

Lecture 1: **Dualism**

René Descartes (1641) *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Meditation VI.

What is the mind?

The central question in the philosophy of mind is: What is the mind? Aristotle's *De Anima* (*On the Soul*, 350 BCE) is a very early example of a philosophy of mind, though he uses 'soul'. Aristotle writes:

The knowledge of the soul admittedly contributes greatly to the advance of truth in general, and, above all, to our understanding of Nature, for the soul is in some sense the principle of animal life. Our aim is to grasp and understand, first its essential nature, and secondly its properties; of these some are taught to be affections proper to the soul itself, while others are considered to attach to the animal owing to the presence within it of soul. (*De An.* Bk I; pt 1)

The mind is somehow in or associated with our body. This has led to much confusion. Gilbert Ryle, in his must-read *The Concept of Mind* (1949), identifies a modern picture of the mind and its place in nature:

The official doctrine, which hails chiefly from Descartes, is something like this. With the doubtful exceptions of idiots and infants in arms every human being has both a body and a mind. Some would prefer to say that every human being is both a body and a mind. His body and his mind are ordinarily harnessed together, but after the death of the body his mind may continue to exist and function. (1949, p.1)

This picture is still prevalent, even among scientists. What is striking in this traditional picture is that the mind and the body are somehow different things or different parts of a thing.

The mind-body problem

We roughly know what kind of thing our body is. But what kind of thing is our mind? This question poses a dilemma: the mind is either a material or physical phenomenon, or it is not. Each option leads to uncomfortable questions:

- A. If the mind is not a material or physical phenomenon, then how can it have effects in the physical world?
- B. If the mind is a material or physical phenomenon, then how can we explain intentionality and consciousness?

This twofold conundrum is the mind-body problem.

Descartes's dualism

The mind-body problem can be traced back to Descartes. Elisabeth of the Palatinate (also known as Elisabeth of Bohemia) famously raises the problem in her correspondence with Descartes.

Descartes contrasted the mind (thinking) with matter (extension). One of his arguments, from the *Meditations*, goes as follows. Matter clearly is divisible, but the mind clearly is not divisible. When you reflect on a piece of wax, you realise that you can again and again break it up into parts, no matter how large or small the piece is. We can also clearly see that mind doesn't allow for divisions or parts. If mind and matter were identical, then one thing would be both divisible and not divisible. That's absurd. And so mind and matter are not identical. They are different *substances*.

Keep in mind that 'substance' is a technical term. Here it doesn't just mean 'stuff'. Descartes uses 'substance' in a way that goes back to Aristotle's metaphysics. A substance is something that exists in its own right (contrast: attributes or properties). Descartes claims that the mind exists in its own right, its nature is not in any way tied up with body.

Descartes defends a substance dualism: that there are two distinct substances, and only two.

Mental Phenomena

Descartes conceived of the mind as a unity: 'a thinking thing'. Many later philosophers conceive of the mind as a bundle of mental states, mental properties, mental events, or mental processes. You can find this bundle conception of mind outlined in David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738). Your mind is constituted of all mental phenomena that can be ascribed to you.

This changes the question: What makes something a mental phenomenon? Two kinds of criteria have been offered in recent philosophy:

1. Consciousness: all mental phenomena are conscious phenomena; they are states or events for which there is something 'it is like' to have them, as a subject. Examples are sensations, perceptions, dreams, episodes of imagining, etc.
2. Intentionality (mental representation): all mental phenomena are 'about' something else. Examples are beliefs, mental images, emotions, desires etc.

What is matter?

Descartes claimed that no mental phenomenon is a material phenomenon. When mind is in this way contrasted with matter, what is it being contrasted with? Descartes said that matter just has one main feature ('principal attribute'): it is extended. But in the early modern period matter was thought to have further features: solidity, impenetrability, conserved, interacting deterministically, interacting only on contact.

20th century physics has shown this conception to be wrong in every respect: not all matter is solid, it is not impenetrable, not always conserved, and can interact indeterministically and also at a distance.

The physical world

Philosophical discussions of matter since the 20th century have, naturally enough, tended to take their lead from physics in characterising the nature of matter. And in physics, the concept of matter has become much less central. Instead of identifying nature with the material world, it has become more common to identify nature with the *physical world*, i.e. the world described by physical science. This world contains much more than matter and its properties, since it also contains fields, forces, space-time and so on.

Note that in these discussions the word 'physical' is used in the sense of the subject-matter of physical science. It does not mean what is meant when people talk about physical things in the everyday sense. (See Daniel Stoljar, 'Physicalism' in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.)

The relationship between mind and matter

Once you consider Descartes's dualist proposal, a number of puzzles arise:

1. Are mind and matter related in space?
2. Does the one depend on the other?
3. Can mind cause matter to change? And vice versa?
4. Should we after all (contrary to what Descartes thought) think of mind and matter as identical?