Lecture 4: Two Cartesian Topics
Scepticism, and the Mind

- Last Time …
  … we looked at scepticism about INDUCTION.

- This Lecture …
  … will move on to SCEPTICISM concerning the external world, most famously exemplified in Descartes’ first *Meditation*, and his related claims about the nature of MIND AND BODY.

- The Next Lecture …
  … will say more about modern responses to SCEPTICISM, and focus on KNOWLEDGE.
Two Kinds of Scepticism

- **Vertical Scepticism**
  - Inferring from one kind of thing to *a different kind* (e.g. inferring from one’s sensations or appearances, to the existence of real physical objects that cause them).

- **Horizontal Scepticism**
  - Inferring things *of the same kind* as one has experienced (e.g. inferring from one’s sensations or appearances, to expect similar sensations or appearances in the future).
External World Scepticism

It can seem that (“vertical”) external world scepticism is far more worrying than (“horizontal”) inductive scepticism:

– Maybe I am just dreaming, and there is no external world at all.
– Maybe an evil demon is causing me to have illusions of an external world.
– Maybe a wicked scientist has my brain in a vat, and is creating these illusions.
The only way to defeat scepticism is to withhold assent from anything that isn’t completely certain.

When I consider “I think, therefore I am”, it is quite impossible for me to be mistaken. So I am completely certain of this, at least.

By contemplating this first certainty, I understand what makes it certain is that I clearly and distinctly perceive it to be true.
Descartes and God

Hence I can establish as a general rule that anything I clearly and distinctly perceive is true.

I clearly and distinctly perceive that God must exist, because only a perfect being could be the ultimate cause of such a perfect idea as my idea of God.

A perfect God cannot deceive, so I know that my faculties are essentially reliable.
The Cartesian Circle

- Descartes seems to be “boot-strapping”:
  - proving the existence of God by relying on his mental faculties.
  - then appealing to the existence of God to justify reliance on his mental faculties.

- Isn’t this viciously circular?
  - If my faculties might be defective, then how can I trust my proof of the existence of God in the first place? How can any anti-sceptical argument even get off the ground?
G.E. Moore famously claimed to refute this sort of scepticism by appeal to common-sense knowledge:

– Here’s one hand [he holds up a hand], and here’s another [he holds up the other].
– If this is a hand, then there is an external world.
– Therefore there is an external world, and scepticism is refuted.
Two Arguments from “P implies Q”

**Modus Ponens**

- P implies Q \( P \rightarrow Q \)
- P is true \( P \)
- therefore Q is true \( \therefore Q \)

**Modus Tollens**

- P implies Q \( P \rightarrow Q \)
- Q is false \( \neg Q \)
- therefore P is false \( \therefore \neg P \)
One person’s *modus ponens* …

*Deuteronomy 20:16-17* commands multiple genocide to avoid religious pollution.

- The religious fundamentalist might say:
  - Everything in the Bible is true.
  - Therefore genocide is sometimes desirable.

- The humane philosopher would say:
  - Genocide is never desirable.
  - Therefore not everything in the Bible is true.

- Which underlined premise is more plausible?
… is another’s modus tollens …

– If this is a hand, then there is an external world.

Moore says:
  – We know this is a hand.
  – Therefore we know there is an external world.

The sceptic says:
  – We don’t know that there is an external world.
  – Therefore we don’t know that this is a hand.

Moore will claim that his premise is more plausible than the sceptic’s.
Internalism and Externalism

We’d like to agree with Moore, but it seems hard to justify a claim to knowledge so crudely: don’t we need some *philosophical argument* rather than a bare common-sense claim to justify knowing that this is a hand?

But “internalist” arguments, like Cartesian boot-strapping, have difficulty doing the job. So many recent philosophers have moved towards *externalism* (next lecture, and compare Mellor’s approach to induction).
Cartesian Dualism

The view for which Descartes is now best known:

– The body is *material*, composed of matter whose essence (i.e. fundamental property from which other properties follow) is *extension*.

– The mind is composed of *immaterial substance* whose essence is *thinking*.

This *substance dualism* is to be contrasted with *property dualism* (i.e. there are both physical and non-physical *properties*).
A Bad Argument for Dualism

In his *Discourse*, Descartes argues like this:

I can doubt that my body exists.
I cannot doubt that I exist.
∴ I am not identical with my body.

Compare:

I can doubt that Hesperus is Phosphorus. *
I cannot doubt that Phosphorus is Phosphorus.
∴ Hesperus is not Phosphorus.

* Hesperus = the Evening Star; Phosphorus = the Morning Star; in fact both are appearances of the planet Venus.
Leibniz’s Law

If $a$ and $b$ are the same thing, then any property of $a$ must also be a property of $b$:

$$Fa, \ a=b \models Fb$$

– If $F$ is the property of being doubted by me to exist, $a$ is me, and $b$ is my body, we get Descartes’ argument from the Discourse.

– Likewise $F$ could be the property of being doubted by me to be Prime Minister (etc.)

