

Mind and Matter Lecture 1

1. The aim of the course is to convince you that one of two incredible things is true. Either your mind is just matter or your mind is not just matter. But both possibilities are incredible. Or so we'll see.
2. First we must pin down the subject matter with a little more precision. Talk of 'your mind' is slightly misleading, involving as it does an assumption of mental unity that is both contentious (Hume *Treatise* I.iv.6) and irrelevant to at least some of our concerns. Instead I'll talk most of the time about 'mental phenomena' or 'mental events'.
3. These fall into two categories: I'll call them 'sensational' and 'propositional' phenomena. Sensational phenomena are those that seem to have some kind of intrinsic quasi-sensory character. A visual experience, a headache, dizziness and perhaps some kinds of fear are sensational phenomena. It isn't just that we take them to occur 'in our minds'. (And anyway what is 'in' supposed to mean?) It is that there is something *it is like* to have these experiences.
4. Propositional mental phenomena are mental states that do not have this character. Beliefs and desires (or as much of them as is necessary to explain human action) are of this sort; and typically for such states they take 'propositional objects' (hence the name).
5. What about matter? Well, what *is* matter? It's easy enough to say that it is solidity. But what is solidity? On reflection it isn't enough even for prescientific understanding to say that it is 'stuff that fills space': we'd need to say something about how other stuff behaves around it. Thus we might try saying that solidity is resistance to pressure: but presumably that means resistance to pressure from something *solid* and now the concept seems to crumble in our hands. (See Locke's very illuminating discussion: *Essay* II.iv.) It may be that no non-circular definition of solidity is available: how then did we attain our present understanding of the term? Let's put that question aside and use this working definition: a material object is something that is spatially extended. The question is therefore whether mental phenomena are materially extended.
6. The first answer that I'll discuss is Dualism: the view that mental phenomena are distinct from materially extended objects. This position is probably the most attractive and there are some plausible arguments for it. The most famous and influential is Descartes's. The argument has three premises and a conclusion.
7. The first premise of the argument is that you can imagine existing without a body (or a brain). In fact there are people who actually claim to have been in such a state for a short period of time. It is irrelevant whether or not they were right. The point is that you can—or at least they can—*imagine* their being right.

8. The second premise is that you cannot imagine that existing in the absence of any mental phenomena i.e. without a mind. You might say that that's what happens when you are asleep. But you can't imagine being asleep—at least not in the autobiographical sense of 'imagine' also enters the first premise; so you can't imagine that form of existence even if it does occur.
9. The third premise is Leibniz's Law or rather the part of it known as the indiscernibility of identicals. (Or better: the distinctness of discernibles. Why is this phrasing better?) The principle says that if $a = b$ then a and b have exactly the same properties. Notice that Leibniz' Law is about *numerical* identity: the relation that everything has to itself and nothing else, not any relation that e.g. identical twins bear to one another.
10. By the first premise every material object has the property that you can imagine existing without it. By the second premise your mind does not have that property. So by the third premise your mind is not identical to any material object. This is dualism.
11. An immediate objection to the first premise is that you *can't* imagine yourself existing in the absence of any material object because (for Hume's reason) you can't imagine your *self* at all. But it's easy enough to get around that. Take any mental phenomenon, say, this headache. You can imagine this very headache existing in the absence of any material object; but you can't imagine it existing in the absence of itself. Therefore your present headache is distinct from any material object. The same goes for any mental phenomenon—at least, for any sensational mental phenomenon.
12. A more telling objection is that the argument misapplies Leibniz's Law. When you say that you can imagine the headache existing without the material object, you are not ascribing a property to a *thing* but to a *description* of the thing. On this objection the argument is invalid: what it shows at best is that 'material' and 'mental' are not different categories of reality but different perspectives on the same stuff.