



Undergraduate assignment feedback form
(to be completed by marker)

Student Name: <i>Bradley Sloares</i>	
Module title:	Student number:
For completion by marker:	
Comments: <i>This essay draws on a wide range of secondary sources but often there's a lack of precision in your presentation, & thus the full force of the arguments is not drawn out sufficiently. That said, there is an interesting discussion of physicalist implications with respect to free will & responsibility, but, again, here the detail of the arguments is missing. While you consider a range of objections, you would do well to focus your answer by developing counter-arguments, & responses to counter-arguments. This would lead to a strong, supported conclusion.</i>	
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Evaluate the plausibility of Cartesian Dualism

By Bradley Sloanes

Cartesian dualism is an ontological theory pertaining to the branch of philosophy known as "Philosophy of Mind." It poses such questions as: where do our minds reside and are they physical or metaphysical things? Mind-body dualism proposes that the mind and the body are two separate and distinct things.¹ While there are three different forms of dualism, this essay looks to focus more on substance dualism which was most famously defended and popularised by Rene Descartes.² Through his meditations Descartes called all of his previously held beliefs into question through his extreme scepticism so he could find something basic in which he was certain of. Through this he discovered that he could be certain that he existed as a "thinking thing" but could not prove that his physical body existed in the way he perceived it, thus establishing the mind and body as two separate entities.³ However, whilst they might be two distinct substances a significant amount of interaction takes place between them. There are clear examples of this in our world, such as you lose your hand (body) but then experience the sadness and emotional loss of losing your hand (mind). In this example, the physical event caused the mental event. This also works vice versa. If you suffer a traumatic event and are grieving, you can also get physically sick from the strain emotional turmoil puts on your immune system. How can a mental event have such a physical impact, and is this proof of substance dualism's argument?

The previous example shows us the interaction that takes place between the mind and the body. However, physicalists might argue that what caused the traumatic event was something physical like death or injury etc and the consequence of this event was a physical reaction. Chemicals and neurons fired in your brain which caused the mental "state" of grieving but every reaction in that chain was a physical one which could be found in the brain. On the other hand if you tweak the example a little to instead be: "I suffer from a period of stress as I attempt to write a 2,000 word essay on Cartesian Dualism, this in turn causes me to become sick from the strain placed on my immune system," how much of the physicalists' argument still stands up? It is still true that chemicals and neurons fired to let my body know that it is stressed and that my immune response was also a physical one, but the mental event of "writing an essay" was still a purely mental one. It is an imagined reality. Arguably one of many that govern our lives but have no real connection to the physical world other than through us and our own subjective experiences.

Which brings us onto an argument for dualism through subjective experience. Philosophers of mind call these subjective experiences "qualia." Examples of qualia are what it is like to hear Beethoven's 9th symphony for the first time, or how it feels to hold a loved one for the last time.⁴ One famous argument of this type is that of Thomas Nagel in his paper "What is it

¹ Crane Tim; Patterson Sarah, *History of the Mind-Body Problem* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 1.2.

² W.D Hart, 'Dualism', in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. by Samuel Guttenplan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 265-267.

³ René Descartes, 'Meditations on First Philosophy', in *The Philosophical Writings of René Descartes 2*, trans. by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1641] 1984), p. 162.

⁴ Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Not necessarily

Really? Why do you think this?

pp 1-2

pp. 265-267

Explain

like to be a bat?" Nagel challenges the physicalists attempt to categorise all conscious mental phenomena as things that can be translated into fully physical terms and processes carried out by the body.⁵ Nagel sees consciousness as something that is not solely human but also a part of all, if not many, animals. According to him "an organism has conscious mental states if and only if there is something that it is like to be that organism" and the subjective nature of all consciousness is not capable of being explained by reductionist means. A reductionist attempt to explain consciousness would neglect the very idea of subjective experience, which Nagel argues would be an absurdity.⁶ However, this is more of a challenge of physicalism rather than an argument for dualism. Some physicalists have argued that the bats' consciousness is accessible through third-person observation. This is proven through our knowledge of echolocation which helps us to understand the perspective through which bats perceive the world. They argue that any further aspects of a bats' experience can therefore be understood through physicalist means like scientific experimentation. While qualia and subjective experience pose some challenges to physicalism, this does not demonstrate that substance dualism is true.

