

Dualism and Behaviorism

What are minds, and how are they related to bodies and brains and other physical stuff?

Descartes' Dualism

Descartes contends that a *person* or human being such as you or me is a two-part composite, of a mind and a body. (Alternatively speaking, the person *is* just the mind but *has* a body.) And according to him, a mind is an entirely immaterial, nonphysical thing, not even located in physical space. Yet what unites a mind with a particular body is that it causally interacts with that body, in a distinctively intimate way.

His main argument is this:

1. I can doubt that my body [or any other physical thing, such as my brain, or anything with any spatial properties] exists.
2. I cannot doubt that my mind exists.

∴ 3. My mind is distinct from my body [and from every other physical thing, such as my brain, or anything with any spatial properties]. [1,2]

Thus, your mind and its states are simply *not physical*.

Besides, intuitively it does not make sense to ascribe spatial location to minds or mental states. “Where exactly is your wish that you had been able to get that Geology class?” “Where exactly is that smell of fresh-made coffee?” (Someone might say, the smell is where the coffee is, in the pot and wafting in our direction. But the *mental, subjective experience of smelling* the coffee isn’t over there in the coffee pot; it’s in your mind, and only in your mind.) —But perhaps we should suspend judgment about that.

Several objections to Descartes’ Dualism were made in class.

Objection 1, the Interaction problem: How could a thing so utterly nonphysical as a Cartesian mind directly affect your physical body, or be directly and intimately affected by it? Replies: Descartes first appealed to the pineal

gland, as the gateway or locus of mind-body interaction. But (rejoinder by Princess Elisabeth¹;) the pineal gland is just another physical entity; so that appeal is no answer *at all* to the question of how a Cartesian mind could interact with anything physical. Descartes then likened mental causation to the force of gravity; gravity isn't a physical *object* like a billiard ball or a fist, yet it causes physical motion. But (rejoinders;) gravity is physical in at least the weaker sense that a gravitational field is always the gravitational field of *some physical object*; also (her Highness again), gravity is physical in Descartes' own favorite sense of being a *spatial* phenomenon and working according to well known laws of physics. The trouble with Cartesian minds is that they do not have any spatial properties at all.

Objection 2: If minds are what Descartes says they are, why is there so intimate an interdependence between what happens in the mind and what happens in the brain?

I mentioned in class that Descartes has a possible response to that. Here it is: Though many physical stimuli affect the mind, those that do are meager in their information content. Even patterned retinal hits greatly underdetermine the incredibly rich visual experiences that result, and the immediate perceptual beliefs that the subject will form as a result of those. Prodigious transducing is needed in order to send the required gigantic mass of hyperfinely structured information to and through the pineal gland. And that is what the brain is for. (Plausible? No, because of the Interaction problem. But Objection 2 is supposed to be independent of 1. *If one holds fixed the assumption that Cartesian interaction does occur, the transducer explanation is not bad.*)

Objection 3: Where did Cartesian minds come from; how could they have come into being? (Descartes did not subscribe to Plato's view that minds or souls have always existed, from eternity.)

Perhaps this just reduces back to the Interaction objection. If we had a good model for physical-to-mental causation, presumably the model could be used to show how complicated physical stuff could bring a Cartesian mind into being.

¹ Her Highness was in exile in Holland at the time, her father the King having been kicked off the throne when she was two years old. According to Anthony Kenny (*Descartes*, Random House, 1968, p. 11), Descartes not only kept up a spirited philosophical correspondence with her, but “favor[ed]...her with a wealth of medical and moral advice, and consol[ed]...her on the execution of her uncle King Charles I.” For a little more biographical information on Elisabeth, see the link on our web site.

Kenny also reports that, coincidentally, Descartes had once soldiered against Elisabeth's father (Frederick V) while serving in the army of Maurice of Nassau; but that is contested by Richard Watson, who says that Descartes did no soldiering at all. Alexandre Koyré comments that “[t]he military career of Descartes seems to have been a failure.... In any case it did not last long. He was not of the stuff that makes good soldiers” (Koyré's Introduction to G.E.M. Anscombe and P.T. Geach (eds.), *Descartes: Philosophical Writings* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1971, p. xviii)). Descartes' own father once said of him that “n'est bon qu'à être relié en veau”—pretty startling, until you learn that “veau” there meant buckskin, not veal.

Objection 4, Ryle's epistemological objection: Descartes' picture makes it a complete mystery how we could ever know what's going on in someone else's mind. All we perceive of another person is her/his body; what could possibly license an inference from physical observations to a conclusion about immaterial goings-on in a nonphysical, nonspatial substance? Reply: This alone does not show that Descartes' Problem of Other Minds is worse than anyone else's. Analogical reasoning should work as well for Descartes as for the rest of us. Moreover, on Descartes' view, relevant bodily motions, speech in particular, are *caused by* mental states and events. In everyday life we usually do know things by way of their observable effects, so it's not a *complete* mystery how we could know things about Cartesian mental states. Rejoinder (Ryle): All right, but Descartes still gets the shape of the epistemology wrong. We don't have to perform a risky inference from effects to ghostly causes. Often we know *perceptually* what is going on in someone else's mind: We know what they think because we hear them say it; we can just see that the accident victim is in terrible pain. Also, we often know another person's mental state—a mood, say, or a belief—better than they themselves know it; on Descartes' view that would be impossible.

