Lecture 5 – Philosophy of Mind: Dualism

Barbara Montero – *On the Philosophy of the Mind*
Agenda

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The Mind-Body Problem

• **The Mind-Body Problem**: the problem of specifying the relationship between mind and body.

• The mind-body problem arises because it is difficult to explain how mental phenomena – sensations, emotions, thoughts, etc. – fit into the physical world of bodies and objects.

• Is the mind different from the brain?
The Mind-Body Problem

• Imagine you are a mad scientist creating a human being.

• After you have created all the physical parts (limbs, organs, brain, etc.), have you created a human being? OR have you left something out?

• “The answer depends on whether the mind is an extra ingredient distinct from all the physical parts” (2).
Dualists versus Physicalists

- **Dualists** (Nonphysicalists) think the mind is an ingredient additional to all the physical ingredients in a person.

- **Physicalists** think the mind is *not* an extra ingredient above and beyond the physical materials making up a person.

- **Interactive Dualism or Cartesian Dualism**: the body causally interacts with the nonphysical mind and vice versa.

- **Substance Dualism**: the (nonphysical) mind and the (physical) body are distinct substances.
Motivations for Dualism

• Many religions advocate dualism.
  • Religions that believe in a soul and life after death.
  • Religions that believe in reincarnation.

• “Imagine the headlines: SOUL DISCOVERED BY MIT NEUROSCIENTISTS DURING MRI SCAN!” (3)

• Could science show that dualism is true?
Descartes’ Argument for Dualism

• René Descartes was a French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist (1596–1650).
• Cartesian coordinates are named after him.
• Wrote *Meditations on First Philosophy*.
Descartes’ Argument for Dualism
(Sixth Meditation)

• I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it.
  • Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct,
  • since they are capable of being separated, at least by God . . .

• I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, unextended [taking up no space] thing;

• and on the other hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended [taking up space] nonthinking thing.
  • And accordingly it is certain that I am really distinct from my body and can exist without it.
Theistic Version of Descartes’ Argument

1. If you can clearly and distinctly understand something, then God can make it so. (Theistic Conceivability Principle)
   • ...because God is omnipotent and so has the power to make anything we can think of.

2. If you can understand one thing without another, then God can make those things distinct from one another.

3. You can understand yourself as a mind without your body.

4. Therefore, God made minds distinct from bodies.

• Premise 2 is a more complex restatement of premise 1.
• What argument form does 2-4 take?
Theistic Move from Possibility to Actuality

• One might object that Descartes commits a non-sequitur (drawing a conclusion which does not follow logically from the premises)
• ...by reasoning from what God can do to what God actually did.
• This is to move from possibility to actuality.

• Descartes defends his conclusion by arguing:
  • If it is possible that God made minds and bodies distinct, and if it seems to us that they are distinct, then God really did make them distinct.
  • If minds and bodies seem distinct to us, but really aren’t, then God would be deceiving us, but God could not deceive us because that would be incompatible with his supreme goodness.
The Conceivability Principle

• Descartes’ argument for dualism depends on the conceivability principle.

• “Rather than arguing that mind can exist as a pure thinking thing because God is capable of creating anything that you can understand, we can simply cut to the chase and state that anything that you understand completely can exist just as you understand it. Or in other words, when you really understand how something could be possible, then it is possible.” (5)

• Conversely, if you can’t think about something (like a round square), then it is impossible.
Non-Theistic Argument for Dualism

1. If you can clearly and distinctly understand something, then it is possible. (Conceivability Principle)

2. If you can understand one thing without another, then it is possible that the two are distinct from one another.

3. You can understand yourself as a mind without your body.

4. Therefore, it is possible that minds are distinct from bodies.

5. If it is possible that two things can be separated, then they really are distinct. (Move from Possibility to Actuality, see 6)

6. Therefore, minds are distinct from bodies.
Issue 1: Rejecting the Conceivability Principle

• Montero challenges Descartes’ reliance on the conceivability principle.
• Whether the conceivability principle is plausible “depends on what is meant by ‘understanding something’ or having a ‘clear and distinct idea of something’” (5).
Issue 1: Rejecting the Conceivability Principle

Two senses of understanding:

1. **Understanding something means what one understands is true.**
   
   • For example, the Greek astronomer Ptolemy did not really understand the universe because he thought the earth was at the center of the universe.
   
