

Mind and Matter

Lecture 1: The relationship between mind and matter

1. Outline

These lectures will introduce the mind-body problem: the problem of the relation between mind and matter, or mind and body. We will look at the nature of the mental and the physical, the problem of mental causation, the doctrines of dualism and materialism/physicalism, and the problem of consciousness.

The overall theme will be that the mind-body problem is a dilemma:

- if the mind is not physical, then how can it have effects in the physical world?
- if the mind is physical, then how can we explain consciousness?

2. Mind

What is the mind? Descartes said that minds (souls) were immaterial substances. A substance here is not a kind of 'stuff', but rather a fundamental kind of being (so beware of those introductory books which say that Descartes thought that bodies were made of one kind of stuff, and minds were made of another kind of stuff; it's closer to the truth to say that Descartes thought that minds were not made of anything at all).

The notion of substance in this sense derives from Aristotle. Aristotle thought of substances as natural unities: things that have an order and principle of activity of their own. So organisms were the paradigms of substances; artefacts are not substances because they do not contain their own principle of activity.

Descartes based his concept of substance on one aspect of Aristotle's concept: substance is what is capable of independent existence. Since the soul could exist independently of the body, it is a substance in this sense. Our individual bodies are not substances, since they could not exist independently of the rest of the material world. Descartes's conclusion was that there is only one material substance (the whole of the material world) but that each of us is an immaterial substance (a soul).

Descartes's view is the paradigm view which treats the mind as a kind of thing. Many contemporary philosophers are suspicious of substances, and suspicious of the talk of the mind as a thing. Rather, they prefer to talk in terms of mental and physical states, properties, events or processes. (This whole family of things is what I refer to as 'mental phenomena'.)

What are the characteristics of mental phenomena? What makes some phenomenon a mental phenomenon? Two kinds of criteria have been offered in recent philosophy:

Consciousness: all mental phenomena are conscious phenomena; they are states or events in consciousness, conscious states or events, like sensations, experiences, episodes of imagining etc.

Intentionality (mental representation): all mental phenomena are representational, they represent something outside themselves. For example: beliefs, hopes, desires etc. all represent something.

However, some philosophers argue that there are mental states which are not conscious (e.g. beliefs) and others argue that there are mental states which are not intentional or representational (e.g. some moods and emotions). So they might adopt a disjunctive classification of the mental: mental phenomena are *either* conscious *or* intentional, *or* both. See Colin McGinn, *The Character*

of *Mind*, chapter one, for a good introductory discussion; and Tim Crane, *Elements of Mind*, chapters one and two, for the next step.

3. Matter

When mind is contrasted with matter, what is it being contrasted with? Descartes's claim was that the essential attribute of matter was 'extension': that is, size and shape. Material substance is extended substance. But this conception was disputed even at the time: isn't matter supposed to be solid? How does Descartes distinguish material substance from space itself?

The 17th century conception of matter added various additional features to mere extension: matter is solid, impenetrable, conserved, interacting only deterministically and on contact. 20th century physics has shown this conception to be wrong in every respect: not all matter is solid, it is not impenetrable, it interacts indeterministically and also at a distance.

Philosophical discussions of matter since the 20th century have, naturally enough, tended to take their lead from physics in characterising the nature of matter. The *material* world has become the *physical* world. The physical world — i.e. the world described by physical science — is more than just a world of matter, since it also contains fields, forces, space-time and so on.

Note that in these discussions the word 'physical' is used in the sense of the subject-matter of physical science. It does not mean what is meant when people talk about physical things in the everyday sense. See Daniel Stoljar, 'Physicalism' in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

4. The relationship between mind and matter

How are mind and matter related? Many different kinds of answer have been given to this question. We will consider first the idea that mind and matter are causally related. Objects in the physical world cause things to happen in the mind, and mental phenomena cause things to happen in the physical world. Why is this supposed to create a problem?

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