

Are we a mind, a
body or both?



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Are We a Mind, a Body or Both? Of all the topics that are currently occupying the attention of philosophers, the Mind-Body problem is at center stage. It is one of the classical metaphysical issues concerning the relationship between that which is mental and that which is physical. The simple question asked is: what are we? Are we a mind, a body or both? The issue has its origins in the ancient dualism of Plato and since then many solutions to the problem have been offered. D. M. Armstrong's *The Mind-Body Problem* gives rise to all the possible solutions to the problem. In his writings, he accurately depicts the views of others, as well as his own. Armstrong wants it to be clear that all theories of the mind-body relation get involved in a certain amount of difficulty. The thing that we have to try and judge is what sort of theory seems to come off best [with] all things concerned. It is not an easy task (20). Out of the many possible theories, the Dualistic approach seems to be the weakest in trying to pose a solution, while the Eliminative Materialistic approach appears to have the strongest hold on answering the never-ending question. According to Dualism, the human person is composed of two completely different substances: the mind and the body. The body, or physical substance, is essentially located and extended in space, inactive, lifeless and unthinking. The mind, or mental substance, is essentially active, living, thinking, and, though located in time, not located in space. Altogether, the human person is some sort of union of a mind and a body (9). This form of Dualism, which seems to be the least plausible in offering a sufficient answer to the mind-body problem, is more commonly referred to as substance dualism. Perhaps the most famous advocate of substance dualism was Rene Descartes, a 17th century philosopher who put forth a tremendous influence on the religious and scientific community of his time. Aside from

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substance dualism, Descartes also adds a Cartesian twist. Cartesian duality is a dogma that explains the division of existence into two distinct entities: a thinking self and a non-thinking body, in which both can have causal effects on the other. With this, Descartes characterized thoughts and thinking as non-spatial, and non-corporeal. Thoughts are not of the body. The body represented a non-thinking entity, free of thoughts. He insisted that one's sense of self existed separate from the body. A body, then, is an epiphenomenon, something outside of anyone's capacity to know it, feel it, be connected with it, etc. Basically, Descartes feels that the body is a substance that is purely physical and, therefore, the mind is first and best known (10) with consciousness as its essence. He then moves from his assumption that consciousness is the very essence of the mind to the conclusion that the mind is conscious at all times that it exists [and] where there's mental activity, we are always aware of it [and] our awareness of mental activity cannot be wrong (13-16). On to the more plausible theory of metaphysics: Eliminative Materialism, commonly known as eliminativism. This theory is fairly new, compared to others, and was first brought forth by Paul Feyerabend and Richard Rorty. Currently Paul and Patricia Churchland defend it. At the very beginning, like the time of Rorty, Eliminativists merely stated that we as human entities are only bodies. This seems to be connected with the Materialist point of view: the mind and body are one, where the mental is a distinct realm from the physical (67). In reality, they are very much different for the mere fact that the Eliminativists do not believe in the mental or in a mind. For them, there are only brain processes and brain (92), that which are purely physical and can be explained by science. Modern Eliminativists explain Eliminativism as the view that Folk

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Psychology is radically false in its ontology, what things it claims exist, and its laws. Folk Psychology is a blanket term referring to any psychological theory that makes reference to intentional states, such as beliefs, desires, attitudes, etc. The Churchlands view on the issue is just: folk psychology is a hopeless unsatisfactory theory. It needs to be replaced by a scientific neurophysiology, and the new theory has no need to make reference to anything mental (92). So in simple English, we see that Eliminativists hold the view that we solely have a physical body, which is made up of neurons and physiological material and nothing more. Now for the big question: why? Why is it that I feel the Dualists pose a weak approach to the mind-body problem? Why is it that I feel the Eliminativists pose a strong approach to the problem? I would like to say I don't know, but I do. The simplest answer I can supply is that one seems more plausible, in my eyes, than the other. The way I was brought up would probably lead people to think that I would find the Dualist's view more plausible, but the fact that I am a Biomedical Science major with hopes of going to medical school, I can more readily relate with the Eliminativists. The most serious problem facing Dualism is the Interaction problem. As an interactionist, Descartes states: Body act on mind. A blow on the hand causes pain. Mind acts on body. A desire to drink is the cause of various bodily acts ending with drinking (18). Given that the mind and body are essentially distinct substances with incompatible properties, it is not clear how the two could ever interact, unless you want to think of it in the same way as the actors of the Matrix, which is ludicrous. In essence, Dualism is unable to explain mind-body interaction; and even when Descartes tried to, it seems to fail. Descartes tries twice to solve the problem of interaction. First, he suggests that the mind and body interact at the pineal gland