To simplest way to avoid the fallacy is to deny that these are genuine properties.
A Better Argument for Dualism

Descartes’ argument in *Meditation* VI is less fallacious, but has questionable premises:

– I have a clear understanding of myself as (potentially) a thinking, non-extended thing.
– I have a clear understanding of body as (potentially) extended and non-thinking.
– Anything I clearly and distinctly understand could be created by God accordingly.
– So I could exist separately from my body, and it follows that I am genuinely distinct from it.
Even in the *Meditations*, Descartes tries to motivate his claim to know the essence of mind (as thinking) from his doubt argument:

“what shall I now say that I am [when I might be deceived by an evil demon, or dreaming]? … At present I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true. I am, then, in a strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason … what kind of thing? … a thinking thing.
Epistemology → Metaphysics?

*The way in which we come to know, or be certain, of something need not reflect its ultimate nature (or why it is that way).*

- From *I am thinking*, it plausibly follows that (in at least one sense) *I am a thing that thinks*.
- But it does *not* necessarily follow that *I am something whose essence is to think*.
- Nor does it follow that the thing that thinks could exist without being extended. (Imagine if a piece of matter were made able to think.)
Possibly Distinct → Actually Distinct?

The final move of Descartes’ argument seems more defensible, in a sense:

God could have created my mind and body as separate entities.

∴ It is possible for my mind and body to exist separately.

∴ My mind and body are in fact distinct things.

But “could have” must be *metaphysical* possibility, not *epistemology* (“might have for all I know”). So this begs the question.
The Distinct Substances Problem

“How can two such distinct substances interact at all?”

– A problem for Descartes, who takes causation to be ultimately *intelligible*.

– Not a problem *in principle* on a Humean view of causation: causation is a matter of lawlike correlation rather than intelligible connexion.

– But it’s hard to see what such “laws” could be like, so a difficulty remains (cf. the “explanatory gap” between physical and mental).
The Causal Closure Principle

- The *causal closure principle* is that physical events (or their probabilities) are determined entirely by physical causes.
  - Also called “the completeness of physics”.
  - In this form, the principle is compatible with physical events’ being to some extent *random*.
  - Casts doubt on *non*-physical causation.

- Commonly believed, though its evidential base is not so clear.
Problems Explaining Interaction

- The causal closure principle seems to leave no room for a distinct mental substance capable of influencing the body.

- Even if we deny the principle, mind/body interaction seems mysterious.

- It’s hard to see how an immaterial mind could have evolved alongside the body.
  - Do animals have one too?
  - Is having a mind “all or nothing”? 

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Mind and Body: Different Views

- **Interactionism**
  - The mind can causally influence the body (e.g. movement), and *vice-versa* (e.g. pain).

- **Epiphenomenalism**
  - The mind is an "epiphenomenon" – caused by events in the brain, but itself causally inert. *(this account is particularly hard to square with evolution – how could such a mind evolve?)*

- **Physicalism**
  - Only physical things exist, hence there is nothing to the mind beyond the physical brain.
Imagine a scientist (Mary) who learns all the physical facts about colour and colour perception, but who can see only in black, white, and shades of grey.

If she then acquires normal sight, when she sees colours she learns what they look like, something she didn’t know before.

Hence these phenomenal colour properties cannot be physical. We are forced into property dualism, if not substance dualism.
What is a Physical Cause?

What are the properties of physical matter?
  – If matter is just inert, extended (and possibly impenetrable) stuff, then it’s hard to see how it could possibly be the causal basis of thought.
  – But quantum “matter” has all sorts of weird properties: charge, spin, “charm”, “strangeness”.
  – Could matter have some proto-psychic property too (*panpsychism*: mind is a fundamental feature of the universe)? Would this then be *physical*?! 
  – Physicalism generally shuns such “spooks”.


Non-Physical Explanation

Even with “non-spooky” physicalism, it doesn’t follow that everything in the world can be explained in physical terms.

– Why does my calculator show “132” when I type “11 x 12 =“?

– Answer: because 11 x 12 is equal to 132. The explanation appeals to mathematical facts, not just physical facts about the calculator.

Likewise evolutionary explanation etc. (e.g. in terms of the logic of game theory).
It is tempting to see the relation between brain and mind as analogous to that between hardware and software.

- This treats the mind as clearly distinguishable from the body, but not a distinct substance.

Explains away another Cartesian argument:

- Body is divisible.
- Mind is not divisible.

∴ Body and mind are distinct.
Ryle and Category Mistakes

- The classic category mistake:
  - “I’ve seen all these colleges and offices, but where is the University?”
  - Supposes the University to be a separate thing.

- “Mind” as a category mistake:
  - “People behave in these various ways, so they must have a mind distinct from their body.”
  - Instead, “having a mind” just is a matter of how one behaves. It’s not a separate thing.
Strawson and “Many Minds”

If one does think of the mind as a separate thing from the body, an “entity” in its own right, then this raises the question of how such entities are to be *individuated*.

How can I know my brain isn’t linked to lots of different minds thinking in unison?

– Possible answer: I can’t be certain, but it’s an extravagant and arbitrary hypothesis.

– However Strawson would probably see even the possibility as a *reductio ad absurdum*.
The Hard Problem

Physicalism can comfortably accommodate:
- Non-physical explanation (e.g. in terms of purposes, as with a chess computer);
- A notion of “mind” analogous to software.

But the “hard problem” (Chalmers) remains:
- Why is all this accompanied by *phenomenal consciousness* (i.e. conscious experience)?

Can this justify substance dualism after all?
- Or should we rather admit that we simply don’t (yet) understand it? Maybe we never will!