

Dualism, Materialism, and Idealism

PHIL312

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Descartes and Plato represent dualism; Hobbes and Lewis, materialism; Berkeley and Bradley, idealism.

How many basic kinds of thing are there? Into what basic classes does reality fall?

- As it is concerned with the basic nature of reality, ontology includes the question of what are the basic kinds or classes of entity.
- In many cases, philosophers reduce the basic kinds of thing to either the physical stuff of the world or to phenomena associated with the mind. This is interesting and presumably revealing in its own right: we seem naturally to confront two basic features or elements in our world, the mental and the physical.¹
- Thus, a common way of classifying ontologies is by reference to these two classes of being. Dualism is the view according to which there are two basic kinds of entity, the material or physical on the one hand and mental or ideal on the other.² Materialism (or physicalism)³ is the view according to which only material (physical) things are real. Idealism is the view that only mental things – minds and their contents or objects – are real.

Dualism: Descartes; see also Plato

- A substance, for Descartes, is a (relatively) independent entity, i.e., one that can exist without the existence of anything else. Strictly speaking, only God satisfies this description, for everything depends for its continued existence on God's "concurrence", according to Descartes. In a more restricted sense, however, a thing may be regarded as a substance as long as it can exist without the existence of anything but God. (In order to determine what may or may not exist independently, Descartes appeals to what we can imagine and thereby to what God can create; see *Meditation II*.)
- Descartes recognizes two basic forms of (created) substance, body and mind. These two kinds of substance have essential "attributes" which determine their nature and by means of which we can know them. The essential attribute of body is extension (i.e., in space) and that of mind is thought (i.e., consciousness, generally speaking).

¹ There are of course exceptions. Spinoza, for example, regards the mental and physical as but two of infinitely many different attributes of reality; Heraclitus appears to regard logical opposition as the basic essence of the real; Parmenides understands reality to be uniform and undifferentiated, so that neither designation would apply. And many systems include a third term, the divine, which frequently is unrelated, ontologically, to either the material or the mental.

² Strictly speaking, 'dualism' simply implies that there are two basic kinds of thing, whether they be the physical and the mental or some other exclusive pair.

³ Historically, there is a distinction between these terms, but I will generally use them as interchangeable.

- Substance *per se* is unobservable, for Descartes. See §52: being as such, the mere fact of existing, “does not of itself have any effect on us.” It is only by perceiving thought or extension that we are able to detect existence as such. Similarly, §53, it is (only?) by reference to thought or extension that we can form a clear idea of substance.
- Mode/Quality/Attribute: These three terms designate increasingly fundamental properties of a thing. A mode is an accidental property, one that a thing may take on or lose without impact to its identity or basic nature. E.g., shape, or the particular content of thought. A quality is a broader, more definitive feature or set of features, by means of which we might classify a substance. E.g., perhaps, being a mammal. An attribute is a feature that defines the essential nature of a thing, such as thought or extension.
- Descartes’s notion of a “conceptual distinction” is important for our purposes. A conceptual distinction is a distinction between a substance and an attribute of that substance, where the attempt to conceive the substance independently of the attribute must fail. Descartes’s example is the distinction between a substance and its temporal duration: we cannot conceive a body or mind to exist without its existing over some period of time. See §62. Notice that this seems to confirm a Becoming construction of time, where substances are concerned: Descartes seems to be appealing to our native, subjective understanding of time, which would seem to rule out the possibility of a durationless being.
- §§63-4: Descartes acknowledges that the distinction between extension or thought and body (extended substance) or mind (thinking substance) is merely a conceptual one. Thus, it is “much easier” to think of mind or body than of substance independent of the relevant attributes, it is only with “some difficulty” that we conceive substance *per se*. Indeed, judging from §62, substance would appear to be “unintelligible” independent its attribute. (Compare Descartes’s brief discussion in §54 of the intelligibility of the concept of God.) Further, the fact that we can mistakenly think of modes as substances (§64) suggests that the notion of substance is readily applied – i.e., not simply to Descartes’s chosen forms, extension and thought, but at will. (Compare Plato, here, who would regard the triangularity of a ball of wax as significantly closer to reality than would Descartes.) Without some particular reason for applying the concept of substance in one context rather than another, dogmatism threatens.
- Note, then, that Descartes appears to have an independent concept of existence or existing – substance – that he applies in three distinct contexts, the physical, the mental, and the divine. In response to the question, what is reality, Descartes’s answer appears to be that reality consists in certain quantities of distinct things. On the one hand, we have material reality, which consists of extension, where we have not so much independent units or atoms of extension as various quantities of extension (bodies), sub-divisible into further quantities. On the other hand, we have thinking reality, but here we have distinct beings, minds, independent of each other and indivisible. (God I’ll leave out of discussion.) And note as above that Descartes’s overall view involves two basic elements – a qualitative attribute (extension or thought) coupled with an existential modifier (substance), where

this notion itself contains the following: existence, plus ontological independence.

- And note, finally, that Descartes thus provides not an account or analysis of *reality*, but merely a classification or categorization of the things he regards as real: some are extended; some are thinking; and one is divine.

Questions:

1. What does Descartes think reality *per se* to be?
2. Why does Descartes identify persisting extended and thinking objects as the only reals (below heaven)? (On what basis should we regard taking a mode to be a substance as an error?)

Research Questions:

1. What view of time is Descartes expressing in the *Principles*?
2. On what basis does Descartes identify thought and extension as the two basic substances? What issues arise in his use of the concept of substance? What is his concept of substance, exactly?