

Week 14 Notes

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1 The Dualist Self

In Descartes' foundationalist epistemology, his knowledge that he exists is the axiomatic truth from which the rest can be rebuilt. According to Descartes, even if some supernatural force is tricking him in every other way, it cannot convince him that he does not exist. After all: even as he doubts all of his other beliefs, there must be a "he" to do this doubting. This much seems entirely certain. What is this self—the thing that Descartes refers to when using the word 'I'?

Descartes' answer is that his true self is not his body, but a mind—a thinking thing (Descartes, 2017, 6):

Well, then, what am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wants, refuses, and also imagines and senses.

Later, in the Sixth Meditation, Descartes gives another argument for dualism in which he further characterizes the nature of the self (Descartes, 2017, 32):

There is a great difference between the mind and the body. Every body is by its nature divisible, but the mind can't be divided. When I consider the mind—i.e. consider myself purely as a thinking thing—I can't detect any parts within myself; I understand myself to be something single and complete. The whole mind seems to be united to the whole body, but not by a uniting of parts to parts, because: If a foot or arm or any other part of the body is cut off, nothing is thereby taken away from the mind. As for the faculties of willing, of understanding, of sensory perception and so on, these are not parts of the mind, since it is

one and the same mind that wills, understands and perceives. They are (I repeat) not parts of the mind, because they are properties or powers of it. By contrast, any corporeal thing can easily be divided into parts in my thought; and this shows me that it is really divisible. This one argument would be enough to show me that the mind is completely different from the body, even if I did not already know as much from other considerations presented in the second meditation.

In other words:

- (1) My self (i.e., my mind) is a unity, and so cannot be divided into parts.
- (2) My body, being a material entity, can be divided into parts.
- (3) Therefore, my self (mind) and my body are not the same thing.

In this argument, Descartes makes another important claim about the self: it is an indivisible unity, which cannot be further divided into parts. Although this isn't an essential feature of dualism, it is a central feature of Descartes' version, and it is an attractive idea in a certain sense. If my self is not the sort of thing that can be divided, then perhaps it also cannot be broken down, degraded, or damaged.

2 The Materialist Self

The implication of Descartes' argument is that if materialism were true, then the self, being a physical entity, would be divisible. It would be made up of smaller parts, which could themselves be taken apart and divided.

There is some evidence that this is the true. One of the most striking piece of evidence arises from so-called "split-brain patients", about whom we have two short required videos for this week. A split-brain patient is someone who has had their extreme case of epilepsy treated by severing their corpus callosum, which is the main connection between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. People who have had this operation mostly behave normally, but in some circumstances—particularly in certain controlled laboratory experiments—it can be shown that their two brain hemispheres do not share information as usual. The crucial background fact is that the left-brain processes information from the right half of the visual field, and controls the motor functions of the right half of the body, whereas the right-brain processes information from the left half of the visual field and controls motor

function for the left half of the body. And so, in situations when split-brain patients are presented with different information on the two sides of their visual fields, and are asked to respond by doing something with their hands, what happens is that their two hands respond in conflicting ways. For example: if such a patient is shown a picture of a dog on the right and a cat on the left, and then asked to choose the stuffed toy that matches what they saw, their right hand will reach for a dog and their left hand will reach for a cat.

An important further detail is that speech is controlled by the left hemisphere of the brain. And so, if we ask a split-brain patient what they saw in the situation described above, they will say “a dog”. Their speech thus matches the behavior of their right hand, not their left hand. And if they are asked why their left hand reached for a cat, they will do one of two things. They might say that they don’t know why, or that they can’t explain. But, more likely, they will make up a fake explanation. They might say something like: “well, dogs chase cats, and so this cat reminded me of a dog”. This clearly isn’t the real reason why their left hand reached for a cat; the real reason is that the right hemisphere of their brain thinks that they were shown a picture of a cat. But the right hemisphere can’t control their speech, and it can’t share its information with the left hemisphere via the corpus callosum. And so, because the person’s right hemisphere makes up a fake explanation without the person knowing that this is what is going on. This sort of fake explanation is often called “confabulation” by psychologists, and it turns out that humans tend to confabulate about all kinds of things without realizing that we’re doing it: our brains are bullshitters.

These facts about split-brain patients have led many psychologists and philosophers to think that split-brain patients have not one consciousness, but two. There are two somewhat independent minds—two selves—in their heads, only one of which can speak, but both of which can show up in the patients’ behavior. If we divide the brain, we divide the self as well.

