PHILOSOPHY PAPER 2

In this paper I will talk about identity or sameness, I will then use Leibniz’s Law of Identity to argue for mental states and brain states being different and explain why the argument is valid. I will then provide an objection to the argument and talk about the position of the physicalist theory.

In philosophy, identity is the relation each thing bears only to itself. “Identity” and “sameness” mean the same; their meanings are identical.[cite: Stanford.edu] There are primarily two types of identity qualitative and numerical. Qualitative identity is when two things share all the same properties i.e. they are indistinguishable from each other e.g. a pair of identical twins. Numerical identity requires absolute, or total, qualitative identity, and can only hold between a thing and itself. Numerical identity is something being exactly the same as itself. So two things cannot have numerical identity, there can be only one thing. A thing can only be numerically identical to itself.

This should not be confused with personal identity which refers to what it means to be a person or what make a person the same individual over time. In the context of this paper we are concerned with numerical identity.

Humans have physical properties like size, mass, density, color etc. These are the properties, which we can attribute to physical objects. Humans also tend to have mental properties like experiences, emotions, desires, beliefs etc. These are the properties which cannot be attributed to physical objects. E.g., What is the circumference of your anger? [cite: Dr. Adam Sennet] This cannot be calculated and seems like an absurd question. Physical properties are observable, they can be seen and calculated by others. Mental properties cannot be observed, it is not possible for someone to tell what emotion you are feeling with certainty, this is something which is internal to you and can only be experienced by you. The mind body problem poses the question of what is the relationship between the body and the mind i.e., what is the relationship between the physical and the mental. If physical and mental states are different what make them up? Are they connected to each other? What relationship do they have with each other if any?

THE DUALISM ARGUMENT:

Dualism is the view that the mind and the body are literally separate entities made of different kinds of stuff. Things like hands, legs, head etc make up your body or the physical part and your beliefs, emotions, thoughts all make up your mind or the mental part. The emotions you feel, thoughts you have are all different types of mental states which are not physical and cannot be observed. Mental states are packages of information which help you think about the world. They are states of being which correspond to your emotions/feelings/thoughts. These are different from brain states which describe the physical conditions your brain is in like the amount of hormones present, neurons that are firing etc. A brain state, with sufficient neuroscience technology and knowledge can be measured. Mental states on the other hand cannot be measured using such methods.

According to Dualism brain states and mental states are not the same. Mental states are made up of intangible material whereas physical stuff is made of tangible material. Now the question may arise what is it to be same? Or what constitutes sameness. Leibniz’s Law (also called the Identity of Indiscernibles) says that no two distinct things exactly resemble each other. If x=y then every property of x is possessed by y. So, if something is true or is possessed by x but is false or is not possessed by y then x and y cannot be said to be the same. According to Leibniz’s law if two things are the same then they have to be numerically equal meaning they have to exact same thing. E.g.

P1: A is 180cm and weighs 135lbs

P2: B is 180cm and weighs 165lbs

C: A is not the same as B

Here A and B both possess the property of being 180cm tall but B does not possess the property of weighing 135lbs, so A possess a property that B does not. Thus, A and B cannot be said to be the same. Beliefs, values or experiences have no physical properties, they do not have shape, size, colour etc because they are not physical thus cannot be measured/observed. Beliefs, values and experiences make up mental states. Every brain state has shape, size, chemical composition, no of neurons firing etc and is physical and thus can be measured. Let’s say (F) is the property of being measurable and observable, then

P1. F is true of brain states.

P2. F is not true of mental states.

C. Therefore, mental states aren’t identical to brain states.

[cite: Dr Adam Sennet]

In other words:

P1: Brain states can be observed and measured

P2: Mental states cannot be observed and measured

C: Mental states are not the same as Brain states

So the property of being measurable and observable is not possessed by mental states but is possessed by brain states, hence by Leibniz’s Law or the Identity of Indiscernables they cannot be said to be the same.

