

Mind as Immaterial Substance

What is it to have a mind? If we asked Plato or Aristotle, two Greek philosophers living c.2500 years ago, they would answer that to have a mind is to have a soul. The English word ‘soul’ translates the Greek word ‘psuche’ and the Latin word ‘anima’. You likely recognize ‘psuche’ if you are a psychology major; ‘psychology’ roughly translates as ‘the science of soul’. Psychologists today do not think that what it is to have a mind is to have a soul, but it is worthwhile thinking about why in years gone past soul and mind have been so closely associated.

The 17th century philosopher, Descartes, is the one most closely associated with the view. You can read a little about Descartes and his project [here](#). You can listen to some podcasts about him [here](#).

Reality comprises different kinds of entities. There are chairs, trees, atoms, and molecules. Many think that whatever exists is similar in one important respect: they are all physical. Philosophers use the word ‘substance’ to categorize such a general kind of thing, e.g., clouds and molecules are physical substances. ‘Substance’ is an interesting word that has a variety of uses in English. Compare ‘the substance of the argument’ vs. ‘the substance in this bucket’. For our and Descartes’ purposes, ‘substance’ is closely connected with one of its Greek origins, ‘*upokeimenon*’, which means roughly ‘what underlies’, or ‘subject’.

Here’s the idea: reality is fundamentally divided between entities which are the bearers of qualities, quantities, relations, and activities and these various qualities, quantities, relations, and activities they bear. There is an important difference the height, weight, and swimming of the dolphin Flipper and Flipper himself. Flipper is a substance, in the sense that Flipper is a subject in which other things inhere, e.g., the swimming belongs to Flipper, the shine and weight inhere in Flipper, etc. Flipper, though, does not inhere in anything else. He is not a property of any other substance.

This contrast between substances and what inhere in them obviously mirrors a linguistic contrast between grammatical subjects, on the one hand, and predicates on the other, between ‘Flipper’ and ‘swims’. But the contrast is more fundamental than the linguistic one; ‘blue’ can be used as the subject of a predicate, e.g. ‘blue is nice’. Substances can never inhere in anything else.

Many think that the world contains only physical substances. This means that they only things which exist in which properties inhere are physical things. We will never find, on this view, an existing substance that does not have physical attributes.

This is not Descartes’ view. He argues that reality comprises two radically different kinds of substances, physical (or bodily) substances, and souls (mental substance). These substances have very different features inhering in them, and, according to Descartes have interesting relations to one another.

According to Descartes, each person is made up of two types of substance, a physical and a mental one.

Minds are subjects of their own special properties like thinking, sensing, judging, and willing. These properties inhere in mind. They do not inhere in bodies. Bodies, on the other hand, are extended in space, they have weight, undergo nourishment, etc. It is important to recognize just how different these two types of substances are. A soul is simple, divine, and immutable. Our bodies are composite and perishable.

This allows Descartes to claim that a soul survives bodily death and decay. How could a soul decay if it is not made of matter? In part, this also comes from the notion of a substance. That which inheres in a substance cannot exist without substances. Color cannot exist without some object that has color. Substance, on the other hand, does not depend for its existence on anything to inhere in. Socrates does not need to be predicated of anything for him to exist. It is normally taken to follow that substances can exist independently of anything else. Descartes himself wrote:

The notion of a substance is just this—that it can exist by itself, that is without the aid of any other substance.

So just as these chairs could exist without one another, so too a mind and body should exist without one another.

Descartes fundamental claims

1. There are substances of two fundamentally different kinds in the world, mental substances and material substances—or minds and bodies. The essential nature of a mind is to think, be conscious, and engage in other mental activities; the essence of a body is to have spatial extensions (a bulk) and be located in space.
2. A human person is a composite being (a “union,” as Descartes called it) of a mind and a body.
3. Minds are diverse from bodies; no mind is identical with a body.
4. Minds and bodies causally influence each other. Some mental phenomena are causes of physical phenomena and vice versa.

The fourth claim is important. Descartes thinks that there is causal interaction between mind and body. Mind causes the body to move. The body can cause the mind to have various features. Here are some examples. We’ll ultimately worry whether 1 and 3 are compatible with 4, but let’s review why Descartes believes in substance dualism.

Arguments for Substance Dualism

Descartes offers his famous “cogito” argument: “I think, therefore I exist.” This inference convinces him that he can be absolutely certain about his own exis-

tence; his existence is one perfectly indubitable bit of knowledge he has. Now that he knows he exists, he wonders what kind of thing he is, asking, “But what then am I?” He answers: “A thinking thing”. And a thinking thing is “a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.”

Descartes cannot deny that he is a thinking thing. He therefore knows that he exists and he knows what kind of thing he is. He proceeds to inquire into whether the thinking thing is the same as his body. All of the following arguments turn on identifying some feature that the soul has but the body does not. In general: To show that $X \neq Y$, all we need do is find a single property P such that X has P but Y lacks it, or Y has P but X lacks it. Such a property P can be called a differential property for X and Y .

Argument 1

1. I am such that my existence cannot be doubted.
2. My body is not such that its existence cannot be doubted.
3. Therefore, I am not identical with my body.
4. Therefore, the thinking thing that I am, that is, my mind, is not identical with my body.

Argument 2

1. My mind is transparent to me—that is, nothing can be in my mind without my knowing that it is there.
2. My body is not transparent to me in the same way.
3. Therefore, my mind is not identical with my body.

Argument 3

1. Each mind is such that there is a unique subject who has direct access to its contents.
2. No material body has a specially privileged knower—knowledge of material things is in principle public and intersubjective.
3. Therefore, minds are not identical with material bodies.

We are said to know something “directly” when the knowledge is not based on evidence, or inferred from other things we know. When knowledge is direct, like my knowledge of my toothache, it makes no sense to ask, “How do you know?”

Argument 4

1. My essential nature is to be a thinking thing.
2. My body's essential nature is to be an extended thing in space.
3. My essential nature does not include being an extended thing in space.
4. Therefore, I am not identical with my body. And since I am a thinking thing (namely a mind), my mind is not identical with my body

Argument 5

1. If anything is material, it is essentially material.
2. However, I am possibly immaterial—that is, there is a possible world in which I exist without a body.
3. Hence, I am not essentially material.
4. Hence, it follows (with the first premise) that I am not material.

Argument 6

1. Suppose I am identical with this body of mine.
2. In 2001 this body did not exist.
3. Hence, from the first premise, it follows that I did not exist in 2001.
4. But I existed in 2001.
5. Hence, a contradiction, and the supposition must be false.
6. Hence, I am not identical with my body.

“Should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince’s past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler, as soon as deserted by his own soul, everyone sees he would be the same person with the prince, accountable only for the prince’s action.... Had I the same consciousness “that I saw the ark and Noah’s flood, as that I saw an overflowing of the Thames last winter, or as that I write now, I could no more doubt that I who write this now, that saw the Thames overflowed last winter, that viewed the flood at the general deluge, was the same self ... than that I who write this am the same myself now whilst I write ... that I was yesterday”