

# Problems for dualism

Last time we discussed Descartes' argument for dualism, the view that you are something distinct from your body. Today we are going to be discussing some problems with dualist view of personal identity, and some arguments against that view. But before doing that I want to quickly go over two points from the last lecture that came up in questions.

The first is the meaning of words like "distinct" or "different." When discussing Descartes' argument, we were discussing ways to show that the mind and body are distinct, or different things. But we commonly use these words in two ways.

Sometimes we mean *qualitative difference*. In this sense, we'd say that there's *no difference* between two golf balls which look alike; we might even say that they are two *identical* golf balls.

But other times we mean *numerical difference*. In this sense, the golf balls are not identical; after all, if you were holding the golf balls, and I asked you, 'How many things are in your hand?', you'd say 'Two', not 'One.'

When we are discussing dualism, we are concerned with numerical distinctness: we are asking whether the mind and body are **two things, or one thing**.

The second point from the last lecture concerns the equivalence of contrapositives. The contrapositive of an if-then statement 'if p, then q' is 'if not-q, then not-p.' During the last lecture, my way of setting up Descartes' argument relied on the idea that if-then statements say the same thing as their contrapositives. But do they?

Here's an argument that they do. Take a sentence 'if p, then q.' What does a statement of this sort really tell you?

It doesn't tell you that p is true, and it doesn't tell you that q is true. And it certainly doesn't tell you that either is false. But it tells you something. It tells you that a certain combination can't happen: it can't be the case that you have p, but not q. So it rules out this possibility:

(1) p is true and q is false

Now look at the contrapositive of 'if p, then q', namely 'if not-q, then not-p.' This is also an if-then statement, so its function is also to rule out the possibility that the 'if' part is true and the 'then' part is false. So it rules out this possibility:

(2) not-q is true and not-p is false

But for not-q to be true just is for q to be false, and for not-p to be false just is for p to be true. So (2) is really the same as:

(3) q is false and p is true

But (1) and (3) are the same, just in different order. So if-then statements -- sometimes called *conditionals* -- rule out the same things as their contrapositives. This is one way of seeing that if-then statements and their contrapositives are true in exactly the same circumstances and so, in a sense, say the same thing.

In the selection we read, van Inwagen defends *physicalism*, which for our purposes is the view that human beings are physical things. Physical things are things entirely made up of the sorts of things that physics studies -- things like quarks and electrons.

It is clear that Descartes' argument for dualism, if correct, shows that physicalism is false. After all, Descartes suggests that I can imagine that I exist even though all the physical things which seem to exist (including quarks and electrons) don't; and he takes this to show that I am not a physical thing, in van Inwagen's sense.

But, as Descartes and van Inwagen both point out, even a dualist, who denies that human beings are physical things, must address the question of the relationship between human persons and certain physical things -- in particular, their bodies.

What, intuitively, is the relationship between you and, for example, your arm?

We often say things like, "I wanted to ask a question, so I raised my arm," or "When my arm was sunburnt that summer, I was in a lot of pain." Claims of this sort seem to imply two things. First, I often cause my body to do things; and, second, events involving my body often cause effects in me. If the dualist agrees that persons can cause effects in their bodies, and bodies sometimes cause effects in persons, then they are endorsing *interactionist dualism*.

But the interactionist dualist faces some problems explain how these causal interactions can take place.

In explaining ordinary causal interactions between material things like billiard balls, it's natural to think that the spatial location of the balls plays some role. But could an immaterial thing --- like a person, according to the dualist view -- be located in space? And if they can't be located in space, how could they effect things which are located in space? This is less an argument than a sort of puzzle: how could immaterial things cause change in material things, or vice versa?

A second problem here concerns conservation laws. A conservation law says that a certain quantity in an isolated physical system, like energy, does not change as the system changes over time. If interactionist dualism were true, would we expect to see violations of the conservation of energy?

In response to these problems with interactionist dualism, the dualist can adopt at least other views about the relationship between persons and their bodies.

One sort of dualist gives up entirely on the idea that there can be causal relations between material and immaterial things. This sort of dualist -- usually called an *occasionalist* -- faces an immediate problem: every time my arm is pinched, I feel pain. What could explain this, if not the fact that pinchings of arms cause pains?

But there's another option as well, which is in some ways less extreme. Suppose that you are a dualist, but you are puzzled by the fact that there appear to be no violations of conservation laws of the sort that interactionist dualism might lead us to expect. That might lead you to say that immaterial things like persons cannot cause physical effects. But you might still want to preserve the idea that physical events, like a sunburn, can cause mental effects, like pain. If you are a dualist who holds this pair of view -- that mental events can't cause physical events, but physical events can cause mental events -- then you are an *epiphenomenalist dualist*.

How could the epiphenomenalist reply to the worry about the correlation between pinchings of arms and feelings of pain raised against occasionalists above?

