



Cartesian Dualism

Cartesian dualism is the view that minds are made of a substance which is completely different from the stuff that our bodies are made of. This view has come to be known as **Cartesian dualism** (or ‘substance dualism’) after its most famous proponent, the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650). It is dualistic because it posits two kinds of substances: **material substances** occupy a certain amount of space (and our bodies and everything else in the world are composed of them), while **immaterial substances** do not occupy any space. According to Cartesian dualism, minds are made of an immaterial ‘thinking substance which does not occupy space. As a consequence, the part of me that thinks exists independently of my body.



Cartesian dualism chimes with lots of our intuitions about our minds. In particular, the view that our minds are importantly different from our bodies forms a central tenet in many world religions, and the thought that we are meat through and through is, for many, an unsettling one. The mind, that part of us which thinks, loves and creates, seems so different from anything else in the world that it is not unreasonable to think that this is because it is made of something entirely different.

Here is one of Descartes’ arguments for his dualism:

Premise 1: I can doubt the existence of my body.

Premise 2: I cannot doubt the existence of my thoughts.

Conclusion: Therefore my mind must be made from something fundamentally different from anything else around me.

Physicalism



But what if there is only one substance—that is, physical substance? This view has come to be known as **physicalism**, and one interesting formulation of it is the **identity theory**. According to the identity theory, our mental states are identical with physical states. The example most loved by philosophers is that the mental state of pain is identical with the activity of C-fibers in the brain.

Functionalism



But now imagine that we discovered some Martians, whose brains are made up a completely different substance,

say silicon. The identity theory would claim that those Martians cannot feel pain even if every time they undergo some physical harm they behave in the exact same way we behave when we are in pain.

To solve this problem, if it is a problem, we must admit that mental states, just as many other things in the world, are **multiply realizable**. Think about chairs; they may be green, red, black and so on; they may be made out of wood or metal; and they may have one or many legs. Still, however, even if chairs may be realized in several ways, all of them count as chairs. What do all these things have in common? The answer is simple: They share a common **function**, which is that they facilitate sitting in an upright position, while supporting one's back.

Accordingly, **functionalists** about the mind claim that trying to give an account of mental states in terms of what they are made of is like trying to explain what a chair is in terms of what it is made of. In other words, we should not identify mental states by what they are made of, but rather by what they do.

If we go this way, however, an interesting possibility opens up:

Machines may have minds...



From a functionalist point of view our minds are information processing machines just like computers are: they take information provided by our senses and other mental states which we have, process it, and produce new behaviors and mental states.



Which of the three views about the mind do you find most intuitive and why?

How plausible is Descartes' argument for substance dualism?

If our minds are immaterial, how do they interact with our material bodies to produce action?

Do only humans have minds? What about animals, or possibly Martians?

If we accept that minds are computing machines, then how complex does an information-processing system need to be for it to count as a mind?

INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY MOOC



What is it to have a mind?

What is it to have a mind? I am certain that I have a mind, and I am certain that tennis balls do not have minds, but what marks the difference? Is it possible for robots to have minds?

