The metaphysics of philosophy of mind: an overview

Philosophy of mind is a branch of metaphysics, and different theories in philosophy of mind disagree on metaphysical questions about what exists and its nature. Questions about what exists are questions about ontology. It is worth having a sense of the options in philosophy of mind and how they relate to each other at the most general level.

According to a traditional metaphysics, a substance is an entity, a thing, that does not depend on another entity for its continued existence. It has ‘ontological independence’. For example, this handout is a (physical) substance.

1. Substances are also understood by contrast with properties.
2. Substances are what possess properties. The chair (substance) is solid (property). Properties can’t exist without substances - they depend on substances to exist. Solidity depends on things being solid; the property ‘being 1 metre long’ depends on something being that long; and, Descartes claimed, thoughts can’t exist without a thinker.
3. Substances persist through changes in properties - something can change from being 1 metre long to being 1.1 metres long, e.g. by growing. Obviously, the property ‘being 1 metre long’ does not persist through this change. Or again, a thinker can think a series of thoughts - the thinker persists, the thoughts do not.

A central question in philosophy of mind is ‘is the mind a substance?’ Can your mind exist independently, or is it dependent on something else in order to exist? In particular, is your mind dependent on your body, perhaps especially your brain, in order to exist at all? Many people believe, and many religions teach, that your mind can exist after death, i.e. the death of your body. This can mean many things, which we can’t review here, but one common interpretation is that your mind is a separate substance from your body. If the mind is a substance, then the end of your body’s existence is not the end of your mind’s existence. The view that the mind and the body are separate substances is known as substance dualism. Substance dualism claims that there are two fundamental kinds of substance - mental and physical.

We can contrast substance dualism with idealism, the view that minds are the only kind of substance, and so whatever exists is either a mind or depends on a mind. However, the most popular alternative to dualism is the view that the only kind of substance is physical. This view is materialism (on one meaning of that word). According to materialism, everything that exists, including whatever is mental, is either a material thing or it is dependent on some material thing to exist. (An updated version of materialism is physicalism, which replaces ‘matter’ with ‘physical substance’ because recent physics has analysed matter as interchangeable with energy in various forms.)

The most natural development of materialism is to say that instead of talking
about ‘the mind’, it is more accurate to talk about mental properties. Mental properties include mental states, such as beliefs, and mental events, such as having a thought or feeling pain. If substance dualism is right, then mental properties are possessed by mental substances. However, according to materialism, mental properties are properties of a physical substance. You can think of the physical substance that has such properties as either the person or the brain.

Suppose materialism is true. Are mental properties (mental states and events) themselves types of physical property (physical states and events)? There are many different types of physical property, e.g. size, shape, motion, mass, various forms of energy, chemical properties such as molecular structure, biological properties such as genetic code, and many others. Are mental properties, such as thinking about snow or feeling sad, also physical properties? One might argue, for instance, that they are simply neurological properties, e.g. to think about snow just is for certain neurons to fire in one’s brain. This view is known as mind-brain type identity theory.

Alternatively, one might argue that mental properties are not physical properties and can’t even be understood or explained in terms of physical properties. (Neurons firing is just a physiological process, like food being digested. How can consciousness be neurons firing any more than it could be digestion?) Although mental properties are possessed by physical substances, they are completely different from any of the other properties physical substances possess. This view is property dualism - there is only one kind of substance but two radically different kinds of property.

A third understanding of mental properties claims that they should be understood in terms of behaviour and dispositions to behave. Wanting to go for a drive, feeling cross, thinking about your mother - these are each a matter of being disposed to behave in certain, perhaps highly complex, ways. This view is logical behaviourism.

But perhaps thinking of mental properties just in terms of behaviour is too restrictive. We can talk more broadly in terms of the contribution of mental properties to how the person (or brain) functions, including the interactions of mental properties with each other, such as how one thought leads to another, how desires lead to emotions and vice versa, as well as how any and all of these lead to behaviour. This view is functionalism.

There are various ways of interpreting functionalism and logical behaviourism which involve different metaphysics. As they are usually interpreted, functionalism and logical behaviourism lie ‘in between’ the claim that mental properties are just types of physical property (type identity theory) and the claim that mental properties can’t be explained or understood in terms of physical properties (property dualism). They are both forms of ‘non-reductive physicalism’.

There are many more options in the philosophy of mind, but we will discuss just one. This view, eliminative materialism, claims that, not only are there no mental substances, there are no mental properties either (as we usually think of them). This is very counter-intuitive - no such things as having a thought or feeling a pain?
As the examples so far indicate, many philosophers think that mental properties can be categorised in terms of ‘thought’ and ‘consciousness’. They pick out the two most important aspects of what we mean by ‘having a mind’. What distinguishes things that have minds (or mental properties) from things that don’t is that things with minds have a ‘point of view’, a ‘perspective’, on the world. Things with a point of view experience the world, there is a ‘subjectivity’ to their existence, they are not just objects. And this involves ideas of being conscious and of being able to experience and think about things, to have beliefs and desires.

So the question ‘how does the mind relate to the body?’ has two components: how do thoughts relate to the body? and how does consciousness relate to the body?

FLOWS CHART OF POSITIONS IN PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

Does more than one kind of substance exist?

- One kind of substance exists = monism
- Two kinds of substance exist = substance dualism

Only physical substance exists = materialism

Only mind exists = idealism

Do mental properties exist?

- Yes
- No = eliminative materialism

Are mental properties ontologically reducible to physical properties?

- No
- Yes = type identity theory

Are mental properties a completely new type of property that cannot be accounted for in terms of physical properties?
No = non-reductive physicalism  Yes = property dualism

Are mental properties to be understood in terms of behaviour?

No  Yes = logical behaviourism

Are mental properties to be understood in terms of functioning?

Yes = functionalism