because it lay at the centre of the brain (19). But this doesn't solve the problem, since the pineal gland is every bit a physical object as the rest of the body and it simply is not correct. Descartes has simply pushed the problem back a few steps. Second, he backs off of his claim that only the mind is essential to who we are, and suggests that our essence is to be found in a primitive mind-body union. But this too only pushed the problem back. If it's not clear how the mind and body could interact, it's certainly no clearer how they could form a primitive union. Armstrong states, it remains true that we still have no clear model for the way that a spiritual happening gives rise to a brain happening, and vice versa. Descartes, in reply, can protest only that the interaction occurs. But that is no reply if what we are trying to assess is the plausibility of his theory of that interaction (20). The Eliminativists, on the other hand, seem strong and confident because they have science to back up their claims. Science is very concrete and not so easily rejected. If something is proven to be true scientifically, then it really is true. The fact that the Eliminativists can pretty much support their view by using neurophysiology makes me feel like they know what they are saying and can easily provide support. For example, superficial people used to make the ontological claim that witches exist. Most people today have eliminated the claim that witches exist from their theory of what reality contains. In the same way, Eliminativists say, that the existence of the mental is, or is likely to be, a mere myth to which we all subscribe [and we shouldn't] (93). Another example, I woke up this morning and said to myself: I feel exceptionally happy today. While a Dualist would comment by stating that my happiness is caused by my mind, which perceives my feelings of joy, Eliminativists would disagree. They would say that my happiness is due to

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the excess amount of serotonin my brain produced through the night. The case the Dualists pose seems shady and theoretical, while the point of the Eliminativists has been proven through a neuropsychological method. To me, this makes for a more plausible case. Simply, instead of saying I feel sad, depressed, overweight, and in pain, I could more specifically say I have a low serotonin count today or the endorphins in my brain are not in abundance. This view on life is more factual and definitely more plausible. Still, many philosophers have a hard time dealing with Eliminativism. Even Armstrong states, the Eliminativist's position is not completely indefensible, but it does not seem at all plausible (99). Dualists feel the same way and come up with a few of their arguments against them. Descartes has two theories in which he tries to establish his mind-body theory. The first of his theories is the Conceivability Argument. Through various premises and conclusions, he feels he is able to firmly state that [we are] not just a body (22). So how can the Eliminativists argue against this? Second, he states his Indivisibility Argument, which states, the body and mind are two different things (23). He uses his Properties argument to support his claim with $X = Y$ as his example. With this, Dualists say: how can Eliminativists account for these assumptions? To rebut, I think I can start by saying that the Eliminativists express that any attempt to preserve the theoretical terms of the Cartesian theory of mind, or attempts to preserve our everyday psychological ways of describing human behavior, has no value. The most ordinary observations, it is said, according to Armstrong, involve folk theory; some folk theory is bad; and all of it can be called upon to justify itself. This notion contrasts sharply with the older Cartesian epistemology that looks for indubitable foundations for knowledge (96-97). Rather than preserve the

earlier notions and then try to squeeze them into a workable identity equation, where folk psychological terms go on one side and neurological terms on the other, the Eliminativists argue that we do not need an identity equation in the first place, because it causes so much confusion. This is more than simply changing the kinds of explanations that are offered in a new theory. It means changing the very phenomena that the new theory explains. The Eliminativists argue that with any new theory; we do not try to hang on the previous ontological entities and processes. Instead, we give a new explanation of their properties and relationship, like in the example about sadness above. The Eliminativists also believe that once neuroscience reaches full maturity, we will no longer think of the phenomena which are genuinely there and which have a real explanation in any of the terms that we now use, as inherited from our outmoded theories. An example would be how our descendents once believed that the Earth was flat; but once that was proven false, the new theory that the Earth is round replaced all old beliefs. We can go on to say that the Eliminativists think you can get rid of the mental expressions because any attempt to hang on to the Cartesian mode of expression has no meaning. In the case of $X = Y$, Eliminativists feel that the entire idea is irrelevant because how are you to identify to distinctly different things with an equal sign. That is, X has no real existence or properties that science can determine, so it is completely replaced by expressions of the new theory. Thus, there are no X s, only Y s. Even Armstrong says how the Eliminativists have got round the Properties problem. It does not matter for an Eliminativists that the mental has different properties from the physical (94). To sum things up, although the Dualists pose somewhat of a reasonable argument in solving the mind-body problem,

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the Eliminativists do a much better job. The fact that science can back up claims made by the Eliminativists plays a big part in my leaning towards them. The mind-body problem is the problem of what the mind is, what the body is, and especially, what relation they stand in to each other (1).

Throughout this paper, my intent was not to show which is true, but which seems most plausible and the task was not easy (20).