Mind and Body

Is the “mental” really “material?”
René Descartes (1596—1650)

- 17th c. French philosopher and mathematician
- Creator of the Cartesian co-ordinate system, and co-inventor of algebra
- Wrote *Meditations on First Philosophy* in 1641
- Often called the “Father of Modern Philosophy”
Matter and Mind
Matter

• **Matter:**
  - The “*stuff*” (“substance”) of the spatial world
    - i.e., of the world of things that exists whether or nor we perceive it, whether or not any “mind” is aware of it.
  - The subject matter of the “natural sciences”
    - Physics, biology, chemistry, etc.
  - Occupies space, has mass, etc.
  - Descartes and Locke believed in it: Berkeley did not.
Mind

• For Descartes, a “mind” is the \textit{kind} of thing that can be the subject of consciousness.

• It is the thing which “has” sensations, the thing which “thinks” thoughts, etc.

• Different minds can have different sensations, thoughts, etc., but being the \textit{kind} of thing that \textit{can} have sensations, thoughts, etc., is the “essence” of what it is to be a mind.

• If there is life after death, it is this “thinking thing” which continues to exist.
Two Substances?

• Are “mind” and “matter” different “substances?”
  – Are they different kinds of things?
• Is a (conscious) mind, in essence, a fundamentally different thing than a (material) object?
  • Materialists (Matter only) say “no.”
  • Dualists (Matter and mind) say “yes.”
Getting Personal
Metaphysics and “I”

• Can I explain my conscious life in completely “materialistic” terms?
• Is my conscious awareness simply a “state” or “event” in my brain?
• Is what I am, at rock bottom, merely a physical being composed of matter?
  – Or am I, at some level, a non-physical, non-material, mental being?
What am I?

A Mind?

• I know (with certainty) that I exist.
• I know that I am conscious.
• So, I know I am the kind of thing that can be conscious.
• I know that I am a “thinking thing.”

A Body?

• I am (often) consciously aware of my body,
  – But I can conceive of myself existing as a conscious being without “having” or “occupying” any body at all.
• Is my body, like my mind, also something “I am,” or merely something I “have” or “occupy?”
Descartes: What I am

• Descartes:
  – A “thing that thinks.”
    • A thing that: “doubts, understands, affirms and denies, will and refuses, imagines and has sense experiences.”
  – I am a conscious being,
    • A being that is the subject of consciousness.
    • I am a “mind” or “soul.”
What is *my* essence?

• I can conceive of myself existing without a body.
  – I can conceive of life after death.
• I cannot conceive of myself existing without a mind.
• So, Descartes reasons, having or *being* a mind is, for the *kind* of thing I am, a necessary or “essential” property, but having or occupying a body is a non-essential or “accidental” property.
Essence vs. Accident

• *Essential properties:*  
  – Essential properties are *necessary*, i.e., properties a thing can’t lose, at least without ceasing to exist. Essential properties define what *kind* of thing something is.

• *Accidental properties:*  
  – Properties a thing has, but might not have had, i.e., properties it has *accidentally*. A thing’s accidental properties aren’t necessary for it to be the *kind* of thing it is.
Examples

Essential Properties
• A Square
  – Having 4 sides
• A Desk
  – Having a flat surface
• A Bicycle
  – Having 2 wheels
• A Bird
  – Having wings

Accidental Properties
• A Square
  – Having 1 inch long sides
• A Desk
  – Being made of wood
• A Bicycle
  – Having 10 speeds
• A Bird
  – Being black in color
Descartes:

• I can conceive of existing without a body.
• If I can exist without a body, then having a body is not one of my essential properties.
• But I cannot conceive of existing except as the subject of conscious experience.
• So, being the sort of thing that can be conscious is part of my essence.
• My conscious mind, therefore, is distinct from my physical/material body.
The Position
Mind/Body (or Substance) Dualism: There are two distinct fundamental and irreducible *sorts* of things in the world...

**MINDS**

- *Res cogitans*
  - Minds or “souls”
  - Thinking but *non-extended* things
  - Beings that are subjects of conscious experience, but don’t occupy space.

**BODIES**

- *Res extensa*
  - Matter
  - Extended but *non-thinking* things
  - Beings that occupy space but are not subjects of conscious experience.
Mind/Body Dualism

• “Persons” are a combination of an immaterial mind and a material body.
  – *Minds* are conscious, immaterial things.
  – *Bodies* are material, non-conscious things.

• So, the world contains two distinct, irreducible, *kinds* of “stuff” or substance—
  – Neither can be explained by (or “reduced to”) the other.
Two Arguments
Meditation VI, p. 211

• “[B]ody is by its very nature divisible, while the mind is utterly indivisible. For when I consider the mind ..., I am unable to distinguish any parts .... As for the faculties of willing, of understanding, of sensory perception, ... these cannot be termed parts of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, and understands and has sensory perceptions. By contrast there is no corporeal ... thing ... which in my thought I cannot easily divide into parts .... This [is] enough to show me that the mind is completely different from the body....”
Distinct because different

• Minds and bodies each have properties the other lacks:
  – Minds, by their very nature (or “essence”) cannot be divided into parts.
  – Bodies, by their very nature (or “essence”) can be divided into parts.

• Things with different properties cannot be identical.

• So, minds are distinct from bodies.
Meditation VI, p. 208

“... I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God .... Hence the fact that I clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated.... I have a clear and distinct idea of myself .. as ... a thinking, non-extended thing; and ... I have a distinct idea of body ... as ... an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.”
Conceptually Distinct

• If the concept of one thing is distinct from that of another, then it is conceptually possible for one to exist independently of the other.

• If it is conceptually possible for one thing to exist independently of another, they cannot be numerically identical—they must be metaphysically independent.

• So, since minds and bodies are conceptually distinct, they are metaphysically independent.
Life After Death--Again

• If you *believe* in life after death, you are already committed to dualism.

• Descartes’ point here is stronger: the fact that you can *conceive* of life after death also commits you to dualism.
  – If (your) mind and body were *the very same thing*, you could not conceive of your mind continuing after your bodies dies.
  – If you *can* conceive of this, they must be independent things.
Problems
Meditation VI, p. 209

• “Nature teaches me by ... sensations of of pain, ... and so on, that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it.... If this were not so, I ... would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just a as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in the ship is broken.”
Meditation VI, p. 211

• “[T]he mind is not immediately affected by all parts of the body but only by the brain, or perhaps just one small part of [it] .... Every time this part of the brain is in a given state, it presents the same signals to the mind.... ”
Where (in the body) *is* the mind? (Where in the world is the “bubble?”)

- The first passage suggests that the mind is “spread out” through the entire body.
- The second passage suggests that the mind is “located” in the brain.
- But if the mind is (by its very nature) a *non-spatial* substance, how can it have any “location” in a (by its very nature) *spatial* substance such as my body?
Causal Interaction

• On Descartes’ view (dualism), material objects cause changes in my mind.
  – E.g., sense perception

• Likewise, my mind can cause changes in material objects.
  – E.g., when I intentionally move my limbs.

• But if mind and matter have nothing in common, how can they causally interact?
Problem: How could mind causally interact with matter?
Mind/Body Interaction?

• On Descartes’s view, my mind is composed of a fundamentally different kind of “stuff” (or “substance”) than the world of objects I perceive and interact with.
• But if my mind and the physical world (including my physical body) are fundamentally different sorts of stuff, we cannot explain how they could interact with one another, because they would have nothing in common.
• Our next author (Carruthers) will turn this problem into an argument against dualism and for materialism, which denies the existence of mental substance.