

Descartes' indivisibility argument for substance dualism¹

Substance dualism claims that both minds and bodies - physical objects - exist. It is common in contemporary philosophy of mind to assume that bodies exist, and we shall share that assumption. Substance dualism is controversial, therefore, in claiming that the mind is an ontologically distinct substance.

Substance dualism holds that there are two fundamentally different types of substances. In traditional dualism, these two types of substances are physical substances ('bodies', physical objects) and mental substances (minds). Minds are distinct from bodies - they are not bodies, they are not parts of bodies, and because they are substances, they are not properties of bodies either. Cartesian dualism - the form of substance dualism defended by Descartes - also claims that minds do not depend on bodies in order to exist, i.e. minds can exist separated from any body. People who believe that the mind is the soul, and the soul can continue to exist without a body after death, are usually substance dualists.

If mental substances exist, they will be very unlike physical substances. In this handout, we discuss Descartes' argument that minds are distinct from bodies because they do not have any parts and do not even exist in space.

DESCARTES' INDIVISIBILITY ARGUMENT

In *Meditation II*, Descartes argues that mind and body have different essential properties - thought and extension. He understands thought in terms of consciousness and Intentionality; extension is the property having a size and taking up space. In *Meditation VI*, Descartes claims that this provides an argument that mind and body cannot be the same thing: if they were the same thing, they would have the same properties.

Leibniz later formalised this claim in his principle of the indiscernibility of identicals: if two things are identical (i.e. are just one thing), then they share all their properties. Why? Because one thing cannot have different properties from itself. So if two things have different properties, that proves that they cannot be one and the same thing.

But why think that the mind has different properties from the body? Descartes argues that, unlike physical objects, the mind does not have any parts and cannot be divided, and so it is not extended:

When I consider the mind - i.e. consider myself purely as a thinking thing - I can't detect any parts within myself; I understand myself to be something single and complete ... the

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. 179-83

faculties of willing, of understanding, of sensory perception and so on, these are not parts of the mind, since it is one and the same mind that wills, understands and perceives.

Willing, understanding and perceiving are properties of the mind, different ways of thinking. By contrast, the body does have parts. You can literally lose part of your body, e.g. a hand. So the body (physical substance) is divisible into parts, but the mind (mental substance) is not. So mind and body are distinct types of thing.

THE MENTAL IS DIVISIBLE IN SOME SENSE

Descartes' claim that we will, think, imagine, with the whole of our minds, not a literal part, is appealing. However, cases of mental illness, e.g. multiple personality syndrome, might be used to suggest that the mind can be divided. In such cases, it seems that some 'parts' of the person's mind are unable to communicate with other 'parts'. Theories of the unconscious suggest something similar: people may believe or desire one thing consciously and the opposite thing unconsciously. So it makes sense to talk about 'parts' of the mind.

However, Descartes could respond that the way in which the mind is 'divisible' is entirely different from the way in which the body is. Bodies are spatially divisible, while minds are only functionally divisible. The different 'parts' do different things, but they aren't in different spatial locations. So his argument that mind and body are different because they have different properties is unchallenged.

NOT EVERYTHING THOUGHT OF AS PHYSICAL IS DIVISIBLE

Is it true that physical substances are always divisible? When Descartes argued that extension is the essential property of physical objects, and that what is extended is divisible, was he right? We may question whether this theory of physical objects is correct. It was a matter of some debate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries whether physical objects are infinitely divisible. If you cut something up, can you always cut it into smaller pieces? The question is not whether we can actually do this right now, with the technology we have, but whether there are physical things that cannot be divided even in principle. If, for example, the smallest physical particles are best understood as packets of energy or force fields, then we can't further divide these - you can't have half a force field! Or again, perhaps not only force fields but also processes or waves or something else that can't be divided spatially form a fundamental part of the physical universe.

One possible response is that even if force fields or waves can't be divided in reality, we can still conceive of them having half the size. In that sense, we can still talk of spatial 'parts'. There is no logical limit to how small spatial parts can be. However, whether this is true or not may depend on the best physical theory of what space is. If we need to change our concept of space, then perhaps there will be such a limit.

The implication of these reflections is that it may not be an essential or defining property of every physical substance that it is divisible. There are some indivisible things, such as force fields, that are physical. In that case, the fact that the mind is not divisible does not entail that it is not physical. It could be a form of non-

divisible physical thing. So even if Descartes is right that the mind isn't divisible, this doesn't prove that it isn't physical.

This line of thought does not show how the mind could be a non-divisible physical thing. After all, the mind is very different from subatomic particles! The objection only seeks to show that Descartes' divisibility argument, as it is stated, fails.

IS THE MIND A SUBSTANCE?

Perhaps a more conclusive objection to Descartes' indivisibility argument is that the argument assumes that minds exist as substances, and then argues that they are not physical substances. But suppose that minds are not 'things', not substances at all. Then minds are not divisible or indivisible - they simply don't exist. Instead, there are only mental properties - thoughts, desires, pains, etc. Perhaps they are properties of the brain. It is true that these properties are not spatially divisible, but that is because properties in general are not divisible. It is only substances that literally have parts. For example, while the brain has spatial parts, the temperature of the brain does not have parts, and yet it is a physical property of a physical substance. Properties themselves don't 'take up space' in the way that physical substances take up space, and so they can't be divided into spatial parts. But a substance that is spatially divisible can nevertheless possess properties that are not divisible.

In his argument, Descartes cannot assume that the theory of the mind supposed here is false. He needs to show that it is false. To do that, he first needs to show that the mind is a substance, not simply a way of talking about mental properties, and then he can use the indivisibility argument to show that it is not a physical substance.