Descartes, on the other hand, puts forward two arguments for dualism in his meditations. The first one being the modal argument:

1. "It is imaginable that one's mind might exist without one's body."
2. "It is conceivable that one's mind might exist without one's body."
3. It is possible one's mind might exist without one's body."
4. "One's mind is a different entity from one's body."⁷

This argument attempts to use Leibniz's law to show that the body and mind have at least one different property and if this is the case then they cannot be the same thing.⁸ However, while it can be agreed that it is both imaginable and, therefore, conceivable for a mind to exist without a body does it really follow that it is possible? If a mind were to exist without a body or physical form, then we could never know that it existed since there would be no way to verify it. If there is no way to verify it then it is unknowable, so it cannot be described as possible since there is no way to know that it is possible. Therefore, the modal argument fails as it is a fallacy in informal logic and an "argument from ignorance."⁹

The second defence is the indivisibility argument in which Descartes attempts to establish the mind and body as separate entities yet again. He claims that the body by its very nature is divisible, whereas the mind is indivisible because "were a foot or an arm or any other

⁵ Wimsatt, William C., 'Reductionism, Levels of Organization, and the Mind-Body Problem', in *Consciousness and the Brain* (Boston MA: Springer, 1976), p. 205-267

⁶ Thomas Nagel, 'What Is It Like To Be A Bat?', *The Philosophical Review*, 83.4, (1974), 435-450.

⁷ Howard Robinson, *Dualism* (2020) <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dualism/#ModArg>> [accessed 28 October 2020].

⁸ Peter Simons, *Identity Of Indiscernibles* () <<https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/identity-of-indiscernibles/v-1>> [accessed 28 October 2020].

⁹ Hans V. Hansen, Robert C. Pinto, *Fallacies: Classical and Contemporary Readings* (USA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

bodily part amputated, I know that nothing would be taken away from the mind."¹⁰ ✓
However, physicalists could criticise this by providing real world examples of the "mind" being divisible. In certain instances of physical injury (such as brain damage), people's mental states and personality can be altered. In the famous case of the railroad worker Phineas Gage, whose left frontal lobe was destroyed after a huge iron rod was driven through it, he experienced serious mental changes after his accident. Changes significant enough for the people who knew him before his accident to no longer see him to be Phineas Gage.¹¹ This does suggest that there is a correlation between the mind and body and that the mind is therefore divisible. However, without even getting into the numerous evidence that suggests Gage's injuries were exaggerated and later healed¹², this line of thought could be potentially problematic.

If the mind and body are completely linked, so much so that they are the same substance then this absolves people of responsibility for their actions. This is a dire implication. We become no different than machines, except that our programming is biological. Everything that you are, that you have achieved and that you want is nothing more than electrical signals in your brain – something over which you have no control. So, if you raise money for charity by running a marathon then you should not be praised for it because you were just doing what you were already programmed to do. Similarly, if you commit a crime and murder someone then you should not be punished since you had no control over the brain states that caused you to pursue those actions. Many of our societal constructs and most highly regarded institutions depend on us believing in free will and that we have a choice over our actions. Admittedly this does not prove the claim to be false, only that there are negative implications of it. Could this be true? There are examples of free will being demonstrated by human beings. In the case of the social media giant "Facebook", it uses the data it collects on its users to manipulate them into spending more time on the app.¹³ Arguably such a large data giant should have no trouble manipulating people in this way since it already has access to much of the internal working processes of your mind, all they need to do is play on these impulses, desires and dispositions. However, despite this manipulation of its users there are some individuals who "rebel" once they are made consciously aware of it.¹⁴ Even with all its data, Facebook still fails to control its users because it cannot and never will be capable of accounting for free will. Physicalists could argue that this is only due to Facebook not yet having access to all the data necessary to guarantee 100% cooperation, or that the sheer amount of data required could never be collected. If our mental faculties are too numerous to ever be fully documented, then we will always have free will because nothing could manipulate something so complex. Our

¹⁰ René Descartes, 'Meditations on First Philosophy', in *The Philosophical Writings of René Descartes 2*, trans. by J. Cottingham; R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1641] 1984), p. 1,62

¹¹ John Martyn Harlow, 'Recovery from the Passage of an Iron Bar through the Head', *Publications of the Massachusetts Medical Society*, 2.3, (1868), 327-47.

