

What am I?

An immaterial thing:
the case for dualism



Today we turn to our second 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.

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.

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.

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,
the 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.

I \neq my body.

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 $I \neq \text{my body}$. (3)
 5. If it is possible that $x \neq y$, then $x \neq y$.
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C. $I \neq \text{my body}$. (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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2. If I can clearly imagine something being the case, then it is possible for it to be the case.
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C. $I \neq \text{my body}$. (4,5)

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?

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' argument 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.”



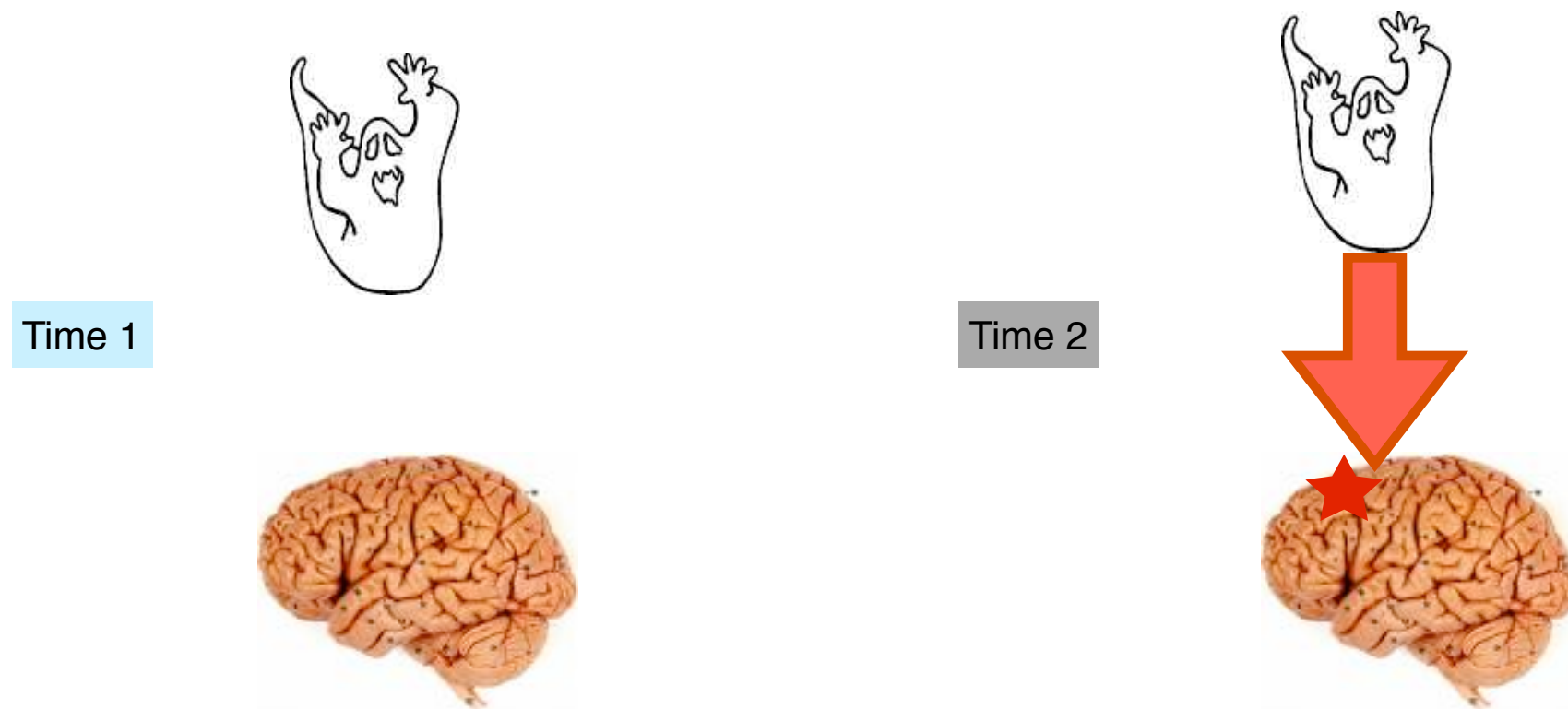
Elisabeth here is considering a special case of causation: putting something in motion. For something to push something else, it seems that the two things must be in contact; and for two things to be in contact, both must occupy space (since being in contact is just a matter of occupying adjacent spaces). 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.

But is it really is so difficult for the dualist to make sense of mind-body interactions? Remember Elisabeth's objection: that something's being set in motion depends on its being in contact with something pushing it, and that immaterial things cannot be in contact with material things. Can't the dualist simply reply that this rests on an overly restrictive view of causation? Why not think that sometimes x can cause changes in y without x and y being in contact?

Is there any way to sharpen the challenge to the dualist here?

One way to do so 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 laws 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.



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?