

What am I?

An immaterial thing:
the case for dualism



Today we turn to our third big question: What are you?

We can focus this question a little bit by introducing the idea of a **physical** or **material thing**. To a first approximation, a material thing is **a thing entirely composed of the sorts of things described in physics:** electrons, quarks, etc.

Materialism, or physicalism, in general is the claim that every thing — every thing that exists — is a material thing.

There are two views opposed to materialism. One is **dualism**. According to dualism (as the name suggests) there are **two sorts of things: material things, and immaterial things**. The second opposed view is **idealism**. According to idealism, **there are no material things, and everything that exists is immaterial**.

According to materialism about human beings, you are material thing. You are something which, like tables, clouds, trees, and amoebae, is entirely composed of the basic particles studied in physics.

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Many of the ways we ordinarily think and talk about ourselves seem to suggest that we endorse materialism about ourselves.

Consider, for example, the question of whether you are currently sitting in a chair. Could an immaterial thing occupy space, and sit in a chair?

But other ways that we think and talk about ourselves suggest that we think of ourselves as immaterial things. For example, many people think that it is possible for human beings to enjoy life after death, and hence to exist even after one's body has ceased to exist; and to many it has seemed easiest to understand how this could be possible if think of ourselves, not as immaterial bodies, but as immaterial souls or minds.

Our topic today is an argument for the conclusion that this second view of ourselves is correct: we are not material things, but instead are immaterial souls or minds. This view is often called ‘dualism about human beings’ — but this is slightly confusing, because the view is also consistent with idealism. But for now we will be setting idealism to the side, and assuming that there are material things. This, plus immaterialism about human persons, does imply dualism.

This argument is due to René Descartes. Descartes was one of the most important philosophers who ever lived — a distinction which is especially impressive given that he devoted most of his energies to mathematics (in which he developed what is now analytic geometry) and natural science.

In 1649 Descartes moved to Sweden to join the court of Queen Christina of Sweden. After complaining that “men’s thoughts are frozen here, like the water,” Descartes died in February of 1650, during his first winter in Sweden.





Descartes' argument begins with his thought that all of our beliefs about the existence of material things can be called into doubt:

The first was that every sensory experience I have ever thought I was having while awake I can also think of myself as sometimes having while asleep; and since I do not believe that what I seem to perceive in sleep comes from things located outside me, I did not see why I should be any more inclined to believe this of what I think I perceive while awake.

Descartes is saying that we can imagine any sensory experience we have occurring in sleep rather than waking life. But in sleep our seeming sensory experiences do not reflect the reality of the material world around us; so, we can imagine all of the sensory experiences we have failing to reflect the world around us. That is, we can coherently imagine a scenario in which there are no tissue boxes, cats, planets, or other material things, even though in our experience it seems to us that there are such things.

Now let's ask another question: when we conceive of the possibility that there are no material things, are we conceiving a situation in which **nothing at all** exists?

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I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I too do not exist? No: if I convinced myself of something then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver of supreme power and cunning who is deliberately and constantly deceiving me. In that case I too undoubtedly exist, if he is deceiving me; and let him deceive me as much as he can, he will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.

Descartes here seems to be saying that, when I imagine a world in which there are no material things, I am still imagining that I exist.

This suggests the following claim:

I can clearly imagine a scenario in which I exist, but no material things exist.

Suppose that this claim about imagination is true. What could this have to do with the question of what I am? We aren't, after all, interested in what we can imagine about ourselves; we are interested in the question of what sorts of things we really are.

The answer to this question comes in the following passage:

I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can 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, at least by God.

Each of the two sentences in this passage makes a claim which is central to Descartes' argument. Let's focus on the first one first.

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Descartes seems to be saying that if I can clearly imagine something to be the case, then God could make it the case: God could bring it about. It seems to follow from this that Descartes would endorse the following principle:

If I can clearly imagine something being the case, then it is possible for it to be the case.

Is there any reason to think that this is true?

I can clearly imagine a scenario in which I exist, but no material things exist.

If I can clearly imagine something being the case, then it is possible for it to be the case.

It is possible that I exist and no material things exist.

It is possible that I \neq my body.

What premise could we insert to get us to the intended conclusion?

I \neq my body.

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If I can clearly imagine something being the case, then it is possible for it to be the case.

It is possible that I exist and no material things exist.

It is possible that I \neq my body.

If it is possible that P, then P is true.

I \neq my body.



Let's go back to Descartes' text to see what the missing premise could be.

I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can 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, at least by God.

Here Descartes does not seem to be asserting the unrestricted (and absurd) claim that anything possible is true; rather, he's asserting the following more restricted principle:

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

Is this principle true?

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

A good case can be made that it is. Consider first the following principle:

The principle of the necessity of identity
If $x=y$, then, necessarily, $x=y$

In ordinary English, one might state the principle of the necessity of identity as the claim that it is impossible for a thing to be distinct from itself. This principle seems true: it does not seem possible that you could have existed without being yourself - in that case, one wants to say, it would not have been you that existed!

