

Dualism: The Mind-Body problem
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In Anthropology, dualism refers to the relationship between the two components distinctive to a human person: the presence of a mind and a body – in other words, the relationship between mental properties and physical properties. In the philosophy of mind, dualism assumes that the mind and the body are completely distinct from one another. Physical properties include size, shape, color, weight, etc. while mental properties are those who are proprietary to the human person such as perceptions, emotions, and intentionality. So, what is the relationship between these different entities and to what extent do they work together in harmony?

The mind-body problem also known as the mind-brain problem is dealt with varying in different cultures. In Ancient Greece, it was thought that the body and the soul were completely distinct from one another. Plato ([375BC] 2004) was a proponent of pure dualism and argued that the soul came from a different world than us – the world of ideals – and has been imprisoned in the body. The soul contains passions; it is thus given a higher value than the body. It wants to escape the body; it is in perpetual, chaotic and violent movement. All in all, the ancient Greeks did not recognize the human person but as a collection of various components with different values making up the human person.

On the other hand, in monotheistic cultures, a major anthropological event has happened which has partially solved the mind-body problem: the rise of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the book of Tawrat, it is said that Creation happened over a six-day period. Every day, God would will his creations into existence “Let there be light, and there was light” (Genesis 1:3) however, when creating the human being God said: “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26). It is important to distinguish the nuance between the creation of everything on earth from the creation of the human: God’s creation of light can be characterized as “كوني فكانت” whereas the creation of humans is very distinct and bears a very important meaning “فالنصنع الانسان”.

God has taken a piece of something that already exists and has given it a special piece of himself: “Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). The human is thus a whole creation that God gave a special divine quality to. That said, monotheist cultures do not differentiate between the body, the soul and the spirit. They believe that the human is a single, complete entity with divine attributes given by God. However, that does not mean the issue with dualism is completely solved. In Christianity, the human being is considered a human from conception to death, his value does not change. Nevertheless, in Islam there is a specific time frame after which the embryo gains its humanistic traits and properties. Finally, in Judaism, the embryo, although considered human, is not given the same value as a human being. These small discourses illustrate the flaws in spiritual monism.

Furthermore, dualism today is different from the way it was in the olden days. Dualism is now rational and that is in part due to the advances of French philosopher René Descartes ([1641] 1955). Descartes claimed that the human being is made of two substances the Res Extensa “*la chose étendue*” and the Res Cogitans “*la chose connaissante*”. This belief is known as radical dualism. The two substances belong to two different realms: the Res Cogitans has no physical properties whereas the Res Extensa belongs to the physical realm. As a human person, both components work together in harmony. Each substance is connected to the other in the brain. For example, when a person is asleep, the Res Cogitans is not there, but if a human is active and conscious, both substances are present. In the 20th century and with the rise of neuroscience, the presence of these two substances was thought to be wrong. Humans were believed to be one unique, physical entity driven by the mind. The mind is controlled by various hormonal secretions that regulate its actions. The spirit was thus materialized: it is after all the consequence of some biological function. This position pretends to be non-dualist. Miresco and Kirmayer (2006) suggest that “the idea that mind and brain are different entities is no longer credible in medical science.” However, as demonstrated by Maung (2019), there is a common misconception that dualism in the philosophy of mind, which holds that the mental and physical are ontologically distinct, is undermined by this neuroscientific study.

To conclude, answering the posed question has proven to be a major hurdle for many scholars throughout history. Modern dualism affirms the existence of two separate entities: the distinction is made between physical and metaphysical. However, the extent to which the two entities interact has yet to be elucidated and is still in dissension. Chalmers (1995) has made major advances pushing further research in the field of psychiatry and how the mind-body problem relates to psychiatric illnesses. The problem as it stands now is identifying what sort of dualism might best describe the inner workings of the human person.

References

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