

Philosophy 110W - 3: Introduction to Philosophy, Hamilton College, Fall 2007  
Russell Marcus, Instructor  
email: [rmarcus1@hamilton.edu](mailto:rmarcus1@hamilton.edu)  
website: [http://thatmarcusfamily.org/philosophy/Intro\\_F07/Course\\_Home.htm](http://thatmarcusfamily.org/philosophy/Intro_F07/Course_Home.htm)  
Office phone: 859-4056

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## 0. Introduction to the philosophy of mind

The central question, historically, in the philosophy of mind concerns the nature of mind, and whether it is distinct from the body.

This central question is often approached by examining the contents of the mind.

Descartes described the contents of the mind in *Meditation Two*, p 106.

Nowadays, we distill such a list to two categories: sensory states, or qualia, and intentional states.

Intentional states have content, and are exemplified by beliefs and desires.

My belief that the moon is made of green cheese has the content that the moon is made of green cheese.

Some theories of mind fare better with intentional states; others seem to do better with qualia.

We will look at four theories of mind: dualism, behaviorism, identity theory, and functionalism.

### I. The sixth meditation

We have spent some time on the beginning of Descartes's *Meditations*, in which he formulates his criterion for knowledge.

We stopped reading the *Meditations*, when Descartes started his argument for the existence of God, as protector of that criterion, in the Third Meditation.

Recall that Descartes's goal was to unify modern science with a traditional religious view.

To this end, Descartes spends much of the Sixth Meditation on arguments for the distinction between the mind and the body.

The distinction between mind and body is necessary for the immortality of the soul.

At the beginning of the Sixth Meditation, Descartes argues for the existence of the material world.

In service to the arguments for the existence of the material world, Descartes starts the sixth meditation without the assumption that there is a material world, or even our bodies.

We can ignore this rhetorical device.

For example, when Descartes argues how the imagination would work if there are bodies, we can take that as an argument for how the imagination actually works: external bodies come into contact with my sense organs, which transmit information to my brain, which then communicate that information (somehow!) to my mind.

To argue that the material world really does exist, he shows first that bodies could exist, since God can make anything that does not create a contradiction.

Then, he argues that I seem to sense objects, and if I seem to sense objects, while there are none, then God is a deceiver; but God is no deceiver, so material objects exist.

Only the mathematical properties of material objects are clear and distinct; their sensory properties are in doubt, as we have seen, in earlier readings.

## II. Descartes' central argument that the mind is distinct from the body:

1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my mind, independent of my body.
  2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of my body, independent of my mind.
  3. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, can be separated by God, and so are really distinct.
- So, my mind is distinct from my body.

Note how Descartes relies on his criterion of clarity and distinctness, twice on p 435.

We call Descartes' position substance dualism, for its insistence that there are two distinct kinds of substances.

We are tied to our bodies in a remarkable way, unlike a sailor and ship.

We do not merely observe injury to the body, but have a special relationship to it.

Philosophers call this relationship privileged access.

## III. The major premise and conceptual dualism

The third premise, which can be called the major premise, is currently thought especially contentious.

In no small part, the problem with the major premise traces back to the problem of Cartesian circularity.

If we weaken the third premise to remove reference to God, substance dualism does not follow.

Another form of dualism, which one might call conceptual dualism, does follow from the argument with a weakened third premise.

Conceptual dualism just says that we have distinct concepts for the mind and the body.

Conceptual dualism is, essentially, a semantic thesis, and not a metaphysical one.

Thus, we can express Descartes' original third premise as saying that conceptual dualism entails substance dualism.

Let us put aside worries about the third premise.

## IV. The minor premises of Descartes' argument for the mind/body distinction

The first two premises, which we can call minor premises, rely on characterizations of the mind and body.

Descartes characterizes the mind as that which thinks.

In §53 of the *Principles of Philosophy*, he says that every substance has one essential characteristic.

Although the presence of substance can be recognized through any attribute, each substance has just one distinctive property, which constitutes its nature and essence, and which is the foundation of all its other properties. So, extension in length, breadth, and depth, constitutes the nature of bodily substance; and thought constitutes the nature of thinking substance. And everything else which can be attributed to body presupposes extension, and is only a mode of that which is extended; similarly, all the contents of our minds are merely different modes of thinking. Thus, for example, we can only make sense of shape in that which is extended, or of motion in extended space; and we can only make sense of imagination, or sensation, or willing in a thinking thing. Whereas we can make sense of extension without shape or motion, and of thought without imagination or sensation, and so on. This should be obvious to anyone who considers it carefully.

The mind is essentially a thinking thing, and bodies are essentially extended.

The characterization of extended things is meant to be consistent with the new science, which claims that the primary qualities are real, though there may be some tension between mere extension, and the other primary qualities.

Descartes characterizes the thinking thing in the Second Meditation: doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, willing, refusing, imagining, and sensing.

Note that these are all conscious states.

Essentially, the core characteristic of thought, for Descartes, is consciousness.

Bodies, on the other hand, are mere machines.

In fact, our bodies are no different in kind from those of the higher animals.

We have similar sense organs, and brain structures, for example.

Cartesians were convinced of the absence of animal souls, and some were notorious vivisectionists.

The most obvious distinction between humans and animals is our ability to reason, our mental qualities.

In the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes further characterizes the distinction between bodies/machines and minds on the basis of language use and behavioral plasticity.

No machine, he says, including an animal, can use language, or solve a wide range of problems.

If the mind is essentially thinking, and the body is essentially extended, the mind and the body are clearly distinct things.

Descartes claims that we may confuse the nature of mind and body because of the union of our minds with our bodies.

For example, consider our faculty of imagination, the mind's ability to receive images from the senses.

It seems that we first receive images, and then reason about them, p 433-4.