Many opponents of dualism would cite the foregoing considerations as the strongest argument against dualism. For the reasons we've discussed, the best version of dualism appears to many to be interactionist dualism; but interactionist dualism relies on the existence of a problematic sort of causal connection between immaterial and material things.

One view is that at this point we face a bit of a dilemma. On the one hand, dualism seems to face some serious problems; but, on the other hand, Descartes seemed to give us a very strong argument in favor of dualism. But something has to give here. Either dualism is the right view, or it isn't!

van Inwagen thinks that the right response to this dilemma is that Descartes' argument for dualism is flawed. (He argues for this on pp. 172-174 of the selection we read.)



Last time, I presented Descartes' argument as depending on the principle of the necessity of identity, which was:

If it is possible that  $x \neq y$ , then  $x \neq y$ .

or, in plain English,

If two things can be distinct, then they are distinct.

Also last time, I suggested that one way to see the plausibility of this principle is by examination of its contrapositive, which is

If  $x = y$ , then it is impossible that  $x \neq y$

Or, in plain English,

It is impossible for anything to be distinct from itself.

van Inwagen considers some examples which seem to call this principle into question. Let's consider an example sort of like the one van Inwagen discusses. As it turns out, Jeff Speaks is the teacher of this section of PHIL 101. That is,

Jeff Speaks = the teacher of this section of PHIL 101

But the contrapositive of the necessity of identity says that

If  $x=y$ , then it is impossible that  $x \neq y$

So it seems that

If Jeff Speaks = the teacher of this section of PHIL 101, then it is impossible that Jeff Speaks  $\neq$  the teacher of this section of PHIL 101

must be true, if the principle of the necessity of identity is true. So, if I am the teacher of this section of PHIL 101, it is impossible for me not to be the teacher of this section of PHIL 101.

The problem is that this claim seems false. It is true that I am the teacher of PHIL 101, but it does not seem true that it is impossible for me not to be. Couldn't I have decided to be a dentist, in which case I would not be the teacher of this section of PHIL 101?

This sort of case seems to present a counterexample to the principle of the necessity of identity. So we have at least an intuitive argument that that principle is false. And if that principle's false, it looks as though Descartes' argument for dualism -- at least the version we considered -- has a false premise.

Can you think of any way that Descartes might respond to this argument?

Here's the beginning of a reply. The core idea behind the necessity of identity is that nothing can be distinct from itself. But the example we just discussed is not a counterexample to this principle; when we imagine me not teaching PHIL 101, we are not imagining a scenario in which I am distinct from myself. Rather, we are imagining a scenario in which someone other than the actual teacher of PHIL 101 is the teacher of PHIL 101.

But now consider the scenario in which I exist, but my body does not. In this case I'm not imagining something other than my body being my body; I am just imagining myself existing without my body.

Or, more to the point, consider a scenario in which I exist, and my body exists, but I am not my body. (You can imagine that you are disembodied, or that you are attached to some other body.) Again, when I imagine this scenario, I am not imagining that something other than the thing which is actually my body is my body; I am just imagining a case in which I am me, and my body is my body, but I am not my body.

This seems to be a disanalogy between Descartes' argument and the sort of example van Inwagen discusses. One thing you might want to think about is whether this difference can be turned into a defense of Descartes' argument for dualism.

In another section of his book (which we did not read for class today), van Inwagen presents another argument against dualism worth considering:

if Alfred's *body* were struck a heavy blow, and particularly if it were a blow to the head, this might have an effect on *him*, an effect that goes beyond his becoming aware of the blow and its damaging effects on his body and his ability to control his body: Alfred might well become unconscious.

This is just the sort of effect that we should expect if Alfred were a certain human organism, for if the processes of consciousness are certain physical processes within the organism, a damaging blow might well cause those processes to cease, at least temporarily. But what effects should *dualism* lead us to expect from a blow to the body? I submit that if we are non-physical things and if the processes of consciousness are non-physical processes that do not occur within the body, the most natural thing to expect is that (at the worst) we should lose control of our bodies while continuing to be conscious. The blow to the base of Alfred's skull that in fact produces unconsciousness should, according to dualism, produce the following effects on Alfred: he experiences a sharp pain at the base of his skull; he then notes that his body is falling to the floor and that it no longer responds to his will; his visual sensations and the pain at the base of his skull and all of the other sensations he has been experiencing fade away; and he is left, as it were, floating in darkness, isolated, but fully conscious and able to contemplate his isolated situation and to speculate about its probable causes and its duration. But this is not what happens when one receives a blow at the base of the skull. One never finds oneself conscious but isolated from one's body.

How should a dualist respond to this argument?

Of course, to say that there are some difficult problems for dualism is not to say that dualism is false; its competitors might also face serious problems.

Beginning next week, we'll be discussing some alternatives to dualist views of the person. The first such view we'll be discussing is the view that persons are to be understood not as immaterial things, but as things having a certain sort of psychology.