Welcome to the second of our two lectures on Descartes' theory of mind and body, the theory that I've called mind/body dualism. Recall that the view is that the body is a physical substance very much like a machine and that the mind is a non-physical thinking substance that inhabits the body much in the way that a captain inhabits his ship or a pilot his plane, but in a much more intimate sort of relationship where mind and body are connected and where the mind is responsible for at least the voluntary motions of the body.

I said that Descartes had a number of reasons for holding this view. Indeed, there are many reasons for holding a view like this. There are traditional reasons that come from ancient religion and from theories of — spiritual theories, but Descartes' reasons for being a dualist come entirely or for the most part from his conceptions of science. I outlined what are two basic lines of argument that Descartes runs for dualism from a scientific perspective. The first has to do with the — making distinction between the basic properties of matter on the one hand and the basic properties of mind on the other. We discussed those arguments last time.

He also offers arguments that arise from the comparison of human beings with animals and with machines, and we'll be talking about those arguments this time. We also will be talking today about a second type of argument that Descartes offers for dualism. An argument that comes not so much from modern science, from considerations of science, but rather from considerations of the order in which we know things and how well we know things. That is, what things can we know with certainty and what things are subject to doubt. These I will refer to as the epistemological arguments for dualism, the word **epistemology** meaning the study of knowledge. We will get to those arguments towards the end of this lecture and with the end of this lecture we will finish our discussion of Descartes.

So let’s start off with Descartes’ arguments for dualism on the basis of
comparisons with animals and machines. Descartes, in his writings, expresses admiration for machines and mechanical devices that can engage in physical movements that are similar to those of a human being. There’s one anecdote that he mentions in which he talks about walking through gardens, presumably of royal palaces or the homes of rich landowners, in which there would be mechanical devices — imagine, if you will, statutes shaped sort of like human beings. Perhaps one with a set of pipes, another with a waving hand. And these machines would be triggered by one stepping on a plate in the ground. So you imagine you’re walking along on a path in a garden and your foot would come upon a plate in the grass that would trigger this mechanism that would cause a statue to swing around and wave its hand at you. Or would cause water to be pushed through a hollow statue holding pipes that would cause the pipes to play music. And Descartes was very impressed by this — by these very primitive early sorts of machines, and he was impressed because he thought that what they demonstrated was that much of our physical movements could be explained purely in mechanical terms. That is, in terms purely of the principles of cause and effect, the laws of cause and effect.

Descartes also — it also led Descartes to realize the extent to which animals are very much like human beings, at least in their bodily capacity. He observed that animals have bodies that are in many ways very similar to ours. I think if you reflect on this for a moment you’ll realize that this is obviously true in a certain sense. Most animals have arms and legs and torsos and heads and eyes and ears, and most animals share many of our internal organs: hearts, lungs, livers, skeletons, etc. Indeed, if you look at a human being purely from a physical mechanical standpoint and look at an animal from purely a physical mechanical standpoint — if you were, for example, to take a dog and a human being and open them up and look inside, you’d be as struck by the similarities between the two as the differences. And human beings
and animals have a large range of common capacities. There’s a large number of physical movements and physical processes that human beings and animals have in common.

So Descartes has this sort of working analogy in his mind. We have the human body, we have animals, and we have machines, all of which may share very common physical characteristics. And Descartes, in sort of a speculative mood, even imagines machines that are made to look exactly like human beings or animals. That is, a machine which would be fashioned with an exterior that would be visually indistinguishable from a human being or an animal and even an interior in terms of the organs — the internal organs, the musculature, the skeletal structure, etc. — he imagines absolute replicas, machine replicas of human beings and of animals. Which is — to just think about this for a moment — a rather remarkable thing to imagine in the 1600s when Descartes is writing. In this as in so many other things, Descartes is very much a man ahead of his time.

So Descartes has this working imagined idea of these machine replicas of animals and human beings and he makes the following point. It’s a point that’s going to lead him to the dualism that we’ve been talking about. Descartes says if you were to build a machine that was visually indistinguishable from, let’s say, a monkey and could perform all of the physical functions of a monkey — so, you know, imagine sort of like a wind-up machine or a machine with an internal engine — he says you would not be able to tell which one is the monkey and which one is the machine. In other words, the machine would be able to completely replicate the monkey’s functions to the extent to which you would not be able to tell which was which.

On the other hand, he said, if you were to build a machine that was a replica of a human being — that is, visually indistinguishable from a human being — Descartes says you would know right away or you would know very quickly which is the real...
human being and which is the machine. Because — and here’s the big because — the real human being would be capable of the original and authentic use of language whereas the machine would not. Let me give a little explanation as to what I mean by the authentic use of language, the original and authentic use of language.