What about the rest of us? Split-brain patients don’t even have to learn anything new in order to exist as a pair of selves in a single body, which suggests that they already knew how to do that. They don’t even notice that anything is different, and they don’t have to learn to confabulate about their actions, which suggests that they already knew that too. The only difference between us and them is that our two brain hemispheres can communicate across the corpus callosum, whereas their hemispheres can’t. Maybe that just means that each of us has two selves that are better at confabulating and coordinating their actions than those of split-brain patients. Maybe what we usually think of as a self should actually be thought of as a team of

sub-selves that normally work together so seamlessly that we don't notice the divisions between them, but whose divisions *can* come out in the right circumstances. This is the conclusion that some philosophers have reached.

This understanding of what a self is is radically different than either the common sense view or Descartes idea. For one thing: both Descartes and common sense tell us that each person's self is a single, indivisible unit. But, perhaps even more importantly, both Descartes and common sense share the assumption that each of us can discover the true nature of the self just by introspecting—by “looking inwardly” and inspecting what we find. Split-brain patients seem to show that this just isn't right: we can be just as wrong and confused about the nature of our own minds—and our own selves—as we are about lots of other things. This suggests that Descartes starting axiomatic starting place—that he exists, and is a mind—was not as rock solid as he thought it was.

Paul Churchland, who is the author of one of our readings for this week, would put the foregoing point as follows: Descartes mistakenly thought that he had direct, unmediated knowledge of his own mind, but what he actually had was a *theory* that could turn out to be either supported or proven wrong by evidence, just like any other scientific theory. According to this theory, the mind is a non-physical substance where beliefs, desires, sensations, decisions, pleasures, pains, and other mental phenomena happen. These kinds of mental states are all *posits* of Descartes' theory, just in the same way that electrons and the force of gravity are posits of contemporary physics. A posit of a theory is something that we have reason to believe in only to the extent that we have reason to believe the theory. We have reason to believe in quarks only to the extent that we have reason to believe that contemporary physics is a true theory of how the world works, for example. If a physicist came up with a better theory—one that made better predictions than what we currently have, but without any mention of quarks, for example—then we should stop believing in quarks. According to Churchland, this is also true of Descartes' theoretical posits, such as beliefs, desires, and pains: we have reason to believe them only insofar as we have reason to believe that the overall picture of the mind that they inhabit is a correct one. And, according to Churchland, it isn't. Churchland argues that mental states are posits of what he calls “folk psychology”—the theory that most of us use to interpret other people and ourselves, and in terms of which Descartes formulated what he took to be his most basic knowledge about himself. But Churchland thinks that folk psychology is a false theory that we will (and should) eventually give up. One of your options for this week is to explain one of Churchland's argument for

this position.

It's easy to imagine Descartes replying to Churchland as follows: "My belief that I have a single, indivisible self that is a thinking thing is not a theory that I must present evidence for, it is something that I cannot conceive of being false, just as I cannot conceive that $2+2$ equals 5." Churchland's response would likely be that we simply can't trust our intuitions about which things are inconceivable. This point is made very well in one of this week's optional readings—Larissa MacFarquhar's profile of Paul Churchland and his wife, Patricia, who is also an eminent and influential philosopher. The anecdote takes place when Patricia Churchland had finished her philosophy PhD, and was training in neuroscience.

The first neurological patient she saw was himself a neurosurgeon who suffered from a strange condition, owing to a lesion in his brain stem, that caused him to burst into tears at the slightest provocation. He would sob and shake but at the same time insist that he was not feeling in the least bit sad. This made an impression on her, partly because she realized how it would have flummoxed a behaviorist to see this complete detachment of behavior and inward feeling and partly because none of the neurologists on the rounds were surprised. The condition, it appeared, was not all that uncommon. She encountered patients who were blind but didn't know it. "That really kicked the slats out of the idea that you can learn very much about the nature of the mind or the nature of the brain by asking what's imaginable," she says. "It's not imaginable to me that I could be blind and not know it, but it actually happens. So its being unimaginable doesn't tell me shit!"

So, both of the Churchlands think that the kind of first-person introspection on which Descartes' philosophical method is based is totally unreliable, because human minds/brains play all kinds of tricks on themselves. The only reliable way of understanding the human mind is by doing science, not by just thinking about what is plausible.

Your second option for this week to explain Daniel Dennett's argument for the conclusion that the self is a kind of useful fiction. Dennett does not think that the self isn't real. Rather, like the Churchlands, he thinks that it is a theoretical posit, much like an object's center of gravity. A center of gravity isn't just another physical part of an object; rather, it is something that we posit because doing so allows us to make better predictions about how complex physical systems will behave. Dennett

thinks the same thing about selves: they can't be identified with any one part of our brains; instead, we posit selves because they play a useful role in our ability to understand and predict the behaviors of complex systems called human beings. Just like Churchland, then, Dennett is casting doubt on some of Descartes' most basic assumptions about the nature of the self, and how we discover that nature.

References

Descartes, R. (2017). *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Early Modern Texts. Translation by Jonathan Bennett, <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/descartes1641.pdf>, 2017 edition.