

Dualism and Physicalism

(Notes on van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, Chapter 10)

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1 Definitions

Human organism: Biological organism that is a member of the species *Homo sapiens*.

Human person: Whatever we refer to when we use the first person pronoun. (Q: who is “we?”) Human persons are capable of thought and sensation.

Physicalism: human persons are physical things. (In particular, a human person and a human organism are one and the same thing.)

Physical thing: An individual thing made entirely of those things that physics investigates (e.g. quarks and electrons).

Thing: A particular. Universals are not “things” in this sense.

Nonphysical thing: A thing that is not a physical thing, and has no physical things as parts.

Dualism: Human persons are nonphysical things. (But they may be closely associated with a particular physical thing, namely a human organism.)

Types of Dualism:

- interactionism (Descartes)
- occasionalism (Malebranche)
- epiphenomenalism (T. H. Huxley)

2 Argument 1 (Descartes)

1. I can conceive of my body’s not existing.
2. I cannot conceive of my not existing.

Therefore,

3. I am not my body

Response 1: There must be *something* wrong with the argument, because parallel arguments move from true premises to false conclusions (e.g. I can conceive that lightning

is not an electrical discharge, but I cannot conceive that an electrical discharge is not an electrical discharge, therefore lightning is not an electrical discharge).

Response 2: The problem may be that “being something I can conceive not to exist” is not a property of objects (but rather of objects as thought of in a certain way). Compare: being so-called because of one’s size is not a property of objects, period, but of an object as called by a certain name.

3 Argument 2

1. Human persons are capable of thought and sensation.
2. Physical things are incapable of thought and sensation.

Therefore,

3. Human persons are not physical things.

Response 1: The argument is valid, but the reasons for thinking 2 is true seem to apply equally well to nonphysical things, so the argument doesn’t favor dualism over physicalism. (van Inwagen’s analogy: That person in the air is flying; men can’t fly; therefore that person in the air is a woman.)

Response 2: The argument seems to come close to begging the question. No one who isn’t already committed to the rejection of physicalism will accept premise 2.

4 Argument 3

1. I seem to be located in my head.
2. My body is not located in my head.

Therefore,

3. I am not my body.

Response 1: This is just silly. I seem to be at the point my sense organs are getting information from. If they were in my chest I would seem to be there. If I were to wear a virtual reality headset connected to a distant robot, I would seem to be where the robot is. (Compare Daniel Dennett’s short story “Where Am I?”) There’s no reason to think I *am* where I *seem* to be.

Response 2: Even if the argument were sound, it wouldn’t show I were nonphysical, only that I should be identified with part of my body (perhaps my brain) rather than all of it.

5 Argument 4

1. There could be beings that were very physically different from us but who had thoughts and sensations.

Therefore,

2. Thoughts and sensations cannot be properties of physical things.

Response 1: Even if this shows type-type physicalism to be false, it is compatible with token-token physicalism.

Response 2: This doesn't show type-type physicalism is false, just that the relevant types may need to be very abstract.