

Dualism

This course so far has focused on two topics of perennial philosophical interest: the existence of God, and the nature of freedom of the will.

Today we turn to our third major topic. This topic is a bit hard to describe simply, but we can put the question we will be trying to answer as follows: What is the universe, ultimately, like? In particular, is the universe wholly material, wholly mental or spiritual, or does it contain both mental and physical parts?

We can separate out three broad answers to this question.

According to the **materialist** (also called the physicalist), the universe is a material universe, and everything that exists is a physical thing. This means, roughly, that everything exists in space and time, and is composed of the sorts of materials which are studied in the physical sciences. The materialist might well believe in the existence of mental events, like pains and perceptual experiences, but will claim that they are, ultimately, part of the physical domain (for example, they might be physical events involving the brain).

According to the **dualist**, the physicalist's story is incomplete. According to the dualist, there are two fundamentally different kinds of things (hence the name "dualism") - there are, in addition to the physical things, non-physical mental things, like immaterial souls.

The last, and most unfamiliar position is **idealism**. According to the idealist, the physical world is an illusion; the universe is completely mental, or spiritual, and there are in reality no physical objects at all.

In one sense, then, materialism and idealism are opposites. The materialist says that there are physical things but no fundamentally mental things, and the idealist says that there are mental things but no physical things. But in another sense they agree with each other, and disagree with the dualist: both are forms of **monism**, because they both take there to be, fundamentally, only one sort of thing.

For the next few weeks, we'll be talking about the question of which of these three theories of the nature of reality - materialism, dualism, idealism - correctly describes the universe.

We'll begin by focusing on the dispute between the materialist and the dualist. Throughout history, one central motivation for dualism has been the idea that the materialist cannot make sense of the nature of persons: various arguments have been advanced to show that persons cannot be wholly material things, but instead must also consist of a purely mental, non-physical element - a soul, or mind. Today we'll be focusing on the most important argument for that conclusion.

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Let's approach this argument with a simple question: What is a person? What kind of thing are you?

A very natural answer to this question, and the one given by the materialist, is: a person is a certain sort of material, physical thing, a human organism. In this respect, persons are just like cats, tissue boxes, and desks: they are complex physical things which occupy space and are composed of physical particles.

Descartes' aim in the selection we read for today is to convince us that this natural answer to our question is a mistake. In Descartes' view, we are immaterial things - minds, or souls - which are distinct from our bodies.

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.



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The first step in understanding Descartes' argument for the dualist view that we are things distinct from our bodies is understanding his attitude toward our beliefs about the material world around us. In particular, we have to understand his view that all of our beliefs about the material things which seem to be around us are open to **doubt**.

Descartes expresses one of his reasons for doubt in the following passage:

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.

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We can think of Descartes as saying two things here.

First, 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 perception it seems to us that there are such things.

Second, because we can coherently imagine this scenario, and perception cannot distinguish between a scenario in which I am perceiving the world correctly and one in which I am having convincing illusions, **we cannot know whether there are any material things**.

Each of these claims - the first claim about conceivability, and the second claim about knowledge - has been enormously important in philosophy since Descartes. Today, we will only need to focus on the first of these claims: the claim that we can coherently imagine that all of our perceptual experiences of material things are illusory, and that none of these material things really exist.

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Descartes thinks not:

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.

We can think of Descartes as pointing something out about **what** we are imagining when we imagine being deceived by our senses. I am imagining that my senses are deceiving **me** but, for that very reason, I am imagining a scenario in which I exist.

This seems to imply the following claim:

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

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This claim about imagination seems correct; but one might reasonably wonder what it has to do with our question about the nature of persons. Descartes' answer is contained in the following passage, which comes at the end of our reading for today:

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.

Let's focus on the **first sentence** first.

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.

However, the reference to God here is ultimately dispensable. One can read Descartes as using talk about "what God could bring about" as a picturesque way of talking about what is **possible**. Hence we might put the principle he has in mind in the first sentence above as follows:

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

But why think that this is true? Why think that if I can imagine, or conceive of, a scenario, it must be possible?

This is a difficult question to answer. But Descartes' position does have some plausibility. For, first, we do seem to know some facts about what is and is not possible. I know, for example, that the world could have been such that ND won the National Title in 2009, but that the world could not have been such that in my golf bag is a ball which is red and green all over. I also know the truth of some claims of the form

Had Notre Dame shot the ball better, then would have beaten West Virginia.

All of these are claims about possible states of affairs - ways the world isn't, but could have been. **How** do I know all of these things, and other such claims? A plausible answer is: by trying to imagine the relevant states of affairs.

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But if this is right, then it seems that there must be some link between imaginability and possibility of the sort Descartes is stating in the first sentence above.