¹² Malcolm Macmillan, *Encyclopedia of the Neurological Sciences*, 2nd edn ([n.p.]: Academic Press, 2014), p. 383.

¹³ Sue Buckley, John Kleinsman, 'Facebook Study: A Little Bit Unethical But Worth It?', *Journal of bioethical inquiry*, 12.2, (2015), 179-182.

¹⁴ 'The Social Dilemma', dir. by Jeff Orlowski (Netflix, 2020).

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minds are too complicated for us to ever understand entirely how even one individual might think or feel.¹⁵ Cartesian dualism does not possess any of these problems that physicalism clearly does, which is an advantage. If the mind and body are separate substances then agents do have free will since there is more to a thinking thing than its neurons and brain states.

How? Explain

However, the idea that mind and body can be entirely separate is quite problematic. Where does the mind reside if not in the body, and how can these separate substances interact? Philosophers like Alfred North Whitehead have attempted to re-frame the dualist argument in order to avoid the problem of causal interaction,¹⁶ whilst others have stated that all mind-body interactions require the direct intervention of God. Descartes himself responded to this criticism citing the "pineal gland" as the place in which the mind interacted with the brain.¹⁷ It could be seen as counter-productive to label something as non-physical and then attempt to pinpoint its physical location, clearly Descartes and some substance dualists are unable to provide a convincing response to this problem. Perhaps the way in which the mind interacts with the body is similar to how gravity interacts with the Earth. The mind, like gravity, is observable but does not occupy observable physical space. Yet we know that gravity exists, but you cannot show me gravity itself. It has no physical form, yet it interacts and operates in physical space. So, it must be possible for an immaterial substance to causally interact with physical substances. The question is how. It is conceivable that the mind could be like energy, incapable of being created or destroyed but transferring from one form to another.

Perhaps these implications could be developed above

In conclusion, Cartesian Dualism establishes that a thinking thing can exist (yourself) but offers no way of establishing that others are also existing as thinking things. This can potentially lead to solipsism. As a result, this poses a wide range of ethical dilemmas especially pertaining to animal rights. If you cannot prove that other humans or animals possess consciousness, then the theory you propose is a very problematic one. If you are not a conscious or sentient being then you would not be entitled to certain rights and protections that you deserve to be entitled to. There are numerous other animals, if not all, that possess or are capable of possessing consciousness so we know this by-product of dualism to be false.¹⁸ However, the theory does provide some interesting evidence which suggests that the mind and body are separate. Or at the very least, not entirely physical. As a whole Cartesian Dualism does not provide an entirely plausible explanation to the mind-

Use conclusion to summarise what you have already said

¹⁵ Lindsay Patterson, *Will we ever fully understand ourselves?* () <<https://earthsky.org/human-world/neuroscientist-matt-wilsons-revelations-on-the-human-brain#:~:text=We're%20never%20going%20to,never%20going%20to%20understand%20that.>> [accessed 28 October 2020].

¹⁶ Michel Weber, Anderson Weekes, *Process Approaches to Consciousness in Psychology, Neuroscience, and Philosophy of Mind* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Gert-Jan, Lorkhurst, 'Descartes and the Pineal Gland', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (2005), in <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/pineal-gland/>> [accessed 29 October 2020].

¹⁸ Donald Griffin, *Animal Minds: Beyond Cognition to Consciousness* ([n.p.]: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

body dilemma, but its value and significance to the field of philosophy of mind and beyond must not be forgotten.

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