

Descartes' argument for substance dualism

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1 Arguments Descartes didn't give

Argument A: I can doubt that my body exists.
I cannot doubt that I exist.

Therefore, I am not my body.

Compare this to

Argument A': I can doubt that my father is standing here.
I cannot doubt that the masked man is standing here.

Therefore, the masked man is not my father.

On one reading of this argument, the premises are true (in the situation we're imagining) but the argument is invalid. On another reading, the argument is valid but the second premise is false.

2 The argument from the possibility of disembodiment

Argument B: I could exist even if my body didn't exist
My body could not exist if my body didn't exist.

Therefore, I am not my body.

Leibniz's Law:

a F s; b doesn't F ; therefore $a \neq b$.

3 Motivating the first premise of the argument

Descartes: I can clearly and distinctly conceive myself in the absence of my body. God exists and isn't a deceiver, so whenever I clearly and distinctly conceive some situation, it really is a possible situation.

Intuitive defence of the first premise: Stories of disembodiment, body-switching, etc. seem to make perfectly good sense.

4 Questioning the first premise of the argument

5 Questioning the validity of the argument

Argument C: Giorgione was so-called because of his size.
Barbarelli was not so-called because of his size.

Therefore, Giorgione \neq Barbarelli.

6 From 'I am not my body' to substance dualism

Argument D: Lumpl (the clay) could exist even if Goliath (the statue) were destroyed.
Goliath could not exist if Goliath were destroyed.

Therefore, Lumpl isn't Goliath.

Many philosophers nowadays accept this argument. But they don't conclude that Goliath isn't a material object; rather, they conclude that there are two very similar material objects occupying the same space. To establish anything like Descartes' dualism, we need to strengthen Argument B.

Argument E: I could exist even if no material object existed.
Whenever x is a material object, x could not exist if no material object existed.

Therefore, I am not a material object.

Note that whereas premise 2 of the original argument seems to be a truth of logic, premise 2 of this argument is controversial. Compare: 'Whenever x is a best-selling novelist, x could not exist if no best-selling novelist existed.'

Argument F: Whenever y is a thinking thing, y could exist even if no material object existed.
Whenever x is a material object, x could not exist if no material object existed.

Therefore, no thinking thing is a material object.