Dualism

The conceivability argument

Dualism and the hard cases

Two versions of dualism

The interaction argument

Are you an immaterial thing?

So far we have focused on views which try to explain the nature of persons just in terms of the kinds of physical and psychological features of the world with which we are very familiar.

A different sort of view holds that this is impossible. On this kind of view, what you are can't be explained in terms of any physical or psychological facts. According to this sort of view, you are a different sort of thing than the physical things that we see around us: you are an **immaterial soul**.

What is an immaterial soul? It seems as thought it would have to be something which does not occupy space — since it seems that occupying space is a defining feature of of physical things.

On most views — for reasons we will discuss — immaterial souls are also thought to be **simple**, in the sense that they have no parts.

This kind of view is often called **dualism** about persons, since according to this view there are two different kinds of things in the world: material things like tables and chairs, and immaterial things like you and me.

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Our second question was about what it would take for you to exist at some later time.

The survival question: What does it take for for some person at some other time to be you?

Simple dualist survival: X is me just in case X is the same immaterial soul as me

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This gives us an alternative to the theories we have discussed so far. The natural next question is: why should we believe this theory? Is there any argument in favor of the existence of immaterial souls?

Our first topic today is the main argument in favor of the simple dualist theory of persons.

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.

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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.

> 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.

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 ≠ my body.

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

I ≠ 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.

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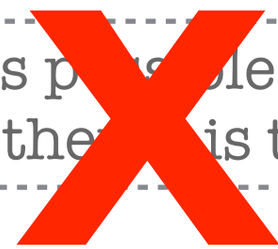
If it is p[illegible]le that P, the[illegible]is true.



I ≠ 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 if this is true, then the following principle also seems true:

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

After all, if x and y are literally the same thing, then the same reasoning which seems to show that the principle of the necessity of self-identity is true also seems to show that this principle is true.

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

This follows because ‘if p then q’ is true, so is ‘if not-q then not-p.’

If it is not necessary that x=y, then x≠y.

This follows by the definition of necessity and possibility.

If it is possible that x≠y, then x≠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 ≠ my body.

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

I ≠ my body.

If it is possible that x≠y, then x≠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 ≠ my body. (3)
5. If it is possible that x≠y, then x≠y.

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C. I ≠ 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 powerful argument. If you were a materialist, how would you reply?

