

Is Intentionality *the* Argument for Substance Dualism?

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In this short article I will review Cartesian dualism and intentionality. The latter has been considered by many as the most convincing argument for Cartesian substance dualism. I will study the relationship between dualism and intentionality, and evaluate whether intentionality really supports such a view.

Cartesian Dualism

René Descartes' *substance dualism* argues, that there are two fundamentally different kinds of things: physical and mental things. According to his method of doubt, Descartes claims that everything physical can be doubted, they can be treated *as if* they were false. In the case of the human mind, the doubting ends. Because I can doubt and I can be fooled (by an evil demon) to believe false things, the mind itself that doubts cannot be doubted. Thus, the physical body can be doubted, but the mind cannot. The mental stuff of mind is fundamentally different from the stuff of the body or the brain. Mind is a thinking and body an extended thing. The body extends itself so that the intellect can perceive things in the world.

Descartes argues that the mind and the body/brain do not share all the same properties. The brain is *divisible* into parts: brain cells and functional areas. The mind on the other hand is a unity, which is not divisible into smaller parts. As Descartes puts it: "I am unable to distinguish any parts within myself." [1] Another property the mind and the brain don't share is the capability for *introspection*. One can think of one's own mind, but one cannot come to know about one's brain by merely thinking about it. There is also difference in *spatiality*: the body/brain is spatially located, but the mind isn't as it is impossible to point out where thoughts exactly occupy space.

Intentionality and Substance Dualism

Intentionality is often referred to as the "aboutness" of mental states. As Franz Brentano and later phenomenologist Edmund Husserl puts it, intentionality is *directness* towards the world and its objects. To have intentional mental states is

to be directed towards something in the world: the thought that the painting I see is beautiful is about the painting, but this “aboutness” is not reducible to the painting nor to my nervous system. Thus, intentionality, or “aboutness”, is not part of the physics of the world or my brain chemistry. Intentionality has been considered as perhaps the strongest argument favoring dualism. Intentionality poses a problem for physicalist positions: intentional states are essentially holistic, but there appears to be no counterpart of this feature in purely physical states of affairs. The mind is qualitatively different from non-mental, purely mechanical things, because of the fact that mind is intentional. It seems, that intentionality is not physically constituted, as no physical thing possesses the same properties as intentionality does. However, it does not follow from this, that intentionality *by necessity* favors substance dualism.

Is Intentionality Really *the* Argument for Cartesian Dualism?

Intentionality is an *emergent* property, it is not reducible to other, more primary physical features of a biological organism. It is impossible to explain how such reduction occurs, at least on the basis of our current scientific knowledge. But even though we cannot explain how such reduction occurs, it does not mean that it doesn't happen: intentionality *could* emerge from those physical properties. Intentionality is not, thus, necessarily an argument for (ontological) substance dualism, but it functions as a knowledge-argument, favoring epistemological dualism. We cannot know how intentionality emerges from physical properties, but even though we lack the knowledge, we ought not necessarily conclude substance dualism from this. Even though intentionality and the immediate experience we have of it seems to fit well with Descartes' thinking of the introspection and indubitability of our own minds, this experience does not necessarily require two different kinds of stuff, mental stuff and physical stuff, but only two different kinds of knowledge of things. Those two kinds are (1) the subjective, irreducible, intentional experience of things in the world, and (2) the objective knowledge of things in the world. From the perspective (2) we cannot get to know what it is like to have knowledge (1).

As Thomas Nagel [2] explains, we can observe bats and get to know their behavior or have understanding of their sonar sense, but we can never have the first person perspective knowledge of what it is like to be a bat. Intentionality is a property of the knowledge (1), it is a necessary part of the first person perspective. In knowledge (2) we can observe things in the world and we can even expect them to be true to others, regardless of them having any personal experiences of those things. There is thus an unbridgeable gap between the two types of knowledge, and this is what I think is in the heart of the problems with Cartesian dualism and intentionality. Therefore, the problem with mind and

matter is not necessarily a problem of *two different substances*, but of *two different kinds of knowledge*.

Conclusion

As I have shown, the relationship between intentionality and Cartesian dualism is not as symbiotic as many would argue. Intentionality is a strong but not a definitive argument for substance dualism. In fact, the relationship between intentionality and dualism appears to be more problematic than it may first seem. Intentionality does not only support substance dualism, but one could also argue in favor of another kind of dualism from it. This other dualism is epistemological dualism, which points out a certain perspectiveness behind the constitution of different types of knowledge.

Footnotes

1. Descartes, René. 'Meditations on First Philosophy,' in Chalmers, David. (ed.) *Philosophy of Mind. Classical and Contemporary Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 18.
2. Nagel, Thomas. 'What Is it Like to Be a Bat?,' (*Philosophical Review*, 1974), pp. 435-50.

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