

The metaphysics of philosophy of mind: an overview¹

Philosophy of mind is a branch of metaphysics, and different theories in philosophy of mind disagree on metaphysical questions about *what* exists and its nature. Questions about what exists are questions about ontology. It is worth having a sense of the different theories and how they relate to each other at the most general level.

According to a traditional metaphysics, a substance is an entity, a thing, that does not depend on another entity for its continued existence. It has ‘ontological independence’. For example, this book is a (physical) substance. Substances are also understood by contrast with properties.

1. Substances are what possess properties. The chair (substance) is solid (property). Properties can’t exist without substances - they depend on substances to exist. Solidity depends on things being solid; the property ‘being 1 metre long’ depends on something being that long; and, Descartes claimed, thoughts can’t exist without a thinker.
2. Substances persist through changes in properties - something can change from being 1 metre long to being 1.1 metres long, e.g. by growing. Obviously, its property of ‘being 1 metre long’ does not persist through this change. It loses that property and gains another. Or again, a thinker can think a series of thoughts - the thinker persists, the thoughts do not.

A central question in metaphysics of mind is ‘is the mind a substance?’ Can your mind exist on its own, independently, or is it dependent on something else in order to exist? In particular, is your mind dependent on your body, perhaps especially your brain, in order to exist at all? Many people believe, and many religions teach, that your mind can exist after death, i.e. the death of your body. This can mean many things, which we can’t review here, but one common interpretation is that your mind is a separate substance from your body. If the mind is a substance, then the end of your body’s existence is not the end of your mind’s existence.

The view that the mind and the body are separate substances is known as *substance dualism*. Substance dualism claims that there are two fundamental *kinds* of substance - mental and physical.

We can contrast substance dualism with idealism, the view that minds are the *only* kind of substance, and so whatever exists is either a mind or depends on a mind. However, the most popular alternative to dualism is the view that the only kind of substance is physical. On this view, because the mind is not a separate *thing*, it is more accurate to talk about mental *properties*. These are often understood to be

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for A Level: Metaphysics of God and Metaphysics of Mind* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 170, 175-8

properties of Intentionality and consciousness (for more on these features of mind, see the handout 'What do we mean by 'mind'?'). Mental properties include mental states, such as beliefs, and mental events, such as having a thought or feeling pain. If the only kind of substance is physical, then mental properties are properties of a physical substance. You can think of the physical substance that has such properties as either the person or the brain. If substance dualism is right, then mental properties are possessed by mental substances.

Suppose there is only physical substance. Our question about the mind now becomes a question about mental properties and their relation to physical properties. Are thoughts and conscious experiences themselves types of physical property (physical states and events)? There are many different types of physical property, e.g. size, shape, motion, mass, various forms of energy, chemical properties such as molecular structure, biological properties such as genetic code, and many others. Are mental properties, such as thinking about snow or feeling sad, also physical properties? One might argue, for instance, that they are simply neurological properties, e.g. to think about snow *just is* for certain neurons to fire in one's brain. This view is known as the *mind-brain type identity theory*.

Alternatively, one might argue that mental properties are not physical properties and can't even be understood or explained in terms of physical properties. (Neurons firing is just a physiological process, like food being digested. How can consciousness *be* neurons firing any more than it could be digestion?) Although mental properties are possessed by physical substances, they are completely different from any of the other properties physical substances possess. This view is *property dualism* - there is only one kind of substance but two radically different kinds of property.

On the other hand, if we can't say that mental properties are physical properties, then perhaps we should question whether there are any mental properties as we usually think of them. *Eliminative materialism* claims just this. Our whole common-sense way of thinking about 'the mind' and mental properties is mistaken, and we shall need developments in neuroscience to provide a new way of explaining human beings.

Another approach argues that all the views above are misled in their metaphysics. Mental 'properties' aren't like physical properties, 'only different'. Instead, talk of the mind, of thought and consciousness, should be understood in terms of behaviour and dispositions to behave. Wanting to go for a drive, feeling cross, thinking about your mother - these are each a matter of being disposed to behave in certain, perhaps highly complex, ways. This view is *philosophical behaviourism*.

Our final theory follows this lead, but argues that thinking of mental properties just in terms of behaviour is too restrictive. We can talk more broadly in terms of the contribution of mental properties to how the person (or brain) functions, including the interactions of mental properties with each other, such as how one thought leads to another, how desires lead to emotions and vice versa, as well as how any and all of these lead to behaviour. This view is *functionalism*.