

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 image 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.

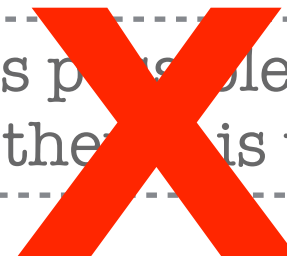
If I can clearly imagine something being the case, then it is possible for it to be the case.

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 self-identity

For any object x , necessarily, $x = x$.

In ordinary English, one might state the principle of the necessity of self-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 self-identity, along with one other principle:

Leibniz's law

Necessarily, if $x = y$, then if x is F then y is F .

Is this principle plausible?

The principle of the necessity of self-identity

For any object x , necessarily, $x=x$.

Leibniz's law

Necessarily, if $x=y$, then if x is F then y is F .

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

Necessarily, if $x=y$, then if x is necessarily identical to x then y is necessarily identical to x .

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 $x \neq y$, 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 $x \neq y$.
-

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?

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 $x \neq y$.

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

The conceivability argument for dualism is a very powerful argument. If you were a materialist, how would you reply?



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Let's consider an objection to the second premise of Descartes' argument:

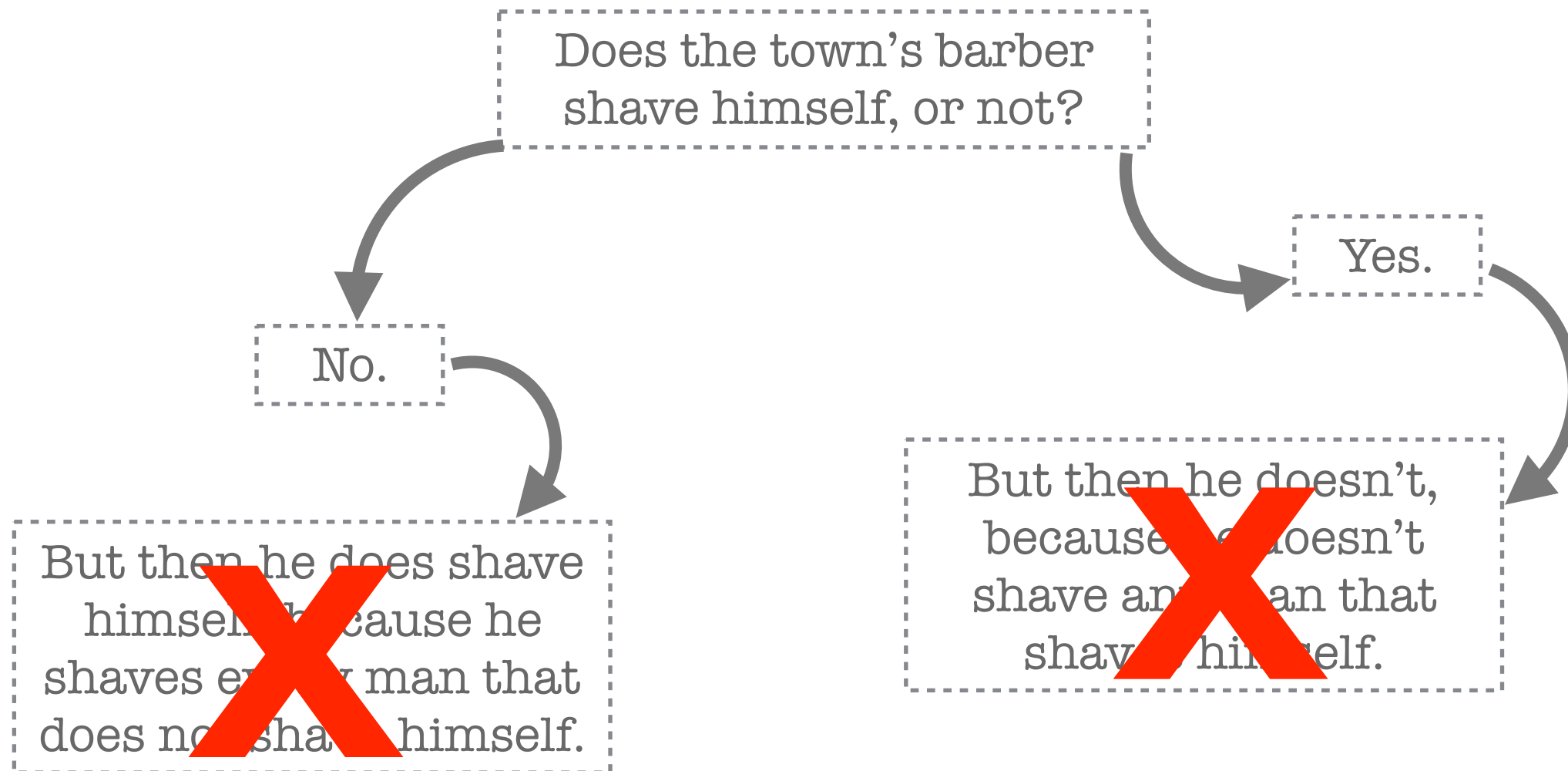
2. If I can clearly imagine something being the case, then it is possible for it to be the case.

