

Week 11 Notes

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1 Cartesian Dualism

Back in the Second Meditation, Descartes argued that he was, first and foremost, a “thinking thing”—i.e., a mind.

Strictly speaking, then, I am simply a thing that thinks—a mind, or soul, or intellect, or reason, these being words whose meaning I have only just come to know. Still, I am a real, existing thing. What kind of a thing? I have answered that: a thinking thing. (Descartes, 2017, 5)

His argument for this position is pretty simple. Remember that, at this point in *The Meditations*, Descartes is still taking a position of skepticism about all of his beliefs that are based on his senses. Included among these beliefs is the belief that he has a body:

But now that I am supposing there is a supremely powerful and malicious deceiver who has set out to trick me in every way he can—now what shall I say that I am? Can I now claim to have any of the features that I used to think belong to a body? When I think about them really carefully, I find that they are all open to doubt... (Descartes, 2017, 5)

So, he concludes that it is at least possible that he doesn't have a body. On the other hand, he has argued that even if the evil demon is deceiving him, still he must exist in order to be deceived, and in order to be the sort of thing that can be deceived, he must be a thinking thing. So it is not coherent to believe that it is possible that he lacks a mind. From this, Descartes concludes that his mind and his body (assuming he has one) are distinct substances. We can summarize the argument as follows:

Descartes' Argument for Dualism

- (i) It is possible that my body doesn't exist (even when I am thinking).
- (ii) It is not possible that my mind doesn't exist (as long as I am thinking).
- (iii) For any two things, X and Y, if it is possible for X to exist without Y existing, then X and Y must not be the same thing; they must be distinct.
- (iv) Therefore, my mind and my body are not the same thing; they are distinct.

Cartesian Dualism is the idea that the mind and the body are distinct *substances*—they consist of fundamentally different kinds of stuff. What are mind and body? What is the difference between them? Descartes gives us something like a definition of each when he lists the different kinds of properties that they can have. In the following passage, he lists some of the things that minds have:

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. (Descartes, 2017, 5)

Doubting, understanding, affirming, denying, wanting, refusing, imagining, and sensing are all different ways of thinking. Mind is the kind of substance that accomplishes these kinds of things.

Bodies have different kinds of properties, which Descartes lists off as follows:

By a 'body' I understand whatever has a definite shape and position, and can occupy a region of space in such a way as to keep every other body out of it; it can be perceived by touch, sight, hearing, taste or smell, and can be moved in various ways. (Descartes, 2017, 5)

So, whereas minds consist of the sort of substance that thinks, bodies (including human bodies, but also other physical objects) consist of the sort of substance that has physical properties like mass, shape, size, and spatial location. Bodies (including brains) don't think, and minds don't have mass or take up space, and there is no kind of substance that has properties of both kinds. This is the central tenet of Cartesian dualism.

Although Descartes believed that his mind and his body were different kinds of things, he nonetheless believed that they interact. This is relatively commonsensical: *action* is what happens when my body moves as a result of something (a decision) happening in my mind, and *sensation* is what happens when something happens in my mind as a result of something happening in my body. Information has to pass between the mind and the body somehow, in order for either action or sensation to be possible. As this week's reading makes clear, the need for interaction between mind and body is one of the weak spots of Cartesian Dualism, as there are reasons to doubt that such interaction is possible. I won't explain this argument any further here, as that is one of your assignment options for this week, but you should keep an eye open for it in the readings.

Many people—not just Descartes—have believed something like Cartesian Dualism. If you believe that you will continue to exist, and to have thoughts, after your body dies, then it seems that *you* believe something like Cartesian Dualism. After all: if you believe in an afterlife, then you must believe that you are not identical to your body. Rather, your body is just a temporary container that you're riding around in during this life, but it doesn't define who you are. What Descartes did was to give us philosophical reasons for believing something that many people had long believed, under the influence of various religious traditions.

2 Idealism and Materialism

There are quite a few alternatives to Cartesian Dualism. The two best-known alternatives are *idealism* and *materialism*.¹ These two theories have something in common: each tries to get rid of one of Descartes' two kinds of substance. They are both forms of *monism*, which means that they posit only one kind of substance. (If this is right, then it might help to avoid Descartes' problem about how different kinds of substance can interact, which I alluded to above.) But dualism and materialism disagree about which of Descartes' two substances to keep. Idealism tells us that all things that exist (including what we normally think of as bodies) are mental. Materialism says that all things that exist (including minds) is physical.²

¹Please note that these words have everyday meanings that are totally unrelated to their philosophical meanings. For present purposes, idealism has nothing to do with being optimistic, and materialism has nothing to do with valuing money and possessions.

²Another word that is often used instead of 'materialism' is 'physicalism'. There are some reasons to prefer the latter term. Physicalism/materialism is the idea that everything that exists is physical.