Descartes doesn’t deny that you could make a machine that would utter sounds that sounded like words. Indeed, Descartes even can imagine — and this is truly remarkable because he’s here really imagining contemporary computer technology — he even can imagine a machine that is designed so as to produce sounds in the form of words in response to certain stimuli. So you can imagine a variation on the example I gave before of the moving statue that waves hi in the garden. You can imagine a statue that when you say hello, has a voice recognition box that causes it to say hello back.

What Descartes means by — what we mean by the original and genuine use of language is the ability not to utter sounds or to utter sounds that sound like words even in response to utterances directed toward the machine, but rather to respond appropriately to the things that are said to the machine and to be able to initiate coherent, cogent, appropriate conversation. This is something Descartes says a machine could never do.

So let’s come back to our example and look at it again as a whole. We have here three objects. We have a human body, a real human being; we have a machine; and we have a monkey. Actually, let’s elaborate a bit. Let’s make two machines, one that looks like a monkey and one that looks like a human being. All of these would be able to engage in a common range of physical motions. Let’s say all of them would be able to walk, all of them would be able to run, all of them would be able to sit, and so on and so forth. Thus, at that level you could not tell the machine apart from the human being or the human being apart from the machine, or the machine apart from the
monkey and vice-versa. And so what we’re imagining is that there’s a common set of physical motions which have an entirely bodily origin, which all of these objects would be able to engage in in common, and which would not be — which would not provide any way to differentiate them. But then we would find there is one capacity, one form of performance, that only the human being is capable of. That performance is real speech, real use of language. And Descartes thinks that this comparison provides a very important basis upon which to draw dualistic conclusions.

Let me for a moment stop and read to you the relevant quotations setting up this example from your readings. So Descartes here is talking about machines which are designed to look like animals and machines which are designed to look like human beings. I’m quoting. This is on page 34 of your readings.

If any such machines have the organs and outward shape of a monkey or some other animal that lacks reason, we should have no means of knowing that they did not possess the same nature as these animals. We’re asked if any such machines bear a resemblance to our bodies and imitated our actions. We would still have certain means of recognizing that they were not real men. They could never use words or put together other signs as we do in order to declare our thoughts. We can certainly conceive of a machine constructed to utter words and even one which utters words which correspond to bodily actions. But it is not conceivable that such a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in its presence.

Descartes thinks — and this comparison of machines with animals and with human beings — that there is inherent in this comparison an argument for the dualism of mind and body. I’m going to summarize the points of this argument in the form of two premises and a conclusion.
The first premise: Animals and machines have nearly identical bodies to human beings. They may share a number of abilities with human beings which are due to these common physical bodies. That’s the first premise.

The second premise: However, human beings have one ability which animals and machines lack, and that is language use. Language use requires thought.

Three, conclusion: Therefore, human beings must have a non-bodily element which is responsible for thought.

Now, let’s be clear about the reasoning here. What Descartes is saying is this. If human beings, animals, and machines can have nearly identical bodies, then it should follow that any bodily capacity that one has, the other should have. However, we find there is one capacity that human beings have that animals and machines do not have and that is language use. However, since human beings, animals, and machines may have identical bodies, it follows that the capacity to use language is not a bodily capacity. Descartes then infers that it must be a non-bodily capacity — that is, a capacity of a non-physical mind — and that indeed is the thesis of dualism.

It’s worth reading one more quotation where Descartes states this conclusion in very clear terms. This is on pages 36 and 37 of your readings. This is now where Descartes draws his conclusions about the different sources of thinking on the one hand and bodily movement on the other as lying in a mind on the one hand, a non-physical mind and a body on the other. Pages 36 and 37 of your readings.

There are two different principles causing our motions. [And by motions, he means both physical motions and the motions of our thoughts.] There are two different principles causing our motions. One is purely mechanical and corporeal and depends solely on the construction of our organs. The other is the incorporeal mind, the soul which I have defined as a thinking substance. So Descartes here has drawn the conclusion that mind and body must be separate
entities by way of this comparison of human beings and machines and animals.

And because one of the crucial skills that you develop in learning philosophy is the capacity to critically analyze arguments, I want to pause and talk a little bit — point out a few essential weaknesses in Descartes’ argument. Throughout the course I will from time to time — indeed, I will routinely engage in a critical analysis of the arguments that are presented for the various positions that we’ll learn in the course in an effort to help inculcate in you this sort of critical faculty and to get you thinking critically about the text that you read. So let me talk about a few weaknesses with respect to this argument — this argument for dualism from comparing human beings with animals and machines.

And I want to identify three kinds of weakness based on three different sets of assumptions. The argument, of course, assumes that animals don’t think. And indeed, from that assumption, it infers a non-physical basis for thought. So the idea is, “Look. Because human beings and animals have such similar bodies, if there’s something that human beings can do that animals cannot do, it must be because human beings have something that the animals don’t — i.e., a mind.” So the argument assumes a non-physical basis for thought.

