. We feel pain in the various parts of our body. The mind does have a privileged link with the brain (a point of causal connection in the pineal gland), but the mind does not feel all pains to be in the brain! So Descartes argues that the mind is joined to all parts of the body - the point about the pineal gland is really just a physiological observation about causal pathways.

Beyond dualism?

If you find this talk of 'intermingling' is confusing, you are in good company! Descartes himself found it difficult to understand how it is that the mind and body

are distinct substances, yet form a 'unit'. In a letter to Princess Elizabeth, 28 June 1643, he wrote

it seems to me that the human mind can't conceive the soul's distinctness from the body and its union with the body, conceiving them very clearly and both at the same time. That is because this requires one to conceive them as one single thing and at the same time as two things, which is contradictory.

He offers a suggestion as puzzling as it is illuminating: the idea of the union between mind and body is a third 'basic notion' alongside the ideas of mind and body. The idea of mind is known by the intellect, the idea of body is known by the intellect aided by the imagination, but the union of mind and body is known most clearly through the senses. It is the ordinary experience of life that gives us an understanding of this union, rather than philosophical reflection.

Given that the union of mind and body is a third 'basic notion', is it a notion of a *third* type of *substance*? Is there one new type of thing here, created from the unification of two distinct types of thing? Descartes says, in a letter to Regius, December 1641, that 'since the body has all the dispositions necessary to receive the soul, and without which it is not strictly a human body, it could not come about without a miracle, that a soul should not be joined to it'. The comment that, unless united to a soul, a body is not a *human body*, suggests (but not conclusively) that the 'human body', body and soul together, can be considered as a substance in its own right, a substance created from the union of body and soul. However, philosophers don't agree on whether or not this is the implication we should draw from his union theory.

To the question, 'What am I?', Descartes' first answer is 'a thing that thinks', and he repeats in *Meditation VI* that we can imagine ourselves existing 'whole' without feeling or imagination. But is it any less true to say 'I am a human being, a union of mind and body, an *embodied* mind' than 'I am a mind'? The mind takes on the body's experiences as its own, i.e. we refer our sensations, emotions, etc., to our *selves*. We 'own' these states just as much as we 'own' our thoughts. We experience ourselves as embodied minds, not just minds.

Descartes accepts all this, but his argument that minds can exist without bodies leads him to say that to lose the experiences that depend on the body would not be to lose our identities.