

Descartes on the mind as substance¹

What are you? I mean, what is it to be you? What kind of thing is a human being? What makes a person a person? People have given surprisingly different answers to these questions. You might think, in light of evolutionary theory, that the answer is that we are animals. But sometimes, when someone is in an irrecoverable coma or brain-dead, we say that they no longer exist, that they've 'gone'. But the body lying there is still the same animal. So our minds seem particularly important to who or what we are. Without a mind, I am not a person at all and I'm not 'me'.

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.

But why think that the mind is a substance? In the *Meditations*, Descartes argues that when we say 'I exist' or 'I think', we are claiming that 'I' am a thinking *thing*. I am the *same* thing from one thought to another. But is this right? Perhaps there is only *a succession of thoughts*, nothing that persists between thoughts which is a *single* thing.

Descartes' response, in an appendix to the *Meditations* called 'Objections and Replies', is to say that thoughts logically require a thinker. 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'. 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.

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2015) *Philosophy for A2* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 209-10

But while this metaphysics of substances and properties has been widely shared, it isn't obviously true, and can be challenged.

Even if we agree that there can't be a thought unless something thinks it, that doesn't entail that the 'thinker' is a subject that persists from one thought to another. Each thinker might exist for just one thought. As soon as Descartes says that to be a thinker is to doubt, will, imagine, and so on, he assumes we can say these activities belong to the *same* subject, that he (the same thinker) does all this. Again, this assumes the traditional metaphysics that substances persist through changes over time. But what is the argument for believing this metaphysical picture is true?

Consider this admission from Descartes: 'I exist - that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. But perhaps no longer than that; for it *might* be that if I stopped thinking I would stop existing'. In dreamless sleep, we certainly cease to think (at least consciously). If Descartes wishes to establish that he is the same person from one day to the next, he will need the idea of the mind as a substance that persists even through those times when there is no thought. For example, when he comes to say that he can distinguish dreaming from waking, he is presupposing that he - the same mind - has experienced both. But that means he must persist between dreaming and waking, and during some of that time, he will have no thoughts at all.

By the end of the *Meditations*, Descartes could reply that he knows that God exists and is not a deceiver. I remember things from previous days, and many of my mental states (beliefs, hopes, plans) are the same. If these are not memories and continuing properties of me - the same mental substance - then this would be tantamount to God being a deceiver. Hence, I must be the same substance before and after such cessations in thought.

Of course, to grant that thoughts require a thinker who is a substance is not to grant that the substance - the thinker - is a mental substance. We could be physical substances with thoughts.