The problem is that this only follows if one fails to recognize the crucial relevant bodily differences between animals and human beings. Of course, this is not something that Descartes would be in a position to recognize because the state of knowledge with respect to human and animal anatomy in Descartes’ time was rather meager. Of course, superficially a human being and a monkey look very similar and, indeed, even genetically we appear very similar, but there is one enormous physical difference between a human being and a monkey. That is, of course, in the brain. A human being’s brain is very different from a monkey’s.

And so the idea that you could somehow prove that thinking is an activity that
belongs to a non-physical mind on the basis of comparing animals and human beings and saying, “Look. They have the same bodies and yet the human can do something the animal can’t. Therefore, the human’s ability must come from some non-physical element.” That assumes a relevant similarity in the bodies of humans and animals which I don’t think can be assumed. Indeed, we know it cannot be assumed. We know that the reason that a human being can think in ways that a monkey cannot is because of the kind of brain that a human being has and, of course, the brain is a part of the physical body.

So one weakness of the argument is that it derives a non-physical basis for thought, the idea that thought has a non-physical basis, because of a failure to recognize what are real significant differences between the bodies of human beings and animals, that difference lying in the brain. This is one weakness in the argument.

Another weakness in the argument is notice it assumes that animals do not use language. Descartes offers some reasons for this. Descartes says, “Look. If animals were thinkers — that is, if animals really thought and had minds — then they should be able to talk. And if they’re able to talk, they should be able to figure out some way to talk to us.” Now, of course, this is a lot of ifs which we may not be able to cash in. Notice it also assumes that thought and mind are all or nothing. Either you’re thinking or you aren’t. Either you’re the kind of thing that has thoughts or you’re the kind of thing that’s simply a machine. It ignores the possibility that intelligence or thought may be matters of degree. That is, it may be that animals think but in a much diminished capacity to the way that human beings do, and perhaps at a level of capacity that makes whatever language they have incomprehensible to us.

But finally — and this is, I think, the most devastating problem with this argument — and it’s a problem again that — it’s not at all clear that Descartes could have anticipated, simply because of the state of knowledge of his day. Notice that it
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assumes that there are going to be external indicators of genuine thought. That is, that there’s always going to be external evidence, evidence observable from the outside, that someone or something else is thinking. Now, for Descartes this external evidence is language. So when I witness a creature or a thing employing language in a certain way, I can then infer that the thing thinks and therefore that the thing has a mind.

Of course, today we know that even like bodily movements language itself can be simulated, and can be simulated to a very high degree of sophistication. There are artificial intelligence programs now — and have been for some time — which can carry on conversations with a person, such that if the person could not see who they were talking to, would not necessarily be able to tell that they are not talking to a real human being.

There are, of course, artificial intelligence programs that can play chess, that can simulate chess playing at the level of a Grand Master. Indeed, such programs have actually defeated real chess Grand Masters and to the extent to which we think — we used to think that chess required thought and that the ability to play chess would be an indicator of thought. The fact that machines can now do it to a degree, can perform that task, to play that game as well as a human being, makes us wonder whether chess playing is any evidence at all that something is thinking. Similarly, we have to ask whether the fact that something can appear to use language properly is an indication of thinking. Indeed, this raises a more general question that’s a very difficult one. How does one really know if anyone or anything else is thinking? That is, if anything or anyone else has a mind?

Obviously, we have direct knowledge of our own thoughts in our own minds because we in a sense are in our own private room with our thoughts. Our self, the I that Descartes talks about, is inside our minds with our thoughts, and so we know our thoughts and we know about the existence of our mind by what I’ll call direct
acquaintance.

The question is how do we ever know that anybody else or anything else has a mind or has thoughts? Descartes proceeds on the assumption that there will always be some sort of external evidence, some sort of behavioral evidence, that will indicate whether something is thinking and he thinks that that external evidence is language use. But as we’ve seen, the fact that we now have today machines that can simulate language use not only calls to question whether language — the ability to use language is necessarily an indicator of thinking but whether there are any external indicators of thinking that cannot be simulated by a non-thinking machine or system.

Now, this gets really sort of deep and difficult if you start thinking about it and pushing it a little further. Many of the people who have worked in artificial intelligence, and especially the people whose work in artificial intelligence is connected to work in psychology, many of them would want to say, “Look. The fact that this machine that we’ve programmed can carry on a conversation with you proves that it is thinking.” Indeed, they go so far as to say the fact that the machine can engage in this activity, can engage in the genuine use of language, shows that it’s thinking and shows that the way that it performs this task — and the computers, of course, perform the task by way of computations — that this sheds light on the way that humans perform the task. Such thoughts have led to what’s called the computational theory of mind, the theory that what thinking is is a form of computation.