But if we are to believe that the mind and body are different and made up of different components then we might question do the mind and the body interact with each other? If you are sitting in a hot room and are sweating profusely, your body will want hydration to replenish the water you have lost, this results in you feeling thirsty. The need to replenish water lost is a physical response caused by your body whereas feeling thirsty is a mental state. Hence we can see that the body and the mind do interact with each other. However if the mind and body are distinct according to the Dualist’s argument then how do they interact? This results in the interaction problem which questions the nature of the interaction between the mental and the physical. Hence if P claims that the mind and body are separate entities then P owes an explanation of how the mind and body interact with each other. [cite: Ofri Oren]

THE PHYSICALIST RESPONSE:

Physicalism is an objection to Dualism. Physicalism states that everything in this world is physical, or as contemporary philosophers sometimes say, everything supervenes on the physical. Physicalism implies that everything is made up of matter and therefore takes up space [cite: rit.edu]. there is nothing above and beyond the physical which cannot be explained using science. This is in contrast to dualism which says that while the body is made up of atoms, molecules, etc, the mind is made up of non-physical materials. According to physicalists all emotions, concepts of experience, desires and beliefs are a function of the brain and can be explained with neuroscientific knowledge. All mental states can be explained in terms of brain states. So emotions like pain or sadness can be expressed in terms of configurations of the brain and its neural activity. The idea that mental states and brain states are different are just a result of our incomplete neuroscientific knowledge. This view does away with the interaction problem as everything consists of matter (i.e. it is physical) and there is no need to specify any special interaction rules between the material (Physical Stuff) and the immaterial (Mental Stuff).

In regards to the Dualist argument of mental and physical states being separate , physicalists consider the example of Iris and the Flash,

Iris, a journalist, believes that:

P1: Flash can run super-fast

P2: Barry Allen cannot run super-fast

C: Flash and Barry Allen are not the same person

[cite: Dr. Adam Senet- Superman/Clark Kent example]

In this example Iris having seen the Flash in action knows that the Flash can run super-fast. It makes sense that no normal humans can run this fast. She also knows that Barry Allen, her childhood friend, cannot run super-fast. So it is appropriate for her to believe that the Flash and Barry Allen are two different individuals. Unbeknownst to Iris Barry Allen and the Flash are the same individual. Iris believes that they are separate due to her individual concepts about the two which is that the Flash is a superhero who can run very fast and Barry Allen is a normal person who cannot run very fast. Thus she is using two concepts or perspectives of thinking about the same entity. Physicalists use this same argument in the context of mental states and brain states, the Dualist’s belief that mental states and brain states are separate and cannot be considered to be equivalent to each other is analogous to the Flash and Barry Allen example. The physicalist point of view says that mental states and brain states are the same but are viewed differently by the Dualist point of view because they are being thought of using different concepts. This also provides an answer to Leibniz’s law which states that two things can only be considered equal if they have exactly the same properties. In this case Flash and Barry Allen are the same person but Iris is unable to come to this conclusion because she is unable to think of the both of them using the same concept. Physicalism examples like this to explain that mental states and brain states are not different and are in fact the same thing - functions of the brain.

The physicalist’s response can be considered to be convincing as the scientific knowledge we have so far suggests that all properties like emotions, desires etc associated with the non-physical are caused by the brain. Being happy corresponds to increase in certain chemicals in your brain or vice versa. The physicalist theory also does away with the interaction problem removing the need to establish how the physical and the non-physical communicate as only the physical is present and the mind and its states are a part of the physical. Due to our current neuroscientific knowledge and understanding the physicalist response seems viable. There is also no evidence which points to the existence of the non-physical material which Dualism advocates. With the Dualism model one might ask what constitutes the immaterial, the mental stuff which is above and beyond the scope of physics. How would you explain the interactions between different parts of the non-material stuff? Physicalism undermines or negates these concerns as all there is the physical and all mental states can be explained as subsets of brain states. Concepts like emotions, desires, beliefs etc which Dualism associates with the immaterial can be explained using physical methods as functions of the brain’s operation. Thus I believe the Physicalist response to be convincing.

The arguments posed by the Dualist theory of, mental states and brain states being different using Leibniz’s Law countered by the Physicalist theory. There is no conclusive evidence of the existence of the non-physical which Dualism advocates, thus physicalism which says that mental states and brain states are both a part of the physical, seems to be the most viable theory. However, the quest to find the true nature of mental states will go on. Advances in scientific understanding of the brain might help establish a more complete picture of the relationship between the two and might even help us discover what the immaterial consists of. As I have argued the physicalist response to the dualist argument is convincing and supports our best understanding of how the mind and the body work together.