

Philosophy of mind



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Philosophy of Mind Topic: While Cartesian Dualism is untenable a Dualist Interpretation of Mental Phenomena is nonetheless defensible.

Understanding the true nature of the mind has been a challenge that has existed for centuries. In fact many continue to seek for the real meaning of the mind and its relationship with the body. Indeed the mind excites curiosity in humans because mental phenomena are so basic to our own nature. Most persons agree that we are not merely bulks of matter, not just bodies; We are creatures that think, feel, experience, imagine, and make decisions so our mental aspect is of much importance and helps us to better understand our humanly existence.[i] Simultaneously we hardly deny that we have a physical aspect as well. But what is this mind that we speak of and claim to have? It is often hard to verbalize what we know the mind to the “ I” that we refer to when use the first person pronoun to refer to our self? Many ideas have been advanced in response to this dilemma of the mind-body problem. Cartesian Dualism is one such idea and falls under the more general theory of Mind-body Dualism or simply dualism.[ii] Dualism states that humans are divided into two distinct and mutually irreducible types of substances: physical substances which are directly observable and obey well-known laws of physics, and mental substances which are not directly observable using any known measurement technique.[iii] Dualism exists mainly in two forms: Substance Dualism and Property Dualism. Substance Dualism in its most radical form is called Cartesian Dualism in honor of its most famous proponent Rene Descartes (1596-1650).[iv] He claims that the soul which is our mind, the thing that causes us to think and thus exist as human beings, is not made out of physical matter, but is intimately related to the body and continues to exist after death or destruction of the body.[v] In essence

Cartesian Dualism purports that the mind is this immaterial, indivisible part of us which is responsible for all mental activity- thought, feelings, and experiences but the mind exists independently of our body, So when I speak of " I" as in " I have a cold, I am hungry" I am referring to the ' thinking part' of me that is my soul or mind as having these experiences. Descartes prominent saying " cogito ergo sum" " I think therefore I am" epitomizes the concept of Substance Dualism.[vi] His argument basically is that while it is possible to doubt everything regarding the physical world, even that we have bodies, we can hardly doubt that we think. He says here that the mere fact that we can conceive of ourselves as existing without a body is enough to reveal firstly that we can exist without a body and secondly that the essence of our being is our ability to think, our mentality or mind and not the body. Therefore we are not our bodies but we are our minds so to speak. So ultimately I am a soul. Property dualism on the other hand asserts the existence of a single, physical substance but argues that this single substance has two potential properties: physical and mental states that are not reducible.[vii] Dualism contrasts with Monism which states that all things in the world are substances of one kind. Material monism in particular states that the world consists of only physical entities but the theory fails to give a plausible account of the mind in purely physical terms taking into consideration the problem of other minds, transparency to self, consciousness and other issues surrounding the mind-body problem. In comparison with Monism dualism gives a fair account of reality as far as it proclaims the thesis that we are comprised of two parts: body and soul or mind, unlike materialism which in my view offers the options that I am either a body or solely a mind. The term substance is used here to refer to a

particular thing that has certain essential properties and other accidental properties[viii]. The essential substances are those it must have if it is to continue existing while the accidental properties are those it can lose and still continue to exist. For Descartes the essential property of a physical substance is extension which means our physical parts or body while the essential property of a mental substance is that it thinks.[ix] His idea is that mental states lack extension and cannot be located in space or time and what is essential to the mental is not essential to the physical. Indeed we do not typically believe that our mind is some extended part that can be seen by all but in the same breath we do not view it as some part that is so separate from who we are. When we speak of “ I” we are not excluding the physical. While dualism in general may be more plausible than monism, Property dualism in particular seems to be more consistent with our view of reality. The main drawback of Cartesian dualism is its failure to adequately account for mental causation.[x] If the mind is a non-physical entity having no position in space, how then can it give rise to a behavioral effect that has a position in space? Our general notion of the mind is that it is closely linked to and dependant on the body. A cut or prick of the skin causes pain[xi] which is body-mind interaction, while a mental activity like making a decision causes a leg to kick a ball or an arm to go up suggesting mind-body interaction. So a Cartesian faces a problem in showing how a non physical entity can affect the physical and vice versa. Descartes also faced a lot of criticism with his conceivability argument where he explains that we are souls based on conceivability of his own existence. First, the argument makes the assumption that whatever is conceivable is possible. This would be hardly so since we can conceive of things which we know to be