This takes us beyond the scope of this lecture and certainly beyond the scope of an introductory level course, but what I’d like to leave you with just on this point before we move on to the next one is this idea that it may not be possible to tell that something else is thinking. There may be no external evidence that someone or something else has a mind. That is, external evidence: some sort of performance or ability that could not be simulated by a non-thinking thing. This general problem of how we know
whether something else is thinking or whether someone else has a mind is known in the literature as the problem of other minds. Failure to be able to solve this problem has led some philosophers to the position that’s called solipsism. Solipsism is the view that I am the only thinking thing that exists. Solipsism is the view that because I cannot know whether anyone else thinks or has a mind, I can only know that I have a mind, and that the rational conclusion to draw is that I am the only thinking thing. We will obviously not solve this problem in the class, but it’s important that you see where arguments lead and where difficulties with arguments arise.

So we’ve discussed now two scientific arguments for dualism. In the last lecture we talked about what I call arguments from the nature of matter. Today we talked about arguments that involve the comparison with animals and machines. In both cases we find that Descartes’ arguments for dualism are based to a large extent on dated scientific notions. That is, on scientific ideas that have since Descartes’ day been overturned. This is not a fault of Desca rtes’ work. Indeed, this is always going to be true. To the extent to which our views today are based on current scientific understanding, they may in several centuries — undoubtedly in several centuries they will also be revealed to be dated. There is a value in studying these arguments, even though they are dated, because it is important to see evolution of thought within our civilization and to see how one idea secedes another, and how one whole way of thinking follows from another.

The second sort of line of argument that Descartes runs in order to prove the dualism of mind and body — that is, a line of argument other than these sort of scientific arguments — is what I’m calling the epistemological argument for dualism. It’s an argument that proceeds from certain other arguments about what we can know, what we can’t know. What we can know with certainty and what will always be subject to doubt. And so I’m going to give a little overview of that argument — of that line of
argument and then I’ll wrap up this lecture with some general discussion of some
difficulties with dualism.

Now, in the next part of the course we are going to talk more in more detail about
theories of knowledge and about the general state of human knowledge — how it’s
acquired, what sort of levels of certainty, different types of knowledge have sort of come
with them.  So I don’t want to front-load too much of the course now.  To the extent to
which Descartes’ arguments here for dualism rely upon some of these epistemological
ideas, I’m going to have to sketch them.  But I’m only going to provide a sketch.  My
main focus here is going to be on the way that these epistemological considerations
lead Descartes to dualistic conclusions.

In the Meditations on First Philosophy, which is probably Descartes’ most famous
book, Descartes begins by going through a process of systematically doubting
everything he believes.  He’s trying to test the strength of his beliefs to see how —
which of his beliefs can withstand scrutiny and how much.  And he does this for a
certain reason which I’m not gonna talk about now because it’s not directly relevant to
this part of the course.  But we will return to it in later parts of the course.

So Descartes goes through this process of systematically doubting everything he
believes.  One of the things he concludes is that he can doubt anything that he believes
on the basis of his senses.  That is, any belief which comes from either something we
see, something we touch, something we hear, something we smell, something we taste
— any belief that has the senses as its source can be subjected to doubt.  And he has
two reasons for thinking this.  The first is a very simple reason, a very obvious sort of
reason, and that is he says, “Look.  Our senses are not always reliable.  Oftentimes
our senses misrepresent how things actually are.”

The obvious examples are optical illusions.  If you stand on a very tall building or
if you stand at a very great distance, things will seem smaller than they actually are.
And so if you were to form beliefs, let's say, on the — let's say you were to form beliefs about how tall someone is. On the basis simply of your seeing them from a distance, you would come to a false belief. Your eyes would mislead you. Indeed, let me point out that so routine is this kind of misapprehension on the basis of the senses, this kind of misleading quality of the senses, so routine is this that we post reminders to ourselves to that effect. If you look on the right side mirror of your car, you'll notice it says on the right side mirror “Things are closer than they appear” or “Objects are closer than they appear.” Because, of course, the right side mirror distorts the rear view and makes cars look like they’re further behind you than they actually are. Now, the fact that this warning is printed on every single right-side mirror indicates the extent to which we recognize that our senses are routinely unreliable and routinely have to be corrected.

And so Descartes makes a very simple point but at the same time a very compelling point. He says, “Look. Any belief that you have on the basis of your senses is at least subject to some doubt, on the simple grounds that your senses are not always reliable.” Notice this does not mean that these beliefs are false. It simply means that they can be doubted. It means that they might be false.

Now, the second argument he makes here for the fact that belief based on our senses can be doubted is not as commonsensical but it’s even more devastating. Descartes points out that we spend a good portion of our lives asleep and we spend a good portion of the time that we are asleep dreaming. He observes that we can have experiences while dreaming that are indistinguishable from experiences while being awake. In other words, sure, a lot of times our dreams are sort of crazy, wild, far-out, and bear no resemblance