# Philosophy of Mind: The Identity Theory

Since at least the time of Descartes, philosophers have become increasing concerned about the relationship between **mental properties** and **physical properties.** To get an idea of what this distinction amounts to, consider the following list:

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| **Mental Properties/Events** | **Physical Properties/Events** |
| “I **see** a red ball” | A round object that reflects light at such-and-such a wavelength (in the “red” part of the light spectrum). Your eyes sending neural “signals” to your brain, and your brain processing these signals. |
| “I **hear** a crash” | An object impacting the ground, sound waves radiating out from the location of the collision. Your ear picking up on these signals and sending them to your brain. |
| “I **believe** in God” | The behavior of “going to church regularly.” Telling people “I believe that God exists.” |
| “I **enjoy** eating peanut butter.” | Eating peanut butter on toast every day for breakfast. |
| “I **feel** pain.” | Having your foot cut off. Screaming. Saying “Ouch!” |
| “I **intend** to punch Jones.” | Actually punching Jones. A certain neural signal sent from your brain to your arm. |

One of the central problems of philosophy of mind concerns the *relation* between the things on the left with the things on the right. That is, how do mental properties or events (the properties on the left side of the table) relate to physical properties or events (the properties or events on the right side of the table)? How do the things that we “experience” as part of our conscious life relate to the physical world around us? In this lecture, we’ll be focusing on three different solutions to these questions. mind-body dualism, behaviorism, and identity theory.

## Mind-Body Dualism: Souls and Bodies are different stuff

“Although I certainly do possess a body with which I am very closely conjoined; nevertheless, because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in as far as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other hand, I possess a distinct idea of body, in as far as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that Iam entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it.” (Descartes, Meditations, sec. 6).

The **mind-body dualism** of Rene Descartes holds that mental properties and events exist in an *entirely different realm* from physical properties and events. On this view, humans are essentially “thinking things” that are only contingently connected to their bodies (i.e., to the physical stuff that makes up the world described by science). The idea is basically that mental experiences are a property of human “souls,” while physical properties belong to objects. Descartes proposed that God would make sure the soul’s perceptions (of pain/pleasure) matched up with the world (of having things happen to one’s body), and that this was mediated by the pineal gland. He also argued that animals couldn’t feel pain, since they lacked souls. Later dualists have dropped many of Descartes’ specific ideas as unworkable, but have tried to maintain Descartes’ basic picture of a two-part world: one part spiritual/mental stuff and one part physical stuff.

**Advantages**. This view explains why we can imagine ourselves disconnected from our bodies, surviving bodily death and going to heaven, being reincarnated, switching bodies with other people, etc. It also explains why we seem to have “privileged” access to our mental states (e.g., I can definitely tell you whether I am in pain, but I can’t necessarily tell whether you are in pain) but don’t seem to have this access to physical states (e.g., depending on the circumstance, I sometimes don’t know exactly what is going on with my body). This view explains why things *besides* humans have to obey the laws of physics (since Descartes was something like the first modern physicist, this mattered quite a bit to him).

**Disadvantages.** This view cannot explain how the mind and body (or the mental properties and physical properties) *interact.* For example, this view cannot explain *why* having your foot cut off causes a sensation of pain, why light of a certain wavelength causes a sensation of “seeing red”, or why “having the intention to punch Jones” causes you to actually punch Jones. Also, if dualism is true, then physics (at least as we think of it now) is false, since humans will be capable of using their immaterial souls to change the world in ways that science can’t predict or explain.

## Behaviorism: Stop talking about souls!

I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word “pain” means—must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalize the one case so irresponsibly?

