

Philosophy 203
History of Modern Western Philosophy

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Class 6 - Hobbes

Monism and the Problem of Interaction

- Two monists:
 - Thomas Hobbes
 - Baruch (Benedict) Spinoza.
- Monism is motivated largely by the dualist's problem of interaction.
- The problem of interaction is to describe how our bodies and minds could interact, if they are two independent substances.
- “Theoretical shuttlecocks”
- Why does the mind get drunk when the body does the drinking?

Descartes and the Pineal Gland

- Descartes located the seat of the soul in the pineal gland.
 - symmetry considerations
- This merely locates the problem.

The Monist Solution

Deny the claim that the mind and body are distinct substances

- Two obvious monist options.
- The materialist claims that the mind is really just the body.
- The idealist claims that there are no bodies; there are only minds.

Hobbes is a Materialist Monist.

- The world (I mean not the earth only, that denominates the lovers of it *worldly men*, but the *universe*, that is, the whole mass of all things that are) is corporeal, that is to say, body, and has the dimensions of magnitude, namely, length, breadth, and depth. Also every part of body is likewise body, and has the like dimensions, and consequently every part of the universe is body; and that which is not body is no part of the universe. And because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing, and consequently nowhere (*Leviathan* §1.46, AW 133b).

Idealism

- Berkeley
- Leibniz is also an idealist, though he writes as if there is a material world.

Spinoza

Weirdo Monist

- For Spinoza, there is only one substance, which he calls God.
- You might prefer to think of that one substance as nature, or Nature.
- Spinoza's one substance, God, has many attributes, both mental and physical (and others!).
- So, there is just one kind of thing (monism), but it has many aspects, or properties.
- Most philosophers take minds and bodies to be substances.
- Spinoza takes them to be properties of a single substance called God, or Nature.

The Problem of Interaction: No Problem

- The problem of interaction seems to require magic, which appears to debar a solution.
- But positing a non-corporeal soul already commits you to a kind of magic.
- Once you are committed to magic, the problem of interaction just requires more of the same.
- The problem seems to be with the dualism, not with explaining the interaction between the body and mind.

The Problem of Mental Causation

- The challenge for any materialist is to account for mental phenomena, especially mental causation.
- While my conscious states may not be thought of as real qualities of external objects, they are real qualities of my conscious mind.
- They seem to affect my actions.
- The problem of mental causation is to explain how thoughts can have causal powers.

Hobbes's Solution to the Problem of Mental Causation

- Hobbes claims that mental phenomena are motions in the nerves and brain.
 - paradigmatic physical phenomena
- Galilean science: all that exists are particles in motion.
 - Interactions of particles are limited to transfer of momentum.
 - Nothing could be given to us by external objects, except their motions.
- The cause of sense is the external body, or object, which presses the organ proper to each sense, either immediately, as in taste and touch, or mediately, as in seeing, hearing, and smelling; this pressure, by the mediation of nerves and other strings and membranes of the body, continues inwards to the brain and heart, causes there a resistance, or counterpressure, or endeavor of the heart, to deliver itself; this endeavor, because *outward*, seems to be some matter without. And this *seeming*, or, *fancy*, is that which men call *sense*... All...qualities called *sensible* are in the object that causes them but so many several motions of the matter, by which it presses our organs diversely. Neither in us that are pressed are they anything else but diverse motions (**for motion produces nothing but motion**) (*Leviathan* §1.1, AW 116; bold emphasis added).

Aristotle Accepted the Resemblance Hypothesis

- Aristotle had taken sensory qualities to be properties of external objects.
- The redness and sweetness of an apple are real properties of the apple itself.
- Our senses are attuned to the external environment.
- For example, color vision occurs when a person's eyes are changed to be like the color of an external object.
- I see the apple as red because my eye itself is able to change to red.
- The eye's changing to match the environment is perception.
- Similarly, in thinking, we are changed to match the forms of other objects in the world.
- On this Aristotelian view, our ideas resemble their causes, and objects really have the properties that we perceive them to have.

