

# Descartes & dualism

What is a person?

One natural thought is that persons are, in one important way, similar to things like chairs, tissue boxes, cats, and planets: they are material things. Like these things, we take up a certain amount of space -- you and cats are each a certain height, for example -- and have other material things as parts -- your arm, for example.

Descartes' aim in the selection we read for today is to convince us that this is a mistake: human beings are not material things, and are in this respect unlike chairs, tissue boxes, and cats. According to Descartes, we are things which are distinct from our bodies.

This is why his view of persons is called *dualism*: it is the view that persons and their bodies are two things, not one.

Descartes was born in 1596, in France.

Descartes was, of course, a philosopher; but, in addition, he was a scientist and one of the most important mathematicians of his time. He is usually credited with the idea that problems in geometry can be formulated as algebraic problems, and so is taken to be one of the inventors of analytic geometry.



In 1639 he began writing the *Meditations on First Philosophy*, which today is his most widely read work. This work is broken into six “meditations” on philosophical topics; for class today, we read selections from the second and sixth.

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 begins the *Meditations* by calling into question the truth of our beliefs about the world around us. He points out that our knowledge of the material world around us is based on sensory experiences, and then makes the following point about those sensory experiences:

... 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.

Here Descartes suggests 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 any sensory experience we have failing to reflect the world around us.

Descartes uses this observation to raise problems for the possibility of knowledge of the material world; we'll return to this argument later in the course. For now, let's leave this point about knowledge to the side and focus on the consequences of Descartes' idea that we can coherently imagine all of our sensory experiences failing to reflect the world around us.

So I can coherently imagine that all of my sensory experiences are illusory, and that none of what I seem to be perceiving with my senses is real. Can I also coherently imagine that I do not exist?

Descartes thinks not:

But 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<sup>2</sup> 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.

So far we have the result that although I can coherently imagine that none of the material things that I seem to be perceiving really exist, I cannot coherently imagine that I do not exist. But what does all of this stuff about what we can imagine have to do with the question with which we started: What are persons?

Descartes' main answer to this question (reproduced at right) is on p. 16 of the selection we read for class today.

There are several arguments in this passage. But we can isolate one argument for dualism by looking closely at the first two sentences of this passage.

First, 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. The question of what kind of power is required to bring about such a separation does not affect the judgement that the two things are distinct. Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body,<sup>14</sup> in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I<sup>15</sup> am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.

Let's look first at the first sentence:

First, 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.

Here Descartes suggests that our ability to imagine a scenario gives us evidence about whether that scenario is really possible --- i.e., whether it is one that could have been actual.

What does **possible** mean here? It is important to see that we are using the word in a very broad sense: something is possible just in case it could have happened --- no matter how absurd, or bizarre, it is. So, for example, it is possible that a pink elephant is presently running through south quad, or that a talking donkey will one day be a professor of philosophy at Notre Dame.

It is not possible, in this sense, that there could be a three-sided plane closed Euclidean figure with four angles -- it isn't just that this scenario would be silly or surprising; on reflection, we can see, on the contrary, that the scenario really does not make sense. This is what we mean when we say that the scenario is **impossible**. If a scenario is impossible, even God could not have brought it about.



What is the importance of this point that my being able to clearly imagine or conceive of a scenario shows us that it is possible?

Remember now Descartes' point from earlier in the *Meditations*. There he suggested that I can coherently conceive of a scenario in which none of the material things I think I am perceiving -- including, of course, my own body -- really exists. However, he also pointed out that I cannot coherently imagine that I do not exist.

This means that when I am imagining that none of the material things I think I perceive really exist, I am imagining a scenario in which I exist, but none of these material things -- including my body -- exist.

So, since I am imagining a scenario in which I exist but my body does not, I am imagining a scenario in which I am distinct from my body.

So, if Descartes is right, it is **possible** that I am distinct from my body.

But still, you might wonder why we should care. It is **possible** that a pink elephant is rampaging down south quad; but this is not really relevant if we are interested in the question of what is **actually** happening on south quad. So if we are interested in what sorts of things persons like us really are, why should we care about what it is possible for us to be?

The second sentence in the passage under consideration gives us Descartes' answer to this question:

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 moves from the claim that two things **can** be distinct to the conclusion that they **are** distinct. If this is right, then his argument looks strong, since he's already given us good reason to think that it is possible for me to be distinct from my body.

