Objections to arguments for substance dualism

This handout considers whether any of Descartes’ arguments for substance dualism succeed. It follows the handout on ‘Substance dualism’. You should read that handout first.

THE MENTAL IS DIVISIBLE IN SOME SENSE

Descartes claims that while the body is divisible, the mind is not. We will, think, imagine, with the whole of our minds, not a literal part. 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 difference between consciousness and 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 still valid.

A different objection is that the argument assumes that minds exist as substances. If minds do not exist as substances, then we cannot talk about ‘their’ properties. A materialist will claim that there are no ‘minds’, only mental properties, which are properties of persons or brains (physical objects). This also provides a completely different explanation of why ‘minds’ are not divisible. Minds are not ‘things’, there are only mental properties – thoughts, desires, pains, etc. It is true that these are not spatially divisible, but most physical properties aren’t divisible either. For instance, the property of belonging to a particular species (e.g. being a chicken) isn’t spatially divisible. Only spatial properties are spatially divisible, if any properties are - really it is physical substances that are divisible. Most properties aren’t the right kind of thing to ‘take up space’. But a substance that is spatially divisible can nevertheless possess properties that are not divisible. So bodies could possess mental properties.

The divisibility argument, then, assumes that the mind is a substance, something with ontological independence. If we know that the mind is a substance, then the divisibility argument shows that the mind is a distinct substance from the body.

Not everything thought of as physical is divisible

We have just seen that physical properties are not always divisible. But what about physical substances? Descartes argues that extension is the essential property of physical objects. He then argues that what is extended is divisible. But
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 these things 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. 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 sub-atomic particles! The
objection only seeks to show that Descartes’ divisibility argument, as it is stated,
fails.

**AM I A SUBSTANCE?**

What does it mean to say ‘I exist’ or ‘I think’? Descartes claims that ‘I’ am a
thinking thing. I am the same thing from one thought to another. But can
Descartes know this? 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.

This isn’t obviously true. It assumes the traditional metaphysics of substances and
properties outlined at the start of this chapter, and is challenged by Hume. 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’ (p. 5). 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 mental substance. We could be physical substances with thoughts.

**WHAT IS CONCEIVABLE MAY NOT BE POSSIBLE**

Many philosophers believe that Descartes’ conceivability argument doesn’t work. In its simplified version, the argument goes like this:

1. It is conceivable that mind can exist without body.
2. Therefore, it is possible that mind can exist without body.
3. Therefore, mind and body are distinct substances.

Objections to an argument either challenge the truth of one of the premises or they challenge an inference. On this version of the argument, there is only one initial premise, namely ‘It is conceivable that mind can exist without body’. There are then two inferences. First, Descartes infers possibility from conceivability - because it is conceivable that mind can exist without body, it is possible that mind can exist without body. We shall discuss this inference here. The second inference, from the possibility that mind can exist without body to substance dualism, is discussed in the next section. The thought underlying challenges to both inferences is this: Just because Descartes can conceive of his mind and body as distinct substances, this doesn’t mean that his mind and body really are distinct substances. Perhaps there is some metaphysical connection between his mind and body that Descartes doesn’t know about.

Is what is conceivable always possible? Not obviously. Suppose I believe that the Masked Man has robbed the bank. I also believe that my father has not robbed the bank. Clearly, I conceive that the Masked Man is not my father. Does this entail that it is possible that the Masked Man is not my father?

In one sense, we might say that the Masked Man could be anyone - nobody knows who he is. But we also rightly think that whoever the Masked Man is can’t be someone else. No one can be somebody else. I can’t be you, and you can’t be me. So if my father is not the Masked Man, it is impossible that my father is the Masked Man. And if my father is the Masked Man, then it is impossible that my father is not the Masked Man.

Now I can conceive that my father is not the Masked Man. But this doesn’t show that it is possible that my father is not the Masked Man. I could be mistaken about
who the Masked Man is - if he is my father, then it is impossible for my father to be a different person from the Masked Man. From my conceiving that ‘two’ people are distinct, we cannot infer that it is possible that they are distinct.

We can apply this result to Descartes’ conceivability argument. Descartes argues that it is possible for the mind to exist independently of the body, because he can conceive of it existing without the body. But this doesn’t follow. It is possible that Descartes’ conception of the mind (or body) is wrong, such that, unknown to him, the mind is not ontologically independent and it is impossible for it to exist separately from the body.