Here is a possible counterexample to this premise:

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?

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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?

This is an appealing thought, if you are a materialist. But you should ask yourself: what contradiction could this be? What could be impossible about you existing in the absence of any material things?

We've now encountered the main argument for the dualist view that you are an immaterial thing. What are the main arguments against that view?

We'll look at four. The first one is extremely simple.

The first is what might be called **the common sense argument** for materialism.

There are lots of versions of this argument. Here is one:

1. I am sitting in a chair.
2. Only material beings can sit in chairs.

C. I am a material being. (1,2)

Which premise should the dualist reject?

1. I am sitting in a chair.
 2. Only material beings can sit in chairs.
-
- C. I am a material being. (1,2)

What is your response to the simple argument against dualism?

The first premise is false.

The second premise is false.

The argument is sound.

1. I am sitting in a chair.
 2. Only material beings can sit in chairs.

C. I am a material being. (1,2)

A dualist like Descartes seems forced to deny the first premise, since Descartes thought that we are identical to immaterial souls.

But one might adopt a less pure dualist view, and say that we have immaterial souls, but also have material parts. On this view, we are a kind of fusion or combination of an immaterial soul and a material body, and cannot exist without both. This seems to be the kind of view that Aquinas, for example, had.

The proponent of the kind of mixed view can at least say that part of me — the material part — is sitting in the chair.

Can this sort of 'mixed' dualist view be motivated by the conceivability argument?

So one might worry that if we opt for a mixed view of this kind, we end up losing our main argument for the existence of immaterial souls.

The second argument against dualism is what might be called [the argument from parsimony](#).

This argument begins with a principle which is sometimes called '[Ockham's razor](#)', after the great 13th century Franciscan friar and philosopher William of Ockham.



Ockham's razor
One should never multiply entities
without necessity.

Ockham's idea was that, in our reasoning, we should not believe in the existence of entities unless we are forced by the evidence to do so. We should avoid believing in entities if they play no role in explaining anything we observe.

This is connected to an argument made in our third reading for today, from Derek Parfit.

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Parfit considers the evidence that we could have had for the dualist view:

“I believe that there might have been evidence supporting the Cartesian View.

There might, for example, have been evidence supporting the belief in reincarnation. ... A Japanese woman might claim to remember living a life as a Celtic hunter and warrior in the Bronze Age. On the basis of her apparent memories she might make many predictions which could be checked by archaeologists. Thus she might claim to remember having a bronze bracelet, shaped like two fighting dragons. And she might claim that she remembers burying this bracelet beside some particular megalith, just before the battle in which she was killed. Archaeologists might now find just such a bracelet buried in this spot, and their instruments might show that the earth had not here been disturbed for at least 2,000 years. ...