But we can derive our missing premise from the principle of the necessity of identity.

The principle of the necessity of identity

If $x=y$, then, necessarily, $x=y$

By the rule of
contraposition: from
If P, then Q
it follows that if not-Q,
then not-P

If it is not necessary that $x=y$, then $x \neq y$.

Because it is not
necessary that P if and
only if it is possible that
not-P

If it is possible that it is not true that $x=y$, then $x \neq y$.

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

I can clearly imagine a scenario in which I exist, but no material things exist.

If I can clearly imagine something being the case, then it is possible for it to be the case.

It is possible that I exist and no material things exist.

It is possible that I \neq my body.

If it is possible that P, then P is true.

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



1. I can clearly imagine a scenario in which I exist, but no material things exist.
2. If I can clearly imagine something being the case, then it is possible for it to be the case.
3. It is possible that I exist and no material things exist. (1,2)
4. It is possible that $I \neq$ my body. (3)
5. If it is possible that $x \neq y$, then $x \neq y$.

C. $I \neq$ my body. (4,5)

This is sometimes called the **conceivability argument** for dualism, since it rests heavily on a claim about what we can conceive of, or imagine.

Suppose that someone were to advance the claim that I am a material thing other than my body. Could the conceivability argument be used against that view?

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The conceivability argument for dualism is a very interesting argument. But it faces two major challenges.

The first is an objection to the following principle, which seems to be used in Descartes' argument:

If I can clearly imagine a scenario in which P is true, then it is possible that P is true.

Here is a possible counterexample to this principle:

Deep in the Indiana countryside, there's a small town; and in this town there's a barber. Some of the men in this small town - the industrious ones - shave themselves every morning. But others (the lazy ones) don't; and the barber shaves all of them. (There's no one else around who will do it.) Moreover, he (the barber's a man) never shaves any of the industrious ones - he never shaves any of the men that shave themselves.

Can you clearly imagine this small town? Is it possible for there to be a town of this sort?

Deep in the Indiana countryside, there's a small town; and in this town there's a barber. Some of the men in this small town - the industrious ones - shave themselves every morning. But others (the lazy ones) don't; and the barber shaves all of them. (There's no one else around who will do it.) Moreover, he (the barber's a man) never shaves any of the industrious ones - he never shaves any of the men that shave themselves.

Does the town's barber
shave himself, or not?

No.

Yes.

But then he does shave
himself because he
shaves every man that
does not shave himself.

But then he doesn't,
because he doesn't
shave any man that
shaves himself.

So if he shaves himself, then he
doesn't, and if he doesn't, he does.

This is thus an example of a scenario which, at first glance, seems possible, but then turns out, on closer inspection to be impossible, because it contains a hidden contradiction. Might the materialist plausibly say the same thing about Descartes' scenario - the imagined scenario in which I exist, but there are no material things?

The second objection to Descartes is less an objection to his argument than to his dualist view. It emerges in the reading from the correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elisabeth.

“For it seems every determination of movement happens from the impulsion of a thing moved, according to the manner in which it is pushed by that which moves it, or else, depends on the qualification and figures of the superficies of the latter. Contact is required for the first two conditions, extension is required for the third. You entirely exclude extension from your notion of the soul, and contact seems to me incompatible with an immaterial thing.”



Elisabeth here is considering a special case of causation: putting something in motion. For something to push something else, it seems that the two things must be in contact; and for two things to be in contact, both must occupy space (since being in contact is just a matter of occupying adjacent spaces). Since immaterial minds don't occupy space, it seems that they can't set things in motion - so, for example, my mind's desire for coffee can't be what sends my body down the hallway in search of some.

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How might the dualist reply? On natural line of thought, which Descartes pursues, is to argue that not all causation requires contact. He uses the example of gravity:

“How do we think that the weight of a rock moves the rock downwards? We don’t think that this happens through a real contact of one surface against another — as though the weight was a hand pushing the rock downwards! But we have no difficulty in conceiving how it moves the body....”

Elisabeth was skeptical about the idea that the example of gravity could provide a model for the interaction between mind and body. And many philosophers since have been on Elisabeth's side here: the idea of an immaterial thing, which is not located in space, interacting with a material thing does seem a bit puzzling.

