

THINKING THINGS

DUALISM AND PHYSICALISM

The 17th century French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes described the mind as a *res cogitans*, or “thinking thing.” The mind is the thing that thinks, that also feels and desires — in a word, it’s the thing that experiences. Experiencing is what minds do; or perhaps we should say: “that’s how minds are.” There is really no question that minds exist in some form or other — their existence is a commonplace of human experience. They are, it seems, where human experience quite literally takes place — unless the mind just is the collection of experiences, as opposed to a *thing* having an experience. The question here isn’t whether minds exist but rather *what* they are.

Some people believe minds are the sort of thing that can exist wholly separate from a material body — we might want to call this kind of mind a “soul” and those who believe that minds are souls we can call “**dualists**.” René Descartes, for instance, was a dualist. Other people believe that minds are simply a certain way that certain kinds of bodies function or behave — that my mind is what I call my body, or a part of it, when it’s having experiences or thinking or willing. This second group — we can call them “**physicalists**” — think that minds exist in much the same way that smiles exist. For instance, if you were creating an inventory of your face, you would list things like two eyes, two eyebrows, a nose, a chin, lips, perhaps a scar or two, and so on, but you probably wouldn’t include ‘smile’ on your list — not because smiles don’t exist or because you never smile, but because smiles don’t exist in the same way that teeth and eyelids exist; they don’t exist as some distinct part of the face. A smile is simply one way that a face can be organized or appear or behave. Except for the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, smiles don’t exist apart from the face they are on. A smile is just a certain way that these various facial parts align themselves, or move together; it’s more like a facial event than a facial part.



Physicalists maintain that minds are just like smiles. Of course minds exist, but not as something separate from the body. The mind is just a certain way that a body is organized or appears or behaves. If a person has a facial paralysis, he might not be able to smile. What he lacks is an ability, not a thing. Similarly, if a person is unconscious, what he lacks is an ability, not a thing; and a dead body is even more lacking in this regard. This is a physicalist understanding of the mind. On this view, the mind is just a certain way that a certain kind of body is able to function or behave.

Dualism and physicalism are not the only possible ways of thinking about the mind, but they are the most prominent and most basic, and so we will be focusing on them in this section.

ME AND MY MIND

A distinct but closely related question about the mind is its relationship to the self: How is my mind related to me, and how is your mind related to you?¹

Is my mind just me? *Am* I a mind? Or do I *have* a mind? When I say: “Please hand me that pencil,” I am presumably wanting the pencil given to my body, not to my mind as such — what would it do with a pencil, anyway? When considering these practical situations, the ‘I’ or the ‘me’ seem very much to be the mind/body composite, the organism as a whole.

Is my mind what perceives and thinks about the world? We certainly don’t say things like: “my body saw a sparrow fly out of that bush” — but it sounds almost as strange to say that “my mind saw a sparrow...”. It would be reasonable to interrupt anyone speaking like that to ask: “Do you mean that *you* saw the sparrow? What’s all this talk of your *body* seeing or your *mind* seeing?”

¹ An additional complication that we can’t pursue here: What is it about my mind that makes it *mine* and not yours? And what is it about my thoughts that make them mine and not yours — for example, my thought that “5 x 7 equals 35”, my desire to go back to bed, my memories of my 18th birthday? Can we share the same thought? If we are both drinking from the same bottle, are we tasting the same thing? If we are both contemplating the Pythagorean theorem, are we contemplating the same thing?

It is clear, in a naïve sort of way at least, that one needs a mind in order to do things like think, wonder, believe, or doubt — and that one might get on well enough doing these things without a body — but that one definitely needs a body in order to do things like swim, play hopscotch, or digest one's lunch. Do these "normal ways of talking" tell us anything about what we *really* are?

When we stop to consider the mind (is it me, or is it my mind, that does the considering?), we normally have in mind that part of us that is conscious or aware, the part that senses or perceives, and also that thinks — and that's why the following story is so peculiar.

A certain patient, known in the psychology literature as L.B., was having trouble seeing. It turns out that a tumor had destroyed part of his optical cortex, which is the part of the brain responsible for processing visual information. As a result of this damage, L.B. reported that he could see nothing on the left side of his visual field.

Nonetheless, when asked to guess where an object in his left field was, he would point correctly over 90% of the time. This suggested that there were neural pathways bypassing that part of the brain responsible for awareness, and yet which supplied perceptual information about the world. The visual data became part of the general background information available to the brain, even though the conscious subject was unaware of the data. This phenomenon is known as **blindsight**.

This story makes clear at least two things: First, that the status of the brain generally has a pronounced effect on the status of our experiences. This is something humans have understood for centuries, although we are only now developing some sense of the causal details involved. Second, it is possible to sense without being aware of the sensing. Is it perhaps also possible to think without being aware of the thoughts? If so, what role does consciousness play? Does it have a *causal* role?

When thinking about the mind we are immediately confronted with two contrasting points of view — the inner and the outer — both of which seem absolutely compelling, yet both of which, seemingly, cannot be correct. The mind would seem to inhabit this non-physical inner realm: My thoughts are in my mind, and they seem to be nowhere in space, suggesting that my mind is also nowhere in space. My thoughts would seem to lack all physical qualities, and thus my mind as well — and yet it is this very mind that allows me to perceive and to consider the physical world around me.

SUBSTANCE OR ATTRIBUTE?

Questions of free will and personal identity (and the possible survival of bodily death) depend on first deciding what the mind is. Does the mind exist as a distinct kind of substance? Or is it just an attribute of certain kinds of material bodies?

We might ask what it means to "act freely" or to "be the same person over time," but ultimately these questions point to the more basic question of what the self or mind is. If physicalism is correct, and the mind is just a special way that the body functions — so, an attribute of the substantial body — then there is no *prima facie* reason for thinking that the mind might survive the death of the body. Similarly, there is good reason to believe that nothing can happen in the mind that is not causally related to earlier physical events in the body, thus making free will problematic.

CONSCIOUSNESS AND CAUSALITY

Try this experiment: imagine a 3-inch cube of wood painted on all sides with red paint. Now imagine the cube cut into 1-inch cubes. How many cubes will there be? And how many of these will have (i) three red sides, (ii) two red sides, (iii) one red side, (iv) no red side?

Most people tend to solve this problem by imagining the red cube being cut up, and then "visually inspecting" each of the smaller cubes in one's imagination. But what is it that solves the problem? The mental manipulation of these images, of which I am conscious? Or the brain processes, of which I am unconscious, that underlie these images?

Is *any* problem solved by way of our conscious thoughts and images? Or is all the work done by subconscious machinery in the brain underlying these thoughts and images? Does the physical event cause the non-causal mental event (a theory known as epiphenomenalism)? Or are the physical and mental "events" just two ways of describing the same event (an identity theory of the mind and brain)?