

Descartes' Dualism Does Not Commit the Masked Man Fallacy

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Abstract

René Descartes believed that there was a logical path from “I think therefore I am,” to mind-body dualism. In more recent times, it has been said that no such path exists. Paul Churchland and Gary Hatfield each prominently make the case that the argument for dualism commits the masked man fallacy. That is, that the Cartesian argument relies on mere ignorance of the body to reach its conclusion. In this paper I show that the argument from “I think therefore I am,” to mind-body dualism does not depend on mere ignorance. It depends on reliable knowledge about what can be known and what can not be known. Descartes' method of doubt leads to the conclusion that the body can never under any circumstance be known as the mind is known. The argument for dualism rests on that knowledge, not on ignorance. This paper reveals a viable Cartesian argument for mind-body dualism and explicates the missteps of Descartes' present-day critics.

Main Text

René Descartes' historically influential mind-body dualism has taken some beatings in the 20th and 21st centuries. In particular, Paul Churchland's book, *Matter and Consciousness*, purports to reveal a fallacy in the best argument leading from Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum* to

mind-body dualism (1988). Churchland argues that the difference between mind and body is really no difference at all, and can only seem like a difference due to the *intensional fallacy*, also known as the *masked man fallacy*. Gary Hatfield seems to have independently developed much the same critique (as he does not cite Churchland) in his 2008 *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on Descartes. Or perhaps Hatfield just sees this critique of Descartes to be so commonly known and agreed upon amongst academics as to not warrant a specific citation. This may be the case, as the *Oxford Reference* dictionary defines the masked man fallacy as the “Fallacy allegedly committed by Descartes” (Oxford Reference, 2022). Though not universally accepted as true, the claim that Descartes’ dualism relies on the masked man fallacy has permeated current thought on the topic, almost as a maxim. Churchland seems to be the thinker who has made the most complete argument for the claim, and Hatfield’s entry on Descartes is probably the most widely read version of the claim. In this paper I will show that the argument from *cogito, ergo sum* to mind-body dualism does not commit the masked man fallacy. To this end, I will engage with both Hatfield and Churchland.

Churchland sets up a succinct version of Descartes’ argument to knock down:

“1. My mental states are introspectively known by me as states of my conscious self.

2. My brain states are not introspectively known by me as states of my conscious self.

Therefore, by Leibniz’ Law (that numerically identical things must have exactly the same properties),

3. My mental states are not identical with my brain states.” (Churchland, 1988, 32)

Churchland then gives what he sees as a parallel argument to show by example how the masked man fallacy works:

“1. Muhammad Ali is widely known as a heavyweight champion.

2. Cassius Clay is not widely known as a heavyweight champion.

Therefore, by Leibniz' Law,

3. Muhammad Ali is not identical with Cassius Clay.” (Churchland, 1988, 32)

This example of the masked man fallacy by Churchland shows that merely being thought of or recognized in one way or another is not a genuine property of a thing which actually distinguishes it from supposedly separate things. How people apprehend a thing can be wrong, incomplete, or change with time. One and the same thing might be recognized under one name, and yet fail to be recognized under another accurate name. Hatfield uses a very similar example meant to demonstrate the same point:

“From the fact that the Joker cannot, at a certain moment, doubt the existence of Batman (because he is with him), but he can doubt the existence of Bruce Wayne (who might, for all the Joker knows, have been killed by the Joker's henchmen), it does not follow that Bruce Wayne is not Batman. In fact, he is Batman. The Joker is merely ignorant of that fact.” (Hatfield, 2008, § 3.4)

The problem with these analogies is that they mischaracterize what is known and unknown. Descartes' method of doubt does not merely lead to a lack of knowledge about the body; it leads to absolute certainty that the body will in principle never be known. The premise is not merely 'I happen to lack knowledge of the body'; it is 'The body is in principle uncertain from any and all perspectives.' The body is uncertain from the perspective of mind, and there are no alternative perspectives from which the body might be known. Any perspective from which knowledge of the body might be sought would be a subjectivity, a mind. There is no knowledge,

certainty, or doubt that is not within a mind, and the body is uncertain to mind, so there is no certainty of the body from any logically possible perspective.

In Hatfield's analogy, 'being with Batman' stands in for 'certainty of the mind', while 'not being with Bruce Wayne' stands in for 'uncertainty of the body'. To be truly analogous, the Joker should truthfully know that he in principle could absolutely never 'be with' (be certain of) 'Bruce Wayne' (that which stands in for the body). He would then rightly conclude that Batman (whom he is with) is not Bruce Wayne. To fully correct the analogy, the name 'Bruce Wayne' should be replaced with a name that does not contradict the true conclusion. The Joker cannot, at a certain moment, doubt the existence of Batman (because he is with him), but he can doubt the existence of Frank Castle (whom he truthfully and for good reason knows can never be with him). It follows that Frank Castle is not Batman. This refutes Hatfield's refutation of the argument for Cartesian dualism. But Churchland partially anticipated this response.