Although it has had ingenious defenders, idealism is probably the least popular theory these days. You may be wondering why anyone would believe it? Isn't it crazy to think that there is nothing other than minds and thoughts? Well, my short answer is that you should take another philosophy class in which George Berkeley and/or Immanuel Kant are taught. Berkeley argued that what we think of as physical things really exists only in minds—and, in particular, in the mind of God. And Kant argued that the world as we experience it (which he called the “phenomenal world”) is irreducibly colored by structures that our minds project onto it, so that we can never know the true nature of the world as it is in itself (the “noumenal world”). These are both versions of idealism, since they say that everything (or at least everything that we can know anything about) is mind-dependent.

By far, the more popular option for the last 100 years or so has been materialism, the idea that everything is physical. If everything is physical, you might ask, then what about minds? There are different ways to answer this question. One is that minds simply don't exist. This theory is called “eliminative materialism”, because it “eliminates” the mind altogether. We will read about this theory in a few weeks, and you will see that it's not as implausible as it might sound. By far, the more popular forms of materialism say that there are minds, but they, too, are physical entities. Thoughts, on this view, are themselves physical things. In particular, many have been tempted to think that what we call “the human mind” is really just the human brain, looked at in a certain way. For this reason, some philosophers now use the term “mind/brain” to talk about this entity.

Materialists have been around for a long time. For example, the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 B.C.E.) argued in a letter to the historian Herodotus that everything that exists consists of particles moving through “the void”. It is only during the last century or so that materialism has become the dominant option among philosophers, however.³ Why the sudden burst of popularity? I think there are a few reasons.

One reason for the increase in materialists is that we have learned more about how the human brain works. Although we still know much less about the human brain than we know about the rest of the human body, psychologists and neurosci-

But since there are physical things that aren't made of matter (such as energy, and the force of gravity), the term ‘materialism’ can be a bit misleading.

³For example: in a poll taken by more than 1800 professional philosophers in 2009, 56.5% said that they “accept or lean toward physicalism”, whereas only 27.1% said that they “accept or lean toward non-physicalism”. You can see the results for this and other questions here: <<https://philpapers.org/surveys/results.pl>>.

entists have discovered a great deal about how the brain's many complexities could explain of the complexities of our behavior. With each new piece of information about something that the brain can do, it seems that there is less of a role for the mind, understood as something distinct from the brain, in explaining our natures. Many have become optimistic that once we fully understand how the brain works, we will also have a complete understanding of how human beings work, and there won't be any further reason to believe in the mind as something additional. Admittedly, this is all quite speculative, since we don't *yet* know enough about the brain to explain everything about human behavior. But it seems that we're heading rapidly in that direction. So, just as learning about the cellular processes that cause disease has caused us to stop believing that diseases are caused by evil spirits, it seems that learning about the inner-workings of the brain is slowly leading us to stop believing that we must believe in the mind as something extra.

How would Descartes have responded to this line of thought? Well, although he wrote *The Meditations* in 1641, he actually knew a lot about the brain for his time, and he had elaborate theories about how it worked. Descartes was a scientist—a mathematician, a physicist, and an anatomist—in addition to being a philosopher. And he knew that the brain is an incredibly complex device that we use to process information. According to Descartes, however, the brain should be thought of as a highly complex communication device—a device that allows the mind to communicate with the body. It needs lots of complicated parts because there are many kinds of information that the mind needs to send to the body, and that the body needs to send to the mind. So, whenever a neuroscientist discovers how a new part of the brain works, a materialist will say that they have discovered a new way in which the idea of an independent mind has been found to be obsolete, but a dualist will say that we have discovered new details about how the mind and the brain communicate.

Another reason that many philosophers have given up on the idea of a mind that is independent of the mind is that they think the idea of a mind is supernatural or “spooky”, a little bit like a ghost. In fact, the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle famously and derisively referred to Cartesian Dualism as “the myth of the ghost in the machine”. Although this may partly explain why some philosophers have tended toward materialism, it is not, on its own, a good reason not to be a dualist. Most contemporary dualists insist that there is nothing spooky or unscientific about the idea of immaterial minds; we just need nontraditional methods for studying such things scientifically.

Still, there are some very powerful reasons for thinking that Cartesian Dualism is incompatible with scientific orthodoxy. Since one of your tasks for this week is to summarize a good objection to dualism, I will leave it up to you to explain this argument.

What about objections to materialism? Well: materialism seems to be incompatible with many religious beliefs, such as the belief in God (who presumably isn't a physical being) and the belief in life after death. More broadly, many have taken materialism to be incompatible with the possibility of genuine freedom and moral responsibility. For this reason, some philosophers have found it tempting to reject materialism because it seems to entail that the world is a bleak and meaningless place. Others have argued that there are some aspects of human experience that materialism simply cannot explain. Again, since part of your task this week is to summarize an objection to materialism, and since both of these arguments can be found in this week's reading, I will leave it up to you to explain one of them.

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.