

Philosophy of Mind 1

Introduction

If you were asked why you were reading this page, it is most probable that you would give an answer along the lines that you thought it was about the philosophy of mind and that you wanted to know more about the subject, or you wanted to know about the state of the current debate (or such like). Some, but hopefully not many, might say you started this course by mistake and are just realising it. If so you might explain your action by saying that you wanted to study a different topic and you mistakenly thought this course would fit the bill. Whatever the particulars of the story you tell, it is likely that in telling it you will rely on a network of concepts which will include such mental concepts as thoughts, beliefs, desires and the like. In effect you would be supplying reasons to make sense of, or rationalise, your action. If you are inclined to employ these concepts, then to use the jargon of today's philosophy of mind, you are in the habit of giving 'folk psychological' explanations of your behaviour and the behaviour of others. Folk psychology is just one of many names given to explanations which make appeal to our reasons for acting, by employing concepts like beliefs and desires.

But why have philosophy of mind at all? Below are some questions that I want us to begin answering in class, but I would also like you to think about and, if possible, discuss them outside of the classes.

- If science tells us about the nature of our brains, why do we need philosophers to tell us about the nature of our minds?
- Is a mental state a brain state? (Are they synonymous?)
- We often say, 'I expect that...'; 'I intend to...'; 'I believe that...' etc. In doing so are we reporting a mental state? Are we indicating that we have a mental state through our expression of expectation, intention or belief? Or are we doing neither?
- Are mind and brain identical? If not, what is the difference? How might we understand each?
- What implications do your answers to the above questions have for the question of whether or not machines can (or one day will be able to) think like us?

Unlike the way I have introduced our other topics I will – to begin with at least – approach this topic historically. Strands of thought that could quite easily be classified under the banner of philosophy of mind were present even in the works of pre-Socratic philosophers (i.e. philosophers who were working any time before about 470 BC); however, the branch itself did not really become established until the early-modern era (i.e. from Descartes onwards). Accordingly, I will begin with Descartes so we can locate contemporary discussions more easily.

Mind & Body

Descartes can be credited with having generated the mind-body problem. According to Descartes, a human being is made of two distinct substances – the mind and the body. But how did he come to this conclusion? In order to answer this question, we need to briefly address his theory of knowledge (epistemology). Descartes' desire to produce a theory of knowledge was motivated by the scientific achievements of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). He wanted to establish a solid foundation upon which all other scientific advances could be built – what were the criteria for saying something counted as authentic knowledge as opposed to just belief? – Obviously, one can believe something to be true, only for it to turn out to be false (for several thousand years it was commonly supposed that the earth was at the centre of the solar system). Descartes' method was logical. He decided to dismiss as knowledge all beliefs founded on unreliable starting points; that way, he would not have to examine each of his beliefs in turn (which would have been a task so laborious it would have scarcely been possible to accomplish within a lifetime). Descartes quite reasonably took, as his starting point for knowledge acquisition, the five human senses – taste, smell, touch, sight and hearing. These senses, he believed, provided information about our surroundings from which we then formed beliefs about the world. The problem is that our senses are not always reliable and if they are, at the same time, the only means through which we come to have knowledge of the world, then there is a difficulty. How can one establish with any certainty that they are reliable even when we think they are? This leaves pretty much all of the external world open to question. As Descartes pointed out, it is wise not to completely trust a friend who has deceived you a few times. Consequently, all beliefs grounded in the senses are unreliable (he did not, as is sometimes

thought, claim them to be false, merely not certain knowledge).

So, what can be known? Descartes even considered mathematical reasoning to be dubitable because our thinking we have made a calculation correctly is, itself, a form of perception and, as such, vulnerable to doubt. Eventually, he ends up at the position that even if everything around him is false, it cannot be doubted that he is a thinking thing (hence 'I think therefore I am'). I shall not enter into how Descartes tries to answer these problems (that is for the epistemology component of the course¹) but it is worth noting that it is these arguments that led him to think that the mind and body are two distinct things.

The existence of all physical objects, Descartes believed, could be doubted. However, what could not be doubted was the existence of the mind that was doing the doubting (even if what that mind was thinking made no sense or was false). Thus, mind and body were two distinct substances; a body (whether it be a human body or any physical object) was a physical substance that has existence independent of the mind. Accordingly, Descartes took the mind to be a separate immaterial substance. This conclusion brought him neatly to what is now known as Cartesian Dualism. The mind, on this model, is construed as near equivalent to the soul – something immaterial that somehow interacts with the brain (which, in turn, controls our physical movements). Descartes believed that this interaction was mediated through the pineal gland at the base of the skull.

Problems with Descartes' Theory

One immediate problem that is raised by Cartesian Dualism is that of the possibility of interaction between mind and body. How is it possible for something immaterial – that is, something non-physical with no spatial dimensions – to interact in a cause and effect relationship with something physical? How would we know when such causal interactions had taken place? Moreover, if such a relationship could not be specified in terms of cause and effect, then this has substantial implications for the possibility of freedom of the will. These are

difficulties that Descartes failed to answer adequately, but it still left the nature of mind in question.

The Development of Philosophy of Mind

The idea of an immaterial mind is, obviously, quite problematic and so attempts were made to explain the mind in purely materialist terms – that is, in terms that can explain the mind as answerable to physical phenomena. Next week, we will examine these materialist (sometimes known as physicalist) conceptions of mind which culminate in what is known as Functionalism; this theory is the basis for much work in artificial intelligence and neuroscience. For now however, I will leave you with the questions: is the character of our thought physical? If you do not think this is so, how are we supposed to fully characterise the mind in materialist terms?

¹ Broadly speaking, Descartes believed that knowledge of the world comes entirely from reason and innate knowledge (i.e. knowledge we are born with). Whether innate knowledge actually exists is a moot point (at least until we focus on epistemology later in the course).