Note, by the way, that Descartes is **not** making that claim that anything which is possible can be imagined by me - and this is a good thing, since there are presumably lots of states of affairs which are possible but too complicated for me to imagine. He is only making the claim that everything clearly imaginable by me is possible.

What follows from this?

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.

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What follows from this?

Putting together the two premises which we've identified, we can immediately get the claim that a certain scenario is possible:

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

So if everything so far is correct, we have established the conclusion that a certain state of affairs is possible: one in which I exist, but no material things exist. But, again, so what? How might this help to establish the truth of dualism - the view that I am an immaterial thing, distinct from the material thing that is my body?

A first step is to note that if it is possible that I exist and no material things exist, the following is also true:

It is possible that I \neq my body.

After all, if I exist but my body does not, then I can't be identical to my body (or any other material thing) -- after all, I can't be identical to something which does not exist.

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But if you were a materialist, you might well find no cause to object to any of this. After all, a materialist says that **we are, actually, in the real world, material things**. Why should the materialist care whether it **possible** that we be distinct from our bodies?

Another way to put this question is to ask how Descartes might get from premise (4) above to his intended conclusion that “I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it”, i.e.:

C. I \neq my body.

Our question is: what sort of premise could Descartes use to get from (4) above to his intended conclusion? Looking at (4) and the conclusion suggests a natural answer. (4) says that a certain scenario is possible, and the conclusion that says that this scenario is actual. So, we could get from (4) to (C) by employing a premise which linked possibility and actuality, like the following one:

If it is possible that such-and-such is the case, then such-and-such really is the case.

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.

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Adding this premise to our argument would, it seems, give us a valid argument for dualism. Is this argument also sound?

It seems not, because this extra premise is extremely implausible. It is, for example, possible that a pink elephant is currently rampaging through South Quad, and it does not seem to follow from this that a pink elephant is actually so rampaging. Something can be possible without being true.

So it seems that we have a gap in Descartes' argument, and the obvious way of filling that gap does not seem especially plausible.

To see how Descartes thought that this gap should be filled, let's turn to the [second sentence](#) in the quote above.

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.

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To see how Descartes thought that this gap should be filled, let's turn to the **second sentence** in the quote above.

Descartes is not saying that whatever is possible is really the case; instead, he seems to be saying something much more limited: namely, that **whenever it is possible for two things to be distinct, they really are**.

This is more limited, because it does not say that **in general** possible truth implies actual truth, but only that in a particular sort of case - when we have a claim about two objects being distinct - possible truth implies actual truth.

We might state the principle on which Descartes is relying as follows:

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

If this is added as a fifth premise to Descartes' argument, we do get a valid reconstruction of his defense of dualism.

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

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This reconstruction has the advantage that it does not involve the absurd claim that possible truth implies actual truth. We have, however, said nothing to explain why premise (5) should be true. Why think that if two things are possibly distinct, they really are distinct?

One way to see why premise (5) might seem plausible is to begin with a superficially quite different principle:

The principle of the necessity of identity

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

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**.

Descartes' argument for dualism

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But premise (5) of our reconstruction of Descartes' argument is just a disguised version of the principle of the necessity of identity. To see this, note that the following two sorts of claims are always equivalent, in the sense that one is true if and only if the other is.

If p, then q
If not q, then not p

Pairs of claims like this are called **contrapositives**. Can you see why claims of this sort are always equivalent? Can you see that premise (5) and the principle of the necessity of identity are contrapositives?

We can derive (5) from the principle of the necessity of identity as follows:

If $x=y$, then it is impossible that $x \neq y$.	Necessity of identity
If $x=y$, then it is not possible that $x \neq y$.	Impossible = not possible
If it is not true that $x \neq y$, then it is not possible that $x \neq y$.	If $x=y$, then it is not true that $x \neq y$
If not ($x \neq y$), then not (it is possible that $x \neq y$)	Simplification
If it is possible that $x \neq y$, then $x \neq y$.	Contraposition

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If we accept the principle of the necessity of identity, then, if premises (1) and (2) of Descartes' argument are true, we have a sound argument for dualism: the claim that we are immaterial things.

Could the materialist resist either of premises (1) or (2)? To do so, the materialist might try to come up with examples of situations which seem at first sight to be coherently imaginable, but which turn out on closer inspection to be impossible.

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Here's a possible example 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.

This is not an especially exciting story. But don't focus on whether it is interesting - ask yourself instead whether it describes a town which you can coherently imagine. Can you clearly conceive of there being such a town as described in the story?

Most people are inclined, at first, to say: "Sure, why not - there might be such a town, for all I know. Indiana is a pretty strange place." But in fact it's impossible for there to be such a town. Can you see why?

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?

Moreover, even if we can find no flaw in Descartes' argument for dualism, this is not the end of the story, since dualism 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? We will begin discussion of these sorts of questions next time.