But why think that he is right? It sounds as though he is saying that if it is possible for such-and-such to be the case, then such-and-such really is the case. But this is crazy, as our pink elephant example shows. If this is an assumption of Descartes' argument, then it is an extremely bad argument.

But let's see if we can give a more plausible interpretation of Descartes' argument. The part of the argument that we're discussing is his claim that if it is possible for two things to be distinct, then they really are. This is an 'if-then' sentence:

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

This is a pretty abstract claim. How can we tell whether it is true?

Sometimes when you are trying to figure out whether a certain claim is true, it helps to consider an alternative way of stating that claim. The claim we are interested in is a claim of the form

If  $p$ , then  $q$ .

As we discussed last time, claims of this form are equivalent to claims of the form

If not- $q$ , then not- $p$ .

Given this, we can see that our if-then sentence

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

should be equivalent to this one:

If not- $(x \neq y)$ , then it is not possible that  $x \neq y$

which is just another way of stating this:

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

This is called the necessity of identity, since it says that if  $x$  and  $y$  are identical, they are necessarily identical. Put another way, it says that if  $x$  and  $y$  are identical, it is impossible for  $x$  and  $y$  to fail to be identical.

One way to express this claim in ordinary English, without using  $x$ 's and  $y$ 's, is

Nothing can be distinct from itself.

Is this claim true? Is it possible for you to be distinct from yourself -- i.e., for you to exist, but not be you?

Many people, though not all, find the necessity of identity plausible. But if the necessity of identity holds, and if Descartes is right that it is possible for us to exist without our bodies, then it looks as though we have a strong case for the claim that we are actually -- not just possibly -- distinct from our bodies. And this is just what the dualist wants.

This raises a difficult series of questions. If we are not material things like chairs and tissue boxes, what sorts of things are we? Are we located in space, like material things? If so, where are we -- in the same place as our bodies? Can we interact with things that are located in space, like our hands? If so, how?

These are difficult questions for the dualist, to which we'll return next time.

The first draft of your first paper is due on Friday, in your discussion section. In this paper, you must do two things:

1. In your own words, present what you think is the strongest version of Descartes' argument for dualism in valid premise/conclusion form (i.e., with numbered premises and a conclusion).
2. In one paragraph, make what you think is the best objection to what you think is the weakest of the premises used in your version of the argument.

I cannot emphasize enough that that is **all that you should do**.

This draft will not be graded. Your TA will give you comments on the draft, and give you a chance to make revisions on the basis of those comments. Your second draft will be graded.

Among the things that you should not do are:

- Include introductory and concluding paragraphs. Just state the argument in premise/conclusion form, and then include a paragraph criticizing what you think is the weakest premise.
- Sum up the paragraph you write with a concluding sentence. Your TA is capable of keeping the whole of your paragraph in his or her mind, and does not need to be reminded of what s/he just read.
- Introduce the paragraph with a sentence like “In this paragraph I will criticize the argument of Rene Descartes, a great philosopher who lived many centuries ago.” We know what you are doing in the paragraph, and who Descartes is; and in any case his greatness and timeline are not relevant to the success or failure of the argument you give, and hence aren’t relevant to your task in this paper.
- Also avoid “learned asides” like “Most philosophers through history have defended the cause of dualism.” Again, this is irrelevant to the success or failure of the argument under discussion; and, moreover, this being Intro. to Philosophy, it is very likely that you don’t really know whether this is true and/or are basing the statement on something you read on the internet.



On a more constructive note, here are some things you should do:

- Make sure that the argument you end up with is valid.
- Make sure that you indicate what is supposed to follow from what in your argument. For example, if your argument has two premises, and the conclusion follows from these two premises together, write after the conclusion: (1,2). Often in arguments a premise follows from other premises. In this case, you should indicate which premises follow from which other premises in the same way.
- Try to simplify the argument as much as possible, and include only premises which are necessary to derive the conclusion. If you have 38 premises in your argument, it is very likely that most of them are unnecessary. It is perfectly OK to hand in an argument with only a few premises.
- Be sure that you are arguing for the right conclusion.
- In your paragraph of criticism, be clear about what your criticism is. Are you arguing, for example, that the premise is false, or just that Descartes gives us no reason to believe it? In either case, why do you think this?
- Above all, aim for clarity in your writing. No prizes for long words or complex sentences.