Now someone tells me that he knows what pain is only from his own case!—Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a “beetle”. No one can look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle.—Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing.—But suppose the word “beetle” had a use in these people’s language?—If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a something: for the box might even be empty.—No, one can “divide through”by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is. (Wittgenstein)

**Behaviorism** holds that there are, in reality, no such thing as mental properties at all. Instead, whenever we *think* we are talking about these things, we are actually talking about *dispositions* or *behaviors.* So, for example, the mental property of “being in pain” is identical to the set of behaviors “screaming, telling people you are in pain, getting away from the source of the pain, etc.” The takeaway—there is NO SUCH THING as a person’s “private mental life.” This view has been very influential in psychology, where many diagnoses that *seem* to be about experience (depression, anxiety, etc.) are actually defined in terms of behaviors that can be observed by the psychiatrist. Because of the way these are (sometimes) defined, it is literally *impossible* for a person to be “secretly” depressed (e.g., to be depressed without displaying the physical symptoms of depression.

**Advantages:** This makes it very easy to account for the relation between physical events and mental events, since they are the same things. In particular, it’s very easy to explain why the mental desire to “raise your arm” causes the physical event of you “raising your arm.” These two things are actually the *same exact thing described in two different ways.* Behaviorism supports also the philosophical thesis of **physicalism**—the thesis that all of the “fundamental” facts about the universe are physical facts, and so it fits with science in a way that dualism does not.

**Disadvantages:** Some mental events simply do not seem to be identical to physical behaviors. For example, it seems that a shy, quiet person might have lots of feelings and thoughts. The mere fact that he or she isn’t willing to *express* or *act on* those thoughts does not mean that there are no thoughts. But that is what behaviorism seems to suggest. For these reasons, most philosophers now reject behaviorism (and even psychologists have backed off the claim that behaviors *define* conditions).

## The Identity Theory of Mind: it’s really all the same

According to the **identity theory of mind,** every mental event (every event on the left side of the table) is identical to a *brain event* (in particular, it is identical to the firing of a group of neurons). If this thesis is true, then there is no separately existing “mental” realm—everything that exists is physical. However, unlike behaviorism, this identity does NOT require that a person act on all of their mental states (so, it’s possible to have private thoughts/feelings). JJ Smart considers a number of objections to the identity theory of mind. Here are some of the most important ones:

**Objection 1:** Beliefs about mental events like pains are different from beliefs about physical events like brain states. LOTS of people have beliefs about feeling pain, seeing the color red, hearing loud noises, etc. Historically, only a select few would agree “I am in such-and-such brain state.”

**Smart’s reply:** mental events and physical events are **contingently identical** in the same way that lightning and electrical discharge are contingently identical. Lots of people who don’t know anything about electricity have had beliefs about lightning; however, this doesn’t imply that lightning isn’t “really” just an electrical discharge.

**Objection 2:** Neurology isn’t advanced enough to tell us with any assurance *which* neurons firing signals “pain”, which signals “seeing the color red”, and so on. So, when I say “I am in pain”, I can’t mean “I am having brain process X”.

**Smart’s reply:** The identity theory isn’t a claim about what your words mean. It’s a claim about what mental events (like pain, or seeing the color red) actually are. Historically, people have referred to “the evening star” (often the first star to appear in the evening) and “the morning star” (often the first star to appear in the morning). These phrases “mean different things.” However, as a matter of historical fact, it was eventually discovered that the morning star and the evening star were actually the planet Venus.

**Objection 3:** I can imagine myself with a different body, or entirely without body, while still having my mind. This shows that mental events cannot be identical to physical events.

**Smart’s reply:** He doesn’t believe that you actually can conceive an *entirely* free floating mind—the mental properties have to exist in *something* (maybe this stuff is ectoplasm, or “soul staff”, or the physical world). If this is true, then you do have some theory of what mental events are identical to, and this theory is just a competitor to Smart’s theory. For similar reasons, the mere fact that you can imagine yourself in a different body while having the same sensations does not really show much.

## Review Question

We discussed three theories about the relationships between “mind and body.” Choose any TWO of these theories, and compare and contrast them. Then, say which theory you prefer, and why.