Churchland knew that someone like me might insist on premises like the following, which replace "known" with "knowable" in what I'll call the updated argument:

“1*. My mental states are knowable by introspection.

2*. My brain states are not knowable by introspection.

Therefore, by Leibniz' Law,

3*. My mental states are not identical with my brain states.” (Churchland, 1988, 33)

Churchland readily admits that being knowable by introspection is a genuine property of a thing, and that the updated argument avoids the masked man fallacy. In order to counter this, he denies the updated premise (2*). As a proponent of physicalism, Churchland holds that mental states really are brain states. And if mental states actually are brain states, then it is really brain

states that we introspect. In the case that physicalism is true, we all know brain states by introspection, but some of us just don't know that we know brain states, much like the Joker could be with Bruce Wayne, but not know he is with Bruce Wayne. According to Churchland, premise (2*) is false and also begs the question. He again illustrates his critique by using a supposedly parallel argument:

- “1. Temperature is knowable by feeling.
 2. Mean molecular kinetic energy is not knowable by feeling.
- Therefore, by Leibniz' Law,
3. Temperature is not identical with mean molecular kinetic energy.” (Churchland, 1988, 33)

Since we scientifically consider temperature and mean kinetic energy to be equivalent, premise (2) is false even though it does not seem obviously false to most people who are not thinking in terms of physical theories. Churchland says, and I agree, that, “Just as one can learn to feel that the summer air is about 70°F, or 21°C, so one can learn to feel that the mean KE of its molecules is about 6.2×10^{-21} joules, for whether we realize it or not, that is what our discriminatory mechanisms are keyed to” (Churchland, 1988, 33). But this temperature-energy example is not truly analogous to the updated mind-body argument. I'll point out the difference and explain why premise (2*) of the updated argument is true and does not beg the question.

The difference between the updated argument for dualism and Churchland's temperature analogy is that we have from Descartes a very good reason to believe (2*), but there is no such reason to believe premise (2) of the analogy. Average molecular kinetic energy is something that might seem like it would not be knowable by feel, but no argument has been made as to why it *can't* be known by feel. In contrast, there is an argument that tells us the body can never be

known by introspection. That is Descartes' persistent doubt. One can always doubt the existence of the body, since any visual or kinesthetic sensation could be an elaborate hallucination, dream, demonic influence, etc.

If we were to somehow scientifically learn that the mind is the body, we would only "know" that fact at the epistemic level where science takes place—where empirical measurements of the body are just assumed for practicality's sake to not be elaborate hallucinations, dreams, or demonic influence. No matter what we learn about the body, nothing can bring that learning to the higher epistemic plane where it can't be suspected of being some kind of dream. To put the same truth in another way, the body is uncertain from the perspective of mind, and there are no alternative perspectives from which the body might be known. Any perspective from which knowledge of the body might be sought would be a subjectivity, a mind. There is no knowledge, certainty, or doubt that is not within a mind, and the body is uncertain to mind, so there is no certainty of the body from any logically possible perspective. So premise (2*) is true. My brain states are not knowable by introspection.

Obviously, the temperature analogy lacks any such justification for its premise (2). So it isn't really analogous. Temperature and kinetic energy both begin and end in the empirical epistemic realm. Neither one is immune to doubt. By Cartesian standards, temperature and kinetic energy may be distinct, may be identical, or may not be properties of anything real at all. From the practical scientific perspective, temperature and kinetic energy are identical, though they were thought for some time to be distinct. But to work within the practical scientific perspective is to depart entirely from Descartes' method of doubt, which is where premise (2*) of the updated argument for dualism comes from.

Premise (2*) does not beg the question. It is itself the conclusion of a good argument. And (2*) would do a terrible job of begging the question, since it does not on its own imply that physicalism is false and mind-body dualism is true. Premise (1*) and Leibniz' Law are also required in order to reach that conclusion. Since these other elements of the argument are required, it is clear that (2*) is just doing the work of an ordinary premise; it is not begging the question. Proving the truth of (2*) is the main Cartesian innovation. That innovation is not touched by any analogy such as Churchland's, which does not prove the truth of its supposedly analogous premise in a comparable way. Premise (2*) does not beg the question, but if it did, that would be even worse for the physicalist, since (2*) is true. A true premise which begs the question would lead directly to the conclusion without even a need for the other elements of the argument.

Since (2*) is true, the updated argument for mind-body dualism is valid and sound, or at least it has not been shown to be otherwise.

References

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