   • On this sense of ‘understanding’, the conceivability principle is true.
     
     o If we understand how something is possible, then it is true that it is possible.
2. Understanding something means one finds no contradiction in it.

• For example, one understands the theory that the first living creatures were brought to the earth by a meteor, but one does not believe it to be true.

• On this sense of ‘understanding’, the conceivability principle is NOT true.
  
  o Sometimes one thinks something is not contradictory but it actually is!
  o Jill finds no contradiction in the idea that there is a largest prime number, but there is NO largest prime number.
Issue 1: Rejecting the Conceivability Principle

2. Understanding something means one finds no contradiction in it.
   • In simple situations, not finding a contradiction in something may be sufficient to show that it is possible.
   • In complicated situations, not finding a contradiction may not be sufficient to show that it is possible.
   • The situation of the mind’s relationship to the body is a complicated one.
Issue 2: The Move from Possibility to Actuality

• The move from possibility to actuality: If it is possible that two things can be separated, then they really are distinct.

• Consider two different names for the same thing, such as George Elliot and Mary Anne Evans.
  • Wherever George Elliot goes, Mary Anne Evans goes, and vice versa.

• Is the move from the possibility of a separation to a real distinction magic or is it sound philosophy?
Issue 2: The Move from Possibility to Actuality

• Here’s one way to reject the move from possibility to actuality.

• The move restated: If it is possible to separate two things—if they have different properties—then they really are distinct.

• George Elliot and Mary Anne Evans have different properties because they differ in the property of what we call them. But they are not two distinct things, so this is a counter-example to the move from possibility to actuality.
Issue 2: The Move from Possibility to Actuality

• Names aren’t the kind of property that truly distinguishes two things from each other. Why not?
• Names are relational properties and not intrinsic properties.
• Relational properties do not belong to the object itself but instead describe the relationship between that object and other things.
• Intrinsic properties belong to the object itself and remain constant in all possible contexts.
Issue 2: The Move from Possibility to Actuality

• The properties that Descartes uses to distinguish minds and bodies from one another are *not* obviously intrinsic properties, which belong to the mind and body themselves, and remain constant in all possible contexts.

• Rather they are relational properties, i.e. facts about Descartes’s relationship to these things—what he thinks and believes about them.

• Therefore, Descartes mistakenly concludes that the mind and body are actually distinct because it is possible that they have different relational properties (because he thinks differently about them).
“A prominent objection to interactive dualism is that it is unclear how anything nonphysical could interact with anything physical: How could anything as ephemeral as a mind affect something as substantial as a brain?” (2)
Issue 4: The Unextended Mind

- Can a thinking thing, or thought, take up no space?
- Thoughts take up time and contemporary physics tells us that time takes up space.
  - Maybe Descartes’ point is that even though mind takes up no space (has no extension), it *exists* in space.
  - Contemporary physics posits point particles which exist in space but have no extension.
- Should we be ‘naturalists’ (rather than ‘non-naturalists’) and think that contemporary physics should be the final word on what the world is like?
Issue 4: The Unextended Mind

• Perhaps it just *appears* that the mind is unextended, but it is actually extended.

• This would be like someone who imagines a right triangle without imagining that the Pythagorean theorem holds for that triangle (that the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the squares of the other legs added together).
  
  • Descartes’ reply: Everything about thought is present to the mind. We have special access to our own thoughts.
  
  • Counter: It is not clear that *everything* about thought is present to the mind of the person who is thinking.