Descartes argues that this Aristotelian picture is misleading.

We can even exist, and think, without imagination, p 435.

Descartes has separated thought from sensation, where Aristotle had wed the two.

On Cartesian dualism, the senses have been demoted from their lofty position as the origin of all knowledge.

For Descartes, the senses just provide natural protection of our bodies.

This is just the best structure for humans.

Since the body must have a method for transmitting information to the brain, it is bound to be imperfect.

It is better to be deceived once in a while, than not to have any information for the protection of the body.

#### V. An objection - Is our knowledge of the mind complete?

Consider the following objection to Descartes' argument.

(The objection is inspired by Antoine Arnauld, in the Fourth Objections.)

If Descartes's argument is valid, then this argument is valid:

1. I have a clear and distinct understanding of Clark Kent, as someone who can not fly.
2. I have a clear and distinct understanding of Superman, as someone who can fly.
3. Whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive of as separate, can be separated by God, and so are really distinct.

So, Clark Kent is not Superman.

The conclusion of the Superman argument is clearly false.

But, the form of the argument is the same as the form of Descartes' argument.

In Arnauld's favor, if we determine the problem with the Superman argument, maybe we can find a problem with Descartes' argument.

Descartes has to respond by finding a difference between the two arguments such that the Superman argument can be unsound while the mind/body argument remains sound.

Descartes could insist that we do not have a clear and distinct understanding of Clark Kent.

Instead, our knowledge of him is inadequate, or incomplete.

Denigrating our knowledge of Clark Kent solves the problem with the Superman argument.

But, does that solution undermine the first premise of Descartes' original argument?

We have to wonder whether our knowledge of the body is also incomplete.

If our knowledge of the mind were complete, then we might understand that the mind is the body, and not distinct from it.

We must wonder if the way that we know the mind is insufficient to rule out an essential link to the body.

Arnauld mentions that we can think of a line in abstract, without attributing breadth or depth to it, even though in the material world every extension has breadth and depth.

Similarly, we might think of the mind as independent of the body, while in reality every mind must have a body.

Arnauld's point is that if our knowledge of the mind as independent of the body is not complete, then Descartes' argument fails.

Descartes argues that our knowledge of Clark Kent is incomplete, so that the Superman argument fails.

But, he thinks that our knowledge of the mind is complete, so that his argument for the mind/body distinction succeeds.

Arnauld wonders if our knowledge of the mind is incomplete, in the same way that our knowledge of Clark Kent is incomplete.

Descartes is sometimes taken as arguing as follows:

We can be certain, not only of the existence of our minds, but also of many of its properties.

The certainty of our knowledge of our minds persists, even if we doubt the existence of our bodies.

Further, we know so much of our minds, even without any knowledge of bodies, that our knowledge of minds must be taken to be complete.

Thus, the body must not be an essential for our minds.

Arnauld counters this interpretation of Descartes' argument with an example from mathematics.

Consider a triangle inscribed in a semi-circle.

We can be certain that it is right-angled, that it is a right triangle.

The certainty of our knowledge of our right triangle persists, even if we doubt, or fail to recognize, that the sum of the squares of the legs is equal to the square of the hypotenuse.

Thus, if Descartes' reasoning about the mind and body is sound, it follows that the Pythagorean theorem must not be essential to the triangle.

But, we can prove that the Pythagorean theorem holds necessarily of the triangle.

Descartes' reasoning must be unsound.

Thus, he has not established that the body is not essential to the self.

## VI. Additional support for Descartes's mind/body distinction

Descartes provides another argument for the distinction of mind and body, from the divisibility of body, p 436.

This argument highlights the different characterizations of mind and body implicit in the first argument.

1. Whatever two things have different properties are different objects.
  2. The mind is indivisible.
  3. The body is divisible.
- So, the mind is not the body.

But, again, we might just not have noticed that the mind is in fact divisible.

There are other attributes of the mind and soul, which Descartes discusses in the omitted sections.

Descartes mentions that these other attributes contribute to the argument for the distinction between the mind and the body.

The most important attribute, surely, is Descartes's argument that knowledge of God is innate, impressed on the soul of human beings like the mark of a painter on his work.

Also, Descartes discusses the distinction between willing and understanding, which helps account for the problem of error.

These attributes support the claim that we have a complete understanding of the mind without any material attributes.

## VII. An aside on Berkeley and Descartes

Berkeley argued for idealism mostly by arguing against Locke.

Descartes argued, distinctly, that we judge that there is an external world, and what it is like, with our minds and not through the senses.

Berkeley rejected Descartes' inference to a material world, since it is possible to have the same ideas even without material objects.

Note that Descartes claims, well in advance of Berkeley's work, that if the world were Berkeleyan, God would be a deceiver.

Berkeley's response to Descartes, at §19 et seq. of the *Principles*, relies on an assertion we can call the Principle of No Good Reason.

The Principle of No Good Reason says that God will not do anything if there is no good reason to do it. A corollary follows: If God does something, there must be a good reason to do it.

(These principles are better known as the Principle of Sufficient Reason, often credited to Leibniz.)

1. If God exists, then he can either create physical objects or not create them.
2. We do not need physical objects in order to have all of our experiences, since God can implant them in our minds directly.
3. So, there is no good reason to create physical objects, in addition to minds.
4. God exists.
5. God will not do anything if there is no good reason to do it. (The Principle of No Good Reason.)

So, God will not create physical objects.

God just creates our ideas directly, instead of taking the detour through physical objects.  
Berkeley asks us, in §20, to imagine a person who has all of our experiences placed directly in his mind.  
Such a person would have exactly the same reasons to believe that there is a material world that we do.  
But, we can see that he has no good reason to believe that there is a material world.  
So, neither do we.