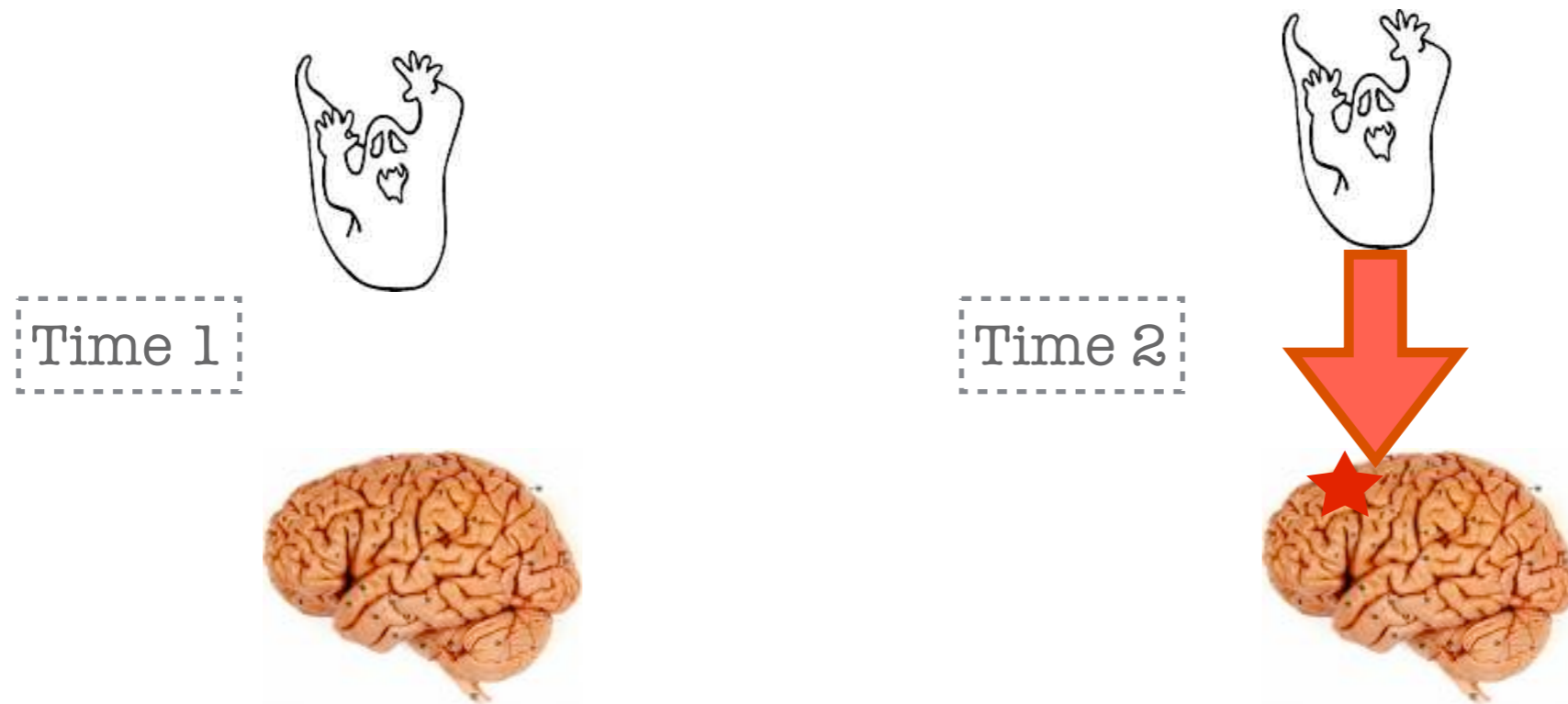
Is there any way that the opponent of dualism might press this argument further — by showing that causal connections between an immaterial mind and a material world are not just puzzling, but also in some clear sense objectionable?

Let's consider two ways of developing Elisabeth's objection to Descartes' dualism further.

A first attempt is to argue that the dualist is committed to the violation of certain fundamental physical laws, such as the [law of the conservation of energy](#). This law says that the total energy of a closed physical system is constant; that the total energy of such a system may be neither increased nor decreased, but only transformed.

It seems, at first glance, that the interactionist dualist should be committed to denying this fundamental principle of physics. For consider a case in which an immaterial soul causes a change in the physical world - say, a case in which an immaterial soul causes a neuron to fire in the brain.

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Now consider the physical system of which the brain is a part, at time 1 and then at time 2. Won't those two physical systems differ in their total energy?

After all, everything is the same in those physical systems other than the activity of this neuron; and if it fires at one time but not the other, mustn't this involve a change in energy?

A second way to further Elisabeth's argument relies not on the idea that dualism violates certain physical laws, but on a certain kind of thought experiment.

Imagine that we have two guns aimed at distinct targets.



Presumably one gun caused one of the bullets to hit one of the targets, and the other gun caused the other bullet to hit the other. But what connects one firing to one of the targets, and the other to the other?

Easy answer: we trace the path of the bullet through space, from gun to target. This series of spatial connections is what connects the cause to the effect.

But now imagine that we have two immaterial souls, and two bodies.

Soul 1



Soul 2



Now imagine that, at the same time, Soul 1 and Soul 2 decide to go for a walk.

Presumably one of the souls caused one of the bodies to walk, and the other soul caused the other body to walk. But which caused which?

Note that we can't answer this question in the same way that we answered the corresponding question in the case of the guns and bullets, for there is no path through space from the souls to the bodies.

This is sometimes called the **pairing problem**: it is the problem of explaining what pairs causes with effects, when either the cause or the effect is something immaterial.