

3. Substance dualism, part 2

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1 Varieties of possibility and necessity

Recall Descartes' conceivability argument that he is not his body:

1. Everything that I can conceive clearly, distinctly, and without contradiction, is possible.
2. Thus, if I can conceive that something exists without something else, then it must be possible for the former to exist without the latter.
3. I can conceive of myself existing without my body.
4. I can conceive of my body existing as a non-thinking thing.
5. So it must be possible for me and my body to exist without each other; therefore,
6. *I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.*

Let's focus on the first premise: everything I can conceive clearly, distinctly, and without contradiction, is possible.

In general, to say that something is *necessary* is to say that that thing *must* be the case. To say that something is *possible* is to say that it *could* be the case. Finally, to say that something is *contingent* is to say that it's neither necessarily true nor necessarily false. Necessity and possibility are usually taken to be inter definable: to say that something is necessary is to say that it's *not* possible for that thing *not* to obtain.

In English, there are different things we can be saying when we talk about possibility and necessity. We will describe three of these in what follows:

Metaphysical possibility/necessity: When we say that something is *metaphysically* possible, we are talking about the ways in which things could be. For instance, I have black hair, but it is *metaphysically possible* that my hair was a different color: if *things had been different*, for instance, if my genes were slightly different, the color of my hair could have been different too. Again, we use possibility in the metaphysical sense when we want to describe *ways things could be*.

Epistemic possibility/necessity: When we say that something is *epistemically* possible, we are talking about what could be the case *for all we know*, or *for all we believe*. For instance, for all I know, it's possible that my friend's turtle is alive and happy. Note that something can be metaphysically possible without it being epistemically possible: it is *metaphysically* possible

that I was born in Mars, but I know that I was born in planet Earth, so it's not *epistemically* possible that I was born in Mars.

Is there anything that is epistemically possible but not metaphysically possible? Yes: supposed that, unbeknownst to me, the person called 'Sarah' and the person called 'Jen' are one and the same person. Since I don't know this, it seems it's epistemically possible (for me) that Sarah is not Jen. But since Sarah and Jen are actually the same person, it's not metaphysically possible that they are different people!

We should be careful here: it's one thing for it to be possible that there are two different people, one called 'Sarah' and the other called 'Jen'. It's a completely different thing to say that Sarah could be someone other than herself. The first is possible; the latter is impossible.

Physical possibility/necessity: We defined epistemic possibility and necessity by using the expression *for all I know*. We can define other kinds of possibility and necessity in similar ways. For instance, we can define *physical* possibility as that which is possible *given the laws of physics*. Thus, everything that is compatible with the laws of physics that actually hold is said to be *physically possible*. Some things are physically impossible but *metaphysically possible*. For instance, that the law of inertia fails.

With these distinctions in place, we should be in a better position to evaluate Descartes' argument. First of all, we need to find out which kind of necessity he must be talking about in order for his argument to be valid. Can he be talking about epistemic or physical possibility? No: his first premise clearly doesn't hold if we're talking about physical possibility, and the step from 5 to 6 doesn't hold if we're talking about epistemic possibility.

When Descartes talks about possibility in his argument, he is talking about *metaphysical possibility*. Having made this clarification, does his argument hold? Some philosophers have denied that the first premise holds, even when we're just talking about metaphysical possibility. This is illustrated by the example of Sarah and Jen above. However, other philosophers have replied to this attack by saying that the premise establishes a link between *conceiving things in the right way* and possibility. **Question:** what could be this *right way* of conceiving things, and how could we distinguish it from the wrong way of conceiving things?

For the time being, let's examine the merits of Descartes' own version of dualism.

2 Descartes' dualism

Descartes' view about the nature of the mind is usually called *substance dualism*. It is so called because it posits two kinds of substances: mental and material—or physical, as we would now call them.¹

Descartes' dualism attempts to recover the common sense intuition that our minds interact with our bodies: our mind can control our body at will, and our body can influence our minds by producing in it pains, hunger, and other sensations including sense perception. For this reason, Descartes' view is also a version of *interactionist dualism*. The main tenet of interactionist dualism is simply

¹Remember our working definition of substance: a substance is something that can exist independently of other things.

that, though the mind and the body are different kinds of substances, they can interact with each other. The following remarks by Descartes show his commitment to this view:

There is nothing that my own nature teaches more vividly than that I have a body, and that when I feel pain there is something wrong with the body, and that when I am hungry or thirsty the body needs food and drink, and so on. So I should not doubt that there is some truth in this (p. 56).

I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but ... I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit. If this were not so, I, who am nothing but a thinking thing, would not feel pain when the body was hurt, but would perceive the damage purely by the intellect, just as a sailor perceives by sight if anything in his ship is broken. (p. 56)

Descartes' view was forcefully attacked since the very beginning, which is why we will consider some objections raised by Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia.

3 Elisabeth's challenges

Recall Descartes' working definition of a body:

By a body I understand whatever has a determinable shape and a definable location and can occupy a space: in such a way as to exclude any other body; it can be perceived by touch, sight, hearing, taste or smell, and can be moved in various ways, not by itself but by whatever else comes into contact with it. (p. 17)

Moreover, Descartes has argued that he (his soul, his mind) can exist without a body, and without having any extension. This is what puzzles Elisabeth:

Given that the soul of a human being is only a *thinking* substance, how can it affect the bodily spirits, in order to bring about voluntary actions? The question arises because it seems that how a thing moves depends solely on (i) how much it is pushed, (ii) the manner in which it is pushed, or (iii) the surface-texture and shape of the thing that pushes it. The first two of those require *contact* between the two things, and the third requires that the causally active thing be extended. Your notion of the soul entirely excludes extension, and it appears to me that an immaterial thing can't possibly *touch* anything else. (Elisabeth to Descartes, 6.V.1643)

Descartes has claimed that the mind and the body causally interact with each other, and Elisabeth is asking for an explanation of how the interaction is supposed to obtain. Elisabeth challenges as follows: causing a material thing to move requires being extended, but Descartes claims that minds are not extended. So how can minds cause bodies to move?

In another letter, Elisabeth presses the challenge:

I've never been able to conceive of 'what is immaterial' in any way except as the bare negative 'what is not material', and *that* can't enter into causal relations with matter!

I have to say that I would find it easier to concede matter and extension to the soul than to concede that an immaterial thing could move and be moved by a body. On the one side, if the soul moves the body through *information*, the spirits would have to think, and you say that nothing of a bodily thing thinks. On the other side, you show in your *Meditations* that the body could move the soul, and yet it is hard to understand that [...] a soul that can exist without the body, and that has nothing in common with the body, is so governed by it. (Elisabeth to Descartes 10.VI.1643)