However, Descartes is happy to grant that we cannot in general infer what is possible from how we think of them. But in the case of clear and distinct ideas, the inference is justified. If we can clearly and distinctly think of some object, \( x \), having a certain property, then not only is it possible that \( x \) has that property, it is true! We may rightly claim that it is impossible for a triangle to have internal angles that don’t add up to 180° just because it is inconceivable that they should. Likewise, because he can clearly and distinctly conceive that mind and body are distinct substances, Descartes argues, it follows that it is possible that they are.

This provides a contrast with the Masked Man. My conceptions of my father and the Masked Man are not clear and distinct in the way that Descartes requires. It is only while we do not know who we are thinking of when we think of the Masked Man that we can think that the Masked Man could be anyone. And so, Descartes would argue, the Masked Man fallacy cannot be used as an objection to his argument.

**WHAT IS LOGICALLY POSSIBLE TELLS US NOTHING ABOUT REALITY**

Suppose that it is possible that the mind can exist as a distinct substance. Does it follow that the mind does exist as a distinct substance?

Let us assume, for the purposes of argument, that we conceive of mind as something that thinks and of body as something that is extended. From this, it does not follow that we conceive of mind as something that thinks and isn’t extended or of body as something that is extended and does not think. There is nothing in the initial conceptions of mind and body that oppose each other. There is no contradiction or (obvious) unclarity in conceiving of mind as something that is extended and thinks, or again as the thinking part of something that is extended. Likewise, there is no contradiction or (obvious) unclarity in conceiving of body as something that is extended, but which may, in some instances, also think. If this is right, then we can conceive of mind and body as distinct substances, or we can think of thought and extension as properties of the same substance.

Assume that whatever we can clearly and distinctly conceive is logically possible. Therefore, given what we said above, it is logically possible that mind and body are distinct substances. But equally, it is logically possible that thought and extension are two properties of a single substance. What we need to know is which option is true. Simply knowing what is logically possible does not tell us which possibility correctly describes reality. So just because it is logically possible for mind and body to be separate substances doesn’t show that they are separate substances.

Now, we should accept that what is logically impossible does tell us something
about reality, because what is logically impossible cannot exist. If Descartes could show that it is logically impossible for mind and body to be the same substance, that would show that they must be separate substances. So he could argue that we cannot clearly and distinctly conceive of mind and body as *anything other* than separate substances - just as we cannot clearly and distinctly conceive of a triangle not having internal angles add up to 180°. But is this right?

**MIND WITHOUT BODY IS NOT CONCEIVABLE**

We granted above that we can conceive of mind and body as separate substances. But is Descartes right about this? Or more precisely, is he right to claim that we can do so clearly and distinctly? What is it to think? What is thought? Descartes assumes that he can identify this from introspection in the absence of anything else - ‘I think’. But what makes it possible for me to think ‘I think’? Without answers to these questions, we may object, we *think* it is conceivable that mind and body are distinct substances when it isn’t conceivable. We may be confused or simply lack relevant information.

Logical behaviourism argues that the mind - mental states and events - should be analyzed in terms of behaviour. To talk of beliefs, thoughts, desires, choices and so on is to talk of how something behaves. Now, without a body, something can’t exhibit behaviour; and without behaviour, there is no mind. If this theory is correct, then once we’ve understood what we mean when we talk about the mind, we will realize that mind without body is inconceivable.

We can object that this is a very strong conclusion. For example, if it is right, then disembodied minds, such as God, are inconceivable. And yet for most of the history of humanity, people have claimed to be able to make sense of the idea of God. Isn’t it more likely that logical behaviourism is wrong to think that in talking about mental states, we are talking about behaviour? Or even if this is right, perhaps ‘behaviour’ doesn’t require a body.

Logical behaviourism provides just one argument supporting the claim that mind without body is inconceivable. But there may be others. The general point is that we can make mistakes over what we think is conceivable.

Descartes accepts this. We can make mistakes, which is why we must get our ideas clear and distinct first. His claim is that we can’t make mistakes with clear and distinct ideas. So to object, what we actually need to argue is one of two things. Either we cannot *clearly and distinctly* conceive of the mind as separate from the body - as the analysis of logical behaviourism claims. Or we can challenge Descartes’ theory of clear and distinct ideas guaranteeing truth. Perhaps we can make mistakes concerning even what we conceive clearly and distinctly.