Lecture 6 – Objections to Dualism

Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia – “Correspondence between Descartes”
Agenda

1. Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia
2. The Interaction Problem
3. Gilbert Ryle
4. The Problem of Other Minds
5. Category Mistake
6. Behaviorism
Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia

• Eldest daughter of Frederick V, Elector Palatine, and Elizabeth Stuart. Her father lost his throne in 1620, prior to the Thirty Years War.

• Abbess of the Lutheran convent at Herford (1618–1680).

• Elisabeth seems to have been involved in negotiations around the Treaty of Westphalia and in efforts to restore the English monarchy after the English civil war.

• Corresponded with Descartes, William Penn, and Nicholas Malebranche.
Princess Elisabeth’s Objection

The Interaction Problem

“Given that the soul of a human being is only a thinking substance, how can it affect the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions?

The question arises because it seems that how a thing moves depends solely on (i) how much it is pushed, (ii) the manner in which it is pushed, or (iii) the surface-texture and shape of the thing that pushes it. The first two of those require contact between the two things, and the third requires that the causally active thing be extended. Your notion of the soul entirely excludes extension, and it appears to me that an immaterial thing can’t possibly touch anything else” (2).
Princess Elisabeth’s Objection

How can an unextended mind causally interact with an extended body? The mind cannot ‘push’ the body the way bodies ‘push’ each other precisely because the mind is not extended!
Questions

1. How might a dualist respond to Princess Elisabeth’s objection?

2. What does the correspondence between Princess Elisabeth and Descartes tell us about the social milieu at the time, especially with regard to gender relations?

• “So I am not ashamed to admit that I have found in myself all the causes of error you mention in your letter, and that I can’t yet banish them entirely. That’s because the life that I am constrained to lead doesn’t let me free up enough time to acquire a habit of meditation in accordance with your rules. The interests of my house (which I must not neglect) and conversations and social obligations (which I can’t avoid), inflict so much annoyance and boredom on this weak mind of mine that it is useless for anything else for a long time afterward” (5).
Descartes’ Reply

“We have certain basic notions that are like templates on the pattern of which we form all our other knowledge” (3).

Body: the basic notion is extension
Mind: the basic notion is thought
Mind and body together: the basic notion is their union

“When we try to explain some difficulty by means of a notion that isn’t right for it, we are bound to go wrong; just as we are when we try to explain or define one of these notions in terms of another, because each of them is basic and thus can be understood only through itself” (3).
Descartes’ Reply

• Do not confuse:
  1. The power of the mind to act on the body.
  2. The power of the body to act on other bodies.

• The mind moving the body is (sort of) analogous to the weight of a rock moving the rock downwards.

• Neither interaction is mysterious, even though neither interaction takes the form of 2—bodies acting on other bodies. The weight of the rock does NOT move the rock by pushing the rock like a hand, or by one surface contacting another surface.

• We already have a basic notion of UNION how the mind and body interact, which cannot be explained in terms of how bodies interact with other bodies.

• (Note: Descartes thinks the notion of UNION is actually misapplied to the example of the weight of a rock to a rock because he doesn’t think weight is a substance—it’s just a quality.)
• Is Descartes’ reply to Princess Elisabeth a good reply?
• Perhaps it just begs the question.
  • Descartes’ conclusion is that the immaterial mind causally interacts with the physical body in a way that is distinct from the way physical bodies move other physical bodies.
  • However, he seems to assume precisely this: that there is a basic notion (he calls it union) of how the mind and body interact that cannot be explained in terms of how bodies interact with one another.
  • Does this explain anything at all? Or is he just making a brute assertion?
Princess Elisabeth’s Rejoinder

I don’t see why we should be persuaded that

(a) a body can be pushed by some immaterial thing

by

(b) the ·supposed· power to carry the body toward the centre of the earth, the ‘power’ that you used wrongly to attribute to weight which you ·wrongly· took to be a ·real· quality;

rather than being confirmed in the view that

(c) a body cannot be pushed by some immaterial thing

by the demonstration, which you promise in your physics, that

(d) the way weight operates is nothing like (b). (6)
Princess Elisabeth’s Rejoinder

In other words, why are we using a flawed analogy by your own admission regarding the weight of the rock acting on the rock to understand the mind acting on the body?

“I’ve never been able to conceive of ‘what is immaterial’ in any way except as ·the bare negative· ‘what is not material’, and that can’t enter into causal relations with matter! I have to say that I would find it easier to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede that an immaterial thing could move and be moved by a body” (6).
Gilbert Ryle

• British ordinary language philosopher (1900–1976).
• Educated at Brighton College and Queen’s College at Oxford.
• Taught at Magdalen College, Oxford.
• Recruited to intelligence work during WWII.
• Wrote *The Concept of Mind* (1949).
The Ghost in the Machine

• Ryle describes Cartesian dualism as “the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine” (151) because Descartes characterizes the mind as an immaterial, ghost-like entity that somehow controls the movements of a material body.
## Features of Dualism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mind</th>
<th>Body</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In time but not in space</td>
<td>In time and space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not subject to mechanical laws</td>
<td>Subject to mechanical laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct access</td>
<td>Less direct or indirect access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No causal connections between minds</td>
<td>Causal connections between bodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(and between mind and bodies)</td>
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The Problem of Other Minds

Ryle raises the problem of other minds:

How can we justify our common-sense belief that other people have minds just like ours when we have no direct experience of their mental lives?
The Problem of Other Minds

• Ryle argues that Cartesian dualism exacerbates the problem of other minds.
• Cartesian dualism says we have perfect knowledge of our own minds through introspection, but no knowledge of other minds.
• We can only make problematic *inferences* from the observed behavior of another person’s body to the states of her mind.
Philosophical Zombies

- Philosopher David Chalmers came up with the term *philosophical zombie* to describe hypothetical beings who look like humans but do not have consciousness.
The Problem of Other Minds

• Ryle’s claim is that Cartesian dualism gives us a concept of the mind that makes it possible that everyone else besides yourself is just a philosophical zombie.

• This is a *reductio ad absurdum*, which shows how a hypothesis leads to a contradiction or false conclusion and thus should be rejected.

• Cartesian dualism leads to the absurd result that everyone else could just be philosophical zombies, so it should be rejected.
Category Mistake

• Ryle thinks that Cartesian dualism makes a category mistake.
• A category mistake is when one applies a term to a logical type to which it doesn’t belong.
Category Mistake

• A person who visits a university, sees all the buildings, and asks, “But where is the university?” is making a category mistake in thinking that the university is just another building.

• But the university and the buildings are not members of the same category. Instead, the university is just the way in which the buildings are organized.
Category Mistake

• Analogously, Descartes sees all aspects of the body, asks, "But where is the mind?" , and concludes that the mind must be a separate entity independent from the body.

• Ryle thinks Descartes makes a category mistake in assuming that the mind and the body are both members of the same category—they are both substances (just with different properties).

• For Ryle, the mind is not a separate entity from the body—a ghost in the machine, as it were—but just the particular way in which the body is organized.
Ryle defends a form of physicalism known as **behaviorism**.

Behaviorism is the view that mental states (like thoughts, beliefs, emotions, intentions) are just a special type of behavior that distinguish humans and animals from things that don’t have minds (robots, inanimate objects, philosophical zombies, etc.).

Minds are not an extra ingredient on top of all the physical parts of a human being, but rather just a useful way of describing a special group of behaviors.

How does behaviorism attempt to solve the problem of other minds? Is it successful?