impossible. I can conceive of my cat as being a dog. when asked to explain“ how the human soul can determine the movement of the animal spirits in the body being that the two have radically distinct natures, “[xii]Descartes said that the pineal gland was responsible for soul-body causal interaction. But as we see the idea was futile, for one it is just another organ which is part of the body which brings us back to the same question of how physical and immaterial interact. Secondly, it does not make scientific sense to think that one small organ is responsible for all mind-body causal interactions.[xiii] since the pineal gland belongs to the physical realm. In order for causal interaction to occur these two entities must obey certain laws of physics. One of these is the Law of conservation. [xiv] Therefore in order for the mind to causally interact with each other the mind must expend energy to alter the body’s state. However no such phenomenon has been observed and thus Cartesian mind-body interaction is nomologically impossible.[xv] Descartes believed that the pineal gland acts as a Substance dualism also has the problem of how we come to know that other minds exist. Property dualists believe that all substances are physical and there are no mental substances. In fact property dualist may be in a better position to deal with many of the problems discovered in substance dualism. For property dualists mental states are non-reducible properties of brain states. Unlike Cartesian dualism, it asserts that there is one substance in the universe which is physical in nature and that this one substance exemplifies two kinds of properties: mental and physical. This idea of there being one substance avoids the Cartesian problem of interaction. It is hard to understand what nexus can serve to join two radically distinct substances which have nothing in common.[xvi] Our bodies have physical properties such weight and height,

and mental properties such as beliefs and desires. Therefore mental phenomena are simply properties of our bodies. Property dualism is a compromise between dualism and materialism in that it does not reduce mental states to physical states nor does it claim that the mind and its contents are separate and distinct from the physical. It somehow combines the plausible aspects of both materialism and Cartesian Dualism and avoiding the challenges of each. For a property dualist the problem of interaction is easily solved since it allows for matter to cause mental states. It adheres to the physical law of conservation. Since both mind and body come from the same substance it is possible for energy to be expended from this physical substance to affect changes in the mind. Property dualism allows for the physical over the mental. Thus, mental states or properties are caused by physical processes in the brain, but are not reducible to a set of physical processes; there is not a one to one mapping as materialist may claim. So property dualism gives a more plausible explanation of causal interaction between body and mind. There is also the pairing problem which the Cartesian faces Since Cartesian minds cannot bear spatial relation to anything causation between minds and bodies or even two minds become problematic. Given that spatial relations do the job of pairing causes with their effects, if minds are not within a spatial network there is nothing to which mental activity can be causally paired with. Regarding the problem of interaction property dualist offer a better response than the Cartesian who fails to reasonably show how two distinct substances can possibly interact, or the Materialist who believe that the mind is nothing more than the brain and body. Gilbert Ryle also rejects Cartesian dualism on this dogma of " the ghost in the machine" claiming that it commits a category mistake. The error

is not factual but logical in that doctrine establishes a polar opposition between mind and body while the descriptions of mental events do not properly belong to the categories used for describing the corporeal events. Property dualism holds that mental phenomena are non-physical properties of physical substances. Consciousness is one such phenomenon.

Consciousness is the defining feature of mentality, for without consciousness we would no longer be creatures with mentality. Property dualism explains that consciousness is an emergent phenomenon of the physical processes in the brain[xvii] resulting in some sort of asymmetrical causation. The Cartesian concept of consciousness on the other hand to be conscious is to be. For Descartes we have consciousness as long as we are aware of our thoughts.[xviii] But seeing that our minds, the thing of which consciousness is the essence, is so separate from our body it may very well follow that if we are struck hard on the head we would lose control of our bodies while continuing to be conscious; and if we drank a lot of alcohol we would lose motor control while still having clear minds. On the other hand the property dualist would not have much difficulty in showing that mental properties are dependant on and can interact with physical properties, to conclude that there would be a loss of consciousness.[xix] Another argument in favor of Property dualism is that it takes a more scientific approach to explaining mental phenomena than the Cartesian view which is based on a more traditional, religious and solipsist perspective.[xx] The property dualist theory is based more on the physical which is equally observable by all as opposed to the view that mental aspect is immaterial and private, existing in a non-physical realm. It thus allows for scientific investigation and public access to the causes of mental states and the problem of knowing whether

other minds exist. Despite its advantages over Cartesian dualism, property dualism has faced some objections as well. First it is not certain whether property dualism solves the problem of location associated with substance dualism.[xxi] Just because mental properties supervene physical properties does not explain where they are, just how they interact with physical properties[xxii]. It claims that Property dualism explains that consciousness is an emergent phenomenon of the physical processes in the brain[xxiii] yet not reducible to it, but it does not show how mental phenomena interact with and emerges from the physical. It suggests that there is an evolutionary aspect to the emergence of mental phenomena from physical. The theory is also criticized on the point that it violates Occams' Razor.[xxiv] Mental functioning as we know it is intimately bound up with our biological makeup. We encounter mind and consciousness only in connection with human beings and other animals. As such we can easily understand and subscribe to the view that property dualism purports.[xxv] Property dualism is a defensible form of dualism in that it meets most of the challenges raised by Cartesian dualism and its opposing materialist theories and also gives a more reasonable account of how we view mentality in the real world. In the same vein the theory is compatible with Descartes in that it agrees that the mind has properties that are distinct from the body. However, unlike the Cartesian account, we believe that we have a mind which is the product of a working brain. We do not merely think of our thoughts, desires, feelings, and imagination as existing in a realm that is separate from our physical nature, but rather that the mind is closely linked to and dependant upon physical processes. As such we cannot totally disregard the credibility of Dualistic theory in totality as a result of the shortcomings of Cartesian Dualism.

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