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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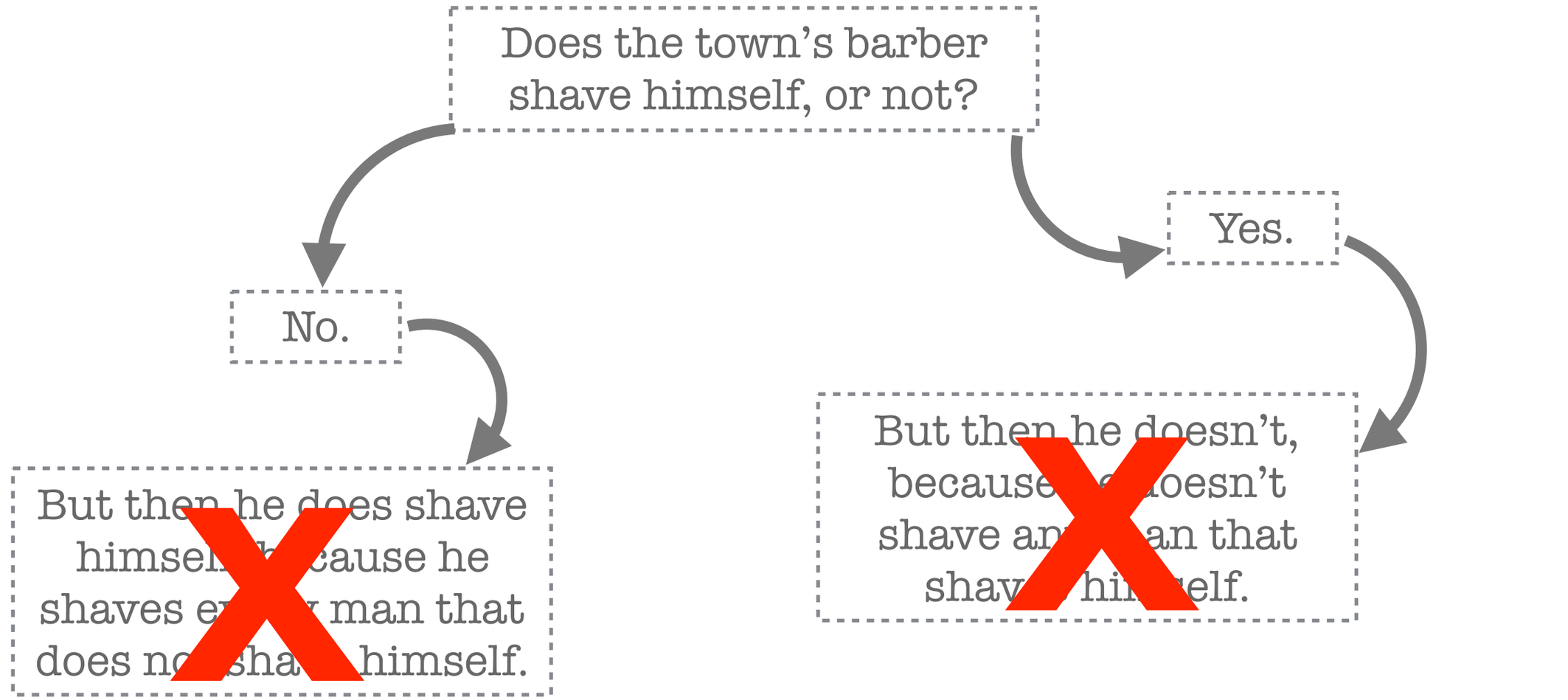


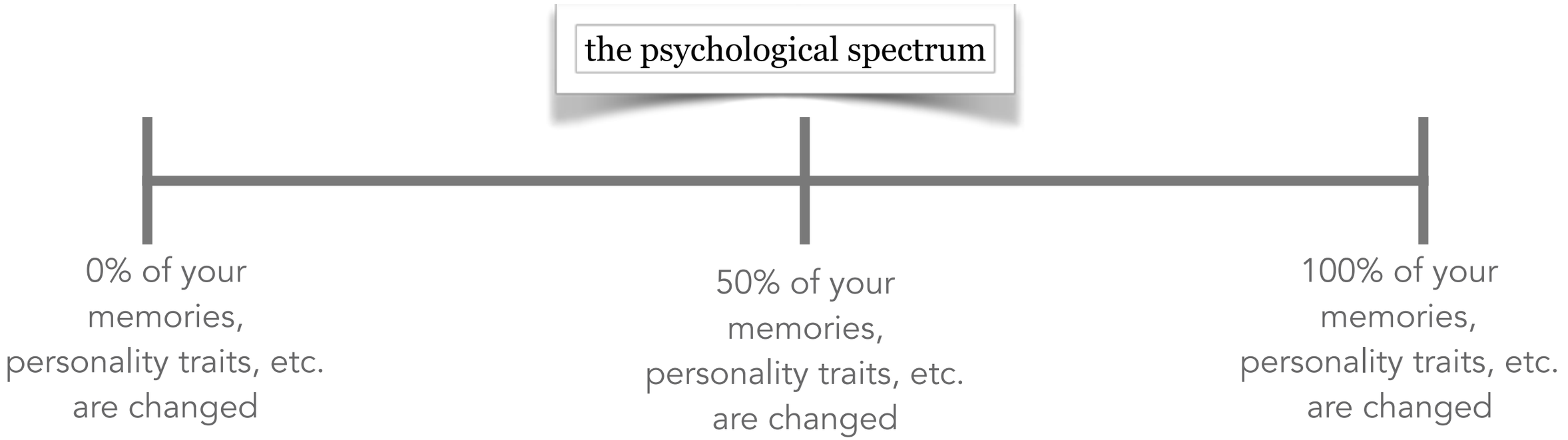
So if he shaves himself, then he doesn't, and if he doesn't, he does.