Evaluating the Doubt argument

Although the argument may at first sound correct, it is not valid. In general, from "I can doubt the existence of X; I cannot doubt the existence of Y," we cannot infer that X and Y are distinct. Compare:

1. I can doubt that the winner of the 1999 All-Ohio Cross-Dressing Contest exists. [Say, because I doubt that there is any such contest.]
2. I cannot doubt that my daughter exists. [Say, because she is standing right in front of me and we are chatting.]

∴ 3. My daughter is not the winner of the 1999 All-Ohio Cross-Dressing Contest. [1,2]

That conclusion clearly does not follow. I can doubt the one and not the other so long as *I don't know* that my daughter is the actual winner of the contest; all that is perfectly consistent with her actually being the winner.

Don't be distracted by the fact that on Dream / Evil Genius grounds, Descartes would not grant the truth of premise (2). The point is that, whether or not (2) is true, (3) does not follow from (1) and (2).

(Should you want to learn in more detail about why the inference fails, see the handout “Descartes’ Argument and Leibniz’ Law.”)

Descartes’ Conceivability argument

1. “[E]verything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it.” (I.e., minus the theology: Everything which I can genuinely and coherently conceive, not just shallowly seem to imagine, is a real metaphysical possibility.)
- ∴ 2. If I can genuinely and coherently conceive X apart from Y, then X and Y “are capable of being separated, at least by God,” i.e., then it is metaphysically possible for X to exist without Y and vice versa. [Special case of 1]
3. If it is metaphysically possible for X to exist without Y and vice versa, then X and Y are distinct.
4. I can genuinely and coherently conceive my mind apart from my body.

∴ 5. My mind is distinct from my body. [2,3,4]

Problems: For technical reasons, (3) will need considerable qualification. And (4) cannot be granted lightly, because we are often mistaken about our ability to conceive things. (Two kinds of error: We are not conceiving the state of affairs coherently; or we are not conceiving the one we think we’re conceiving.)

Behaviorism

The Behaviorists held that to ascribe a mental state to someone is only to say something about that person’s actual or hypothetical behavior. To be in pain is just to behave, or at least be disposed to behave, in the ways we stereotypically associate with pain—crying out, wincing, favoring the injured part, etc. To be sad is to be disposed to weep, to droop, not to show enthusiasm, etc. To believe that motorcycles are dangerous is just to be disposed to say that they are, to avoid them, to recommend them warmly to your enemies, etc.

The Behaviorist theory avoids all four of our objections to Cartesian Dualism at one stroke! (Check that for yourself.)

But (of course) Behaviorism faces objections of its own.

Objection 1: It seems inescapable that there are, in some sense, inner mental episodes that we know from the inside—thoughts, feelings, experiences, that occur in real time and that aren't constituted either by any actual behavior or simply by the mere truth of a hypothetical "If X were to happen, you *would* do Y."

Moreover, the mind can't be *all* hypothetical, nothing but hypothetical. Ryle could fairly reply that, of course, sometimes there's actual, episodic mentality-constituting behavior, such as talking to yourself. But when mind is constituted only by hypotheticals, what *explains* the hypotheticals? They aren't true by magic. The obvious antiBehaviorist answer is, the relevant mental state!

Objection 2: We *introspect* actual, occurrent mental states, events and activities. This is a matter of *turning our attention inward*. The Behaviorist must be pretending to be anaesthetized.

Objection 3, the "Cycle" (P.T. Geach, R. Chisholm): The Behaviorist identifies each mental state with a specific behavioral disposition, which presupposes that every type of mental state has a unique, identifiable behavioral syndrome. (Which is true; else actors would not be able to do their thing on stage.) But the association of mental states with behavior is *mediated* by assumptions, and the assumptions are about what other *mental states* the subject is in.

Example: Suppose we try to give a behavioral analysis of *believing that motorcycles are dangerous*. OK, Jones believes that motorcycles are dangerous just in case: (a) he avoids motorcycles, (b) he warmly recommends them to his enemies, (c) if asked "What do you think of motorcycles?," he'll say "They're dangerous," (d)... But actually those conditions hold only if our tacit psychological assumptions about Jones are right. To avoid obvious counterexamples, the clauses need to be qualified: *if he wants not to get hurt*, he'll avoid motorcycles; *if he is vindictive and does not love his enemies*, he'll recommend...; if asked *and if he intends to tell the truth*, he'll say.... So we cannot give a purely behavioral analysis of the motorcycle belief. At best we can explicate it in terms of behavior *and other mental states*. That is not bad in itself, but if the same holds true of every other mental state we want to analyze, we will be stuck in a large vicious circle.

Neither Dualism nor Behaviorism is very satisfactory.