Suppose next that there are countless other cases in which people alive today claim to remember living certain past lives, and provide similar predictions that are all verified. ... We might have to conclude that the Japanese woman has a way of knowing about the life of a Celtic Bronze Age warrior which is like her memory of her own life. It might next be discovered that there is no physical continuity between the Celtic warrior and the Japanese woman. We might therefore have to abandon the belief that the carrier of memory is the brain. ... We might have to assume that there is some purely mental entity, which was in some way involved in the life of the Celtic warrior, and is now in some way involved in the life of the Japanese woman, and which has continued to exist during the thousands of years that separate the lives of these two people. A Cartesian Ego is just such an entity. If there was sufficient evidence of reincarnation, we might have reason to believe that there really are such entities. And we might then reasonably conclude that such an entity is what each of us really is.”

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What should the dualist say? Is Parfit right that we lack evidence for the existence of immaterial souls?

The third objection to dualism is also discussed in the reading from Parfit.

“the Cartesian Ego that I am might suddenly cease to exist and be replaced by another Ego. This new Ego might ‘inherit’ all of my psychological characteristics, as in a relay race. ... while you are reading this page of text, you might suddenly cease to exist, and your body be taken over by some new person who is merely exactly like you. If this happened, no one would notice any difference. There would never be any evidence, public or private, showing whether or not this happens, and, if so, how often. We therefore cannot even claim that it is unlikely to happen.

And there are other possibilities. On this view, history might have gone just as it did, except that I was Napoleon and he was me. This is not the claim that Derek Parfit might have been Napoleon. The claim is rather that I am one Cartesian Ego, and that Napoleon was another, and that these two Egos might have ‘Occupied’ each other’s places.”

Parfit is considering arguments of the following form:

(1) If dualism were true, X would be possible.

(2) X is not possible.

(C) So, dualism is not true.

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The first version lets 'X' be a situation in which multiple souls are rapidly switched in and out of control of someone's body over time. Imagine that this person is you. Suppose that you are told that there have been 100 different souls attached to your roommate's body, each for one day, over the last 100 days.

Everything which your roommate seems to remember — lunch yesterday, the walk around the lakes the day before that — really happened to your roommate's body. So in that sense those memories were real. But there was a different soul attached to that body at that time. So the person doing those things was, if dualism is true, not your roommate.

Let's call this kind of case **rapid soul replacement**.

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Let's call this kind of case **rapid soul replacement**.

It seems that, if dualism is true, rapid soul replacement is possible.

But many have had the thought that, in cases of rapid soul replacement, the same person continues to exist. For consider the case described above. Your roommate's personality would be unchanged throughout; she would have memories of all of the things that you know that she did; she would seem just the same in every way.

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This suggests the following kind of argument:

1. If dualism is true, then in rapid soul replacement the person attached to the relevant body changes.
 2. In rapid soul replacement the person attached to the relevant body stays the same.

C. Dualism is false.

The proponent of this argument thinks of changes of immaterial souls the way that we ordinarily think of changes of parts of our bodies. Cutting off your hair and having it replaced with new hair does not change you into a different person; why should swapping out one soul for another, so long as your personality and memories stay the same?

The fourth and last objection to dualism has been, historically, the most influential objection to dualism. It emerges in the reading from the correspondence between Descartes and Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia.

Elisabeth was one of the leading intellectuals of her day. She worked in mathematics and physics as well as philosophy, and was active in German politics. She was known by her siblings as 'The Greek' because she mastered ancient Greek at such a young age.



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“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.

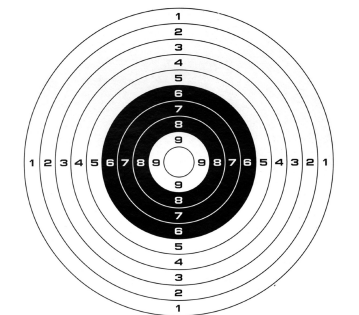
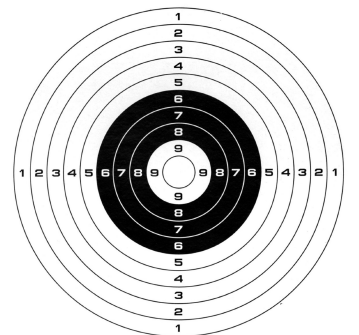
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Now consider the physical system of which the brain is a part, at time 1 and then at time 2. Won't those two physical systems differ in their total energy? After all, everything is the same in those physical systems other than the activity of this 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.