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?

What should the dualist say about some of the hard cases we have encountered so far?

Consider first the spectrum arguments. What should the dualist say about the psychological spectrum, for example?



Or consider one of our cases of fission:

> *My Division*. My body is fatally injured, as are the brains of my two brothers. My brain is divided, and each half is successfully transplanted into the body of one of my brothers. Each of the resulting people believes that he is me, seems to remember living my life, has my character, and is in every other way psychologically continuous with me. And he has a body that is very like mine.

It seems clear that the resulting people are two people, not one person. Which should the dualist say is the same person as the original person?

Does the dualist have to say that this surgery is a case in which an immaterial soul is brought into existence — or at least connected to a body for the first time?

On the one hand, it seems that the dualist has the resources to avoid the result that survival is not an "all or nothing" matter, and the argument that survival is not what matters. On the other hand, the dualist's choices about who survives as who in a given case can look a little arbitrary.

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?

One is a type of argument we have already encountered — our 'easy arguments' for materialism.

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

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

Which premise should the dualist reject?

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Which premise should the dualist reject?

The believer in immaterial souls has two moves here.

The first is a simple one: deny the first premise. This is what a simple dualist like Descartes would say. Strictly speaking, since I am an immaterial soul, I neither sit in chairs, nor walk to class, nor eat at the dining hall.

But there is another possibility. A believer in immaterial souls might reject simple dualism, and instead give the following answer to the identity question:

Fusion dualism: I am a combination of an immaterial soul and a material thing.

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Fusion dualism: I am a combination of an immaterial soul and a material thing.

According to the fusion dualist, I am sitting in a chair, because part of me — namely, the material part — is. This is the kind of view which Aquinas seems to have had.

How should the fusion dualist answer the survival question?

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Here there are two choices. Aquinas would have said:

Fusion survival: X is me just in case X has the same immaterial soul as me and is the same material thing as me

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Fusion

survival: X is me just in case X has the same immaterial soul as me and is the same material thing as me

On this view, my survival requires **both** the survival of my soul and the survival of my body. But the fusion dualist might also stick with our earlier dualist answer to the survival question:

Simple dualist

survival: X is me just in case X is the same immaterial soul as me

On this view, even though I have material parts, I can exist without them.

Fusion survival: X is me just in case X has the same immaterial soul as me and is the same material thing as me

Simple dualist survival: X is me just in case X is the same immaterial soul as me

Which view is better?

On the one hand, fusion survival seems to fit better with the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead — since that view seems to have a bodily component.

On the other hand, the proponent of fusion survival can't use the conceivability argument as an argument for dualism. Can you see why?

I'm now going to set aside the question of which of these versions of dualism is best, and turn to an objection to dualism which affects both equally.

This central objection to dualism 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 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.

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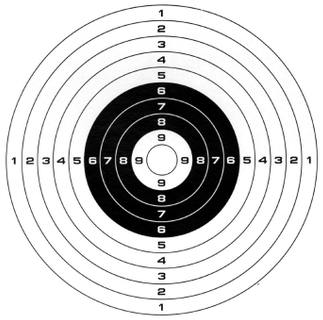
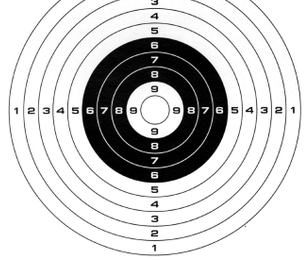
Now consider the physical system of which the brain is a part, at time 1 and then at time 2. Won't those two physical systems differ in their total energy? After all, everything is the same in those physical systems other than the activity of this neuron; and if it fires at one time but not the other,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

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Both the pairing problem and the problem with conservation laws are ways of bringing out Elisabeth's central objection to the dualist: the dualist seems committed to the existence of causal relations between immaterial souls and material things which are quite different than the causal interactions we perceive in the world and are, for that reason, mysterious.