

Substance dualism and ascribing mental states¹

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. This view is substance dualism.

In *The Concept of Mind*, Gilbert Ryle argues that if substance dualism were right, our mental concepts - a thought, hoping, being imaginative - must all refer to episodes in a secret history of our minds, secret because inaccessible to anyone else. So the only way to know whether a mental description of someone is true or not - whether they hope that there is food in the fridge, or feel cross, or know that penguins are birds - is for the person themselves to check using introspection. The parent, teacher, biographer, friend can never know whether their ascriptions of mental states to others are true. But this, Ryle objects, would make it impossible, in practice, for us to use mental concepts.

Descartes, who was a substance dualist, assumed that we can ascribe mental states to ourselves, to say of oneself that one is thinking, or that one wants to understand, or that one is frustrated. But what does this ability require? We can argue that, for instance, a child cannot learn that it is angry, that what it feels is ‘anger’, without also learning what it means to say, of someone else, that they are angry. After all, it learns that it is angry because its parents (and others) help it understand this. One way in which they do this is for the parents to point out when they or other people are angry, and how this is similar to when the child is angry. So the child also learns how to recognise when other people are angry. The ability to ascribe mental states to oneself is learned, and is interdependent with the ability to ascribe mental states to other people. To learn the meaning of ‘anger’, ‘pain’, ‘thinking’ is to learn their correct application to both oneself and others, simultaneously. In that case, to understand a mental property, I have to be able to attribute it to other people. I have to be able to say ‘he is in pain’ or ‘she is thinking’.

This has a number of important implications. First, it raises a challenge to substance dualism. Substance dualism claims that mental properties are attributed to minds, while physical properties are attributed to bodies. But in that case, how can we identify other minds so as to attribute mental properties to them? We have

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2015) *Philosophy for A2* (London: Routledge), Ch. 3, pp. 222-4, 231

no experience of 'minds' on their own. to use mental concepts, we must first learn mental concepts. For us to learn mental concepts, the people who teach us these concepts must be able to refer to our mental states and processes for us even to apply them to the episodes we ourselves undergo - our fears, pains, beliefs, etc. But if substance dualism were true, how could they do so? How would they know reliably what episodes we are undergoing, given that we ourselves can't yet confirm or deny them since we haven't learned the concepts? So we have to attribute mental properties to something that also has physical properties. Mental and physical properties have to be attributed to the *same thing* for us to attribute mental characteristics to anything at all. This threatens the claim that the mind is a separate substance from the body.

Second, it raises a challenge to the substance dualist's concept of mind. We don't know what a mind is unless we already know what a person - an 'embodied mind' - is. We can only understand the idea of a mind by abstracting from the idea of a person; a mind is a disembodied person. In other words, the concept of the 'union' of mind and body is a more basic concept than the concept of mind.

Third, if there can be no knowledge of oneself as a mind without presupposing that there are other minds, the problem of other minds does not arise.

Finally, our knowledge of other minds is not inferred from knowledge of our own behaviour and its causes. We don't have one without the other.