Descartes Rejected the Resemblance Hypothesis

- The wax is just a body which can take various manifestations, hot or cold, sweet or tasteless, etc., but is identified with none of these particular sensory qualities.
- Sound is, “Nothing but a certain vibration of the air which strikes our ears” (*Le Monde*, AT XI.6).
- Physical objects are essentially extended things, made of parts which may or may not be in motion, both together and relative to each other.
- Depending on how its parts, the atoms, unite and move, an object affects us in different ways.
- Their arrangement, along with our sensory apparatus, determines how we experience an object.
- The same object may have many different appearances.
- The arrangement of particles in a lemon makes the light reflect from its surface so that I have a yellow experience.
- Another person, or an alien with a radically different sense apparatus, would have different visual sensations of the same object.
- My conscious experience is unlike the lemon in itself.

The Veil of Perception

- Hobbes embraces the veil of perception, ascribing a profound error to those, like Aristotle, who hold a resemblance hypothesis.
- The third [cause of absurd assertions] I ascribe to the giving of the names of the *accidents* of *bodies without us* to the *accidents* of our *own bodies*; as they do who say the *color is in the body; the sound is in the air, etc.* (*Leviathan* §1.5, AW 127b)

Extension and Mathematics

- Descartes believed that physical objects have extension as their essence.
- Extension is mathematically describable, as is motion.
- The mathematical nature of both extension and motion were essential to the Galilean view of the world.
 - Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth (Galileo, *The Assayer*).
- Descartes writes that the only principles he needs are mathematical.
 - The only principles which I accept, or require, in physics are those of geometry and pure mathematics; these principles explain all natural phenomena, and enable us to provide quite certain demonstrations regarding them (*Principles of Philosophy* II.64).

The Primary/Secondary Distinction

between the real properties of a physical object
and how the object appears

- Locke argues for a primary/secondary distinction, as we will see later in the term.
- Berkeley rejects the primary/secondary distinction, as we will also see later.
- Descartes's discussion of the wax is an argument for a primary/secondary distinction.
- Galileo argues for the distinction on analogy with a feather which might tickle us.
- When touched upon the soles of the feet, for example, or under the knee or armpit, it feels in addition to the common sensation of touch a sensation on which we have imposed a special name, 'tickling'. this sensation belongs to us and not to the hand. Anyone would make a serious error if he said that the hand, in addition to the properties of moving and touching, possessed another faculty of tickling, as if tickling were a phenomenon that resided in the hand that tickled (Galileo, *The Assayer*, 275).
- Hobbes's metaphysics is essentially Galilean: the world consists of particles, or atoms, in motion.

Descartes, Conscious Experience, and the Galilean World

- For Descartes, the material world is fully Galilean.
- Conscious experience occurs out of the world, in the soul.
- Descartes thus gets to have the Galilean view of the world while not giving up the reality of our sense experience.
- The cost is substance dualism and the problem of interaction.

Hobbes and Conscious Experience

- Hobbes denies that we must posit a non-physical substance to account for conscious experience.
- Our conscious experience just is the motion of particles.
- Hobbes's claim sounds almost impossible to take seriously.
- How could the sound of the concerto just be the motion of air, or the vibration of the tympanic membrane?
- What could be more different than motion of air and sound?

Ockham's Razor

- William of Okham (1287-1347) encouraged philosophers not to multiply entities beyond necessity.
- For occurrent sensory states, we might favor Hobbes's materialism over Descartes's dualism on Ockhamist grounds.
 - Hobbes only posits one kind of thing.
 - Descartes posits two.
- Hobbes's account of my occurrent sensory states seems preferable just for being less profligate.
- When we consider memory and fantasy, Hobbes's account of mental phenomena is less compelling.

The Challenge for Hobbes

- Hobbes must account for mental states which are not obviously caused by transfers of momentum from objects to our senses.
 - Memory
 - Fantasy
 - Our ability to deduce new ideas by reasoning

Hobbes's Account

- Hobbes relies on the Galilean/Newtonian concept of inertia.
- Once our ideas are set in motion by sensation, once they enter our imagination, they remain in motion.
- The physical effects of our sense experience, fancies, continue in our brains, slowing down only when impeded by other fancies.
- We associate ideas as we experienced them, remembering a sequence as we first sensed it.
- Memory, which is just imagination in time, fades as we accrue more experiences.

A Metaphor

- “All fancies are motions within us, relics of those made in the sense, and those motions that immediately succeeded one another in the sense, continue also together after sense, inasmuch as the former coming again to take place and be predominant, the latter follows, by coherence of the matter moved, in such manner as water upon a plain table is drawn which way any one part of it is guided by the finger (*Leviathan* §1.3, AW 119b).

Hobbes and Science

- Much of Descartes's work on the mind appears untestable.
- Hobbes provides a scientifically testable theory, a research program.
- “The longer the time is, after the sight or sense of any object, the weaker is the imagination” (*Leviathan* §1.2, AW 117b).
- It is true that our memories fade.
- But it does not seem that they do so in proportion to time, alone.
- Still, no one really understands how memory works.

Interest and Perception

- Hobbes's empiricism relies on the claim that we passively receive and orderly manifold.
- But no.
- We pick out items based on our desires and preconceptions.
 - Attention blindness
 - Change blindness
 - False memory
- Hobbes is working with a naive psychology.
- “Hobbes's general account of thought was rather hamstrung by his obsession with mechanics” (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. IV, p 38).
- But his work is important because it is a precedent for precisely the kind of theory that scientists want.

Hobbes's Empiricism

- Hobbes is the first of our empiricists.
- Like Locke and Berkeley later, he wants to derive or explain all knowledge by sense experience, avoiding Descartes's innate ideas.
- He defines truth and falsity in terms of the correspondence of language to the world.
- Terms of language stand for our ideas, the images left by sense experience in our brains.
- "The first cause of absurd conclusions I ascribe to the want of method, in that they do not begin their ratiocination from definitions, that is, from settled significations of their words, as if they could cast accounts without knowing the value of the numeral words, *one*, *two*, and *three*" (*Leviathan* §1.5, AW 127a).
- "In reasoning a man must take heed of words, which besides the signification of what we imagine of their nature, have a signification also of the nature, disposition, and interest of the speaker -such as are the names of virtues and vices, for one man calls *wisdom* what another calls *fear*; and one *cruelty*, what another *justice*, one *prodigality*, what another *magnanimity*; and one *gravity*, what another *stupidity*, etc. And therefore such names can never be true grounds of any ratiocination. No more can metaphors, and tropes of speech; but these are less dangerous, because they profess their inconstancy, which the others do not" (*Leviathan* §1.4, AW 125b)
- 'God' as a material object?

Finite Beings and Infinite Ideas

- Can a finite being can have an infinite idea?
- Everyone in the modern era agreed that there can be no sensory experience which leads to an infinite idea.
 - They mainly took ideas to be like pictures.
- Descartes separated thought from sensation, paving the way for his claims that finite beings can have infinite ideas.
 - We must have ideas that do not come from the senses, i.e. innate ideas.
 - In particular, our idea of God is infinite and non-sensory.
- Another option would be to argue from our inability to have an infinite idea to the claim that we have no idea of God.
 - “Thus philosophy excludes from itself theology, as I call the doctrine about the nature and attributes of the eternal, ungenerable, and incomprehensible God, and in whom no composition and no division can be established and no generation can be understood” (*De Corpore*, §1.8).
- A third option would be to argue that the idea of God is not infinite.

Up Next

- Spinoza
- *The Ethics* is difficult, written in the synthetic method; take your time.
- Focus on the propositions and the scholia.
 - “The deductive apparatus masks Spinoza’s philosophy. For certain of his deepest and most central doctrines he offers ‘demonstrations’ that are unsalvageably invalid and of *no philosophical use or interest*; it is not credible that he accepts those doctrines because he thinks they follow from the premisses of those arguments” (Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, vol. 1: 113, emphasis added).
- Nietzsche on Spinoza:
 - Not to speak of that hocus-pocus of mathematical form in which, as if in iron, Spinoza encased and masked his philosophy...so as to strike terror into the heart of any assailant who should happen to glance at that invincible maiden and Pallas Athene - how much personal timidity and vulnerability this masquerade of a sick recluse betrays (*Beyond Good and Evil*, §5).
- The appendix to Part I, AW 160-4, is worth reading, even if you have to skim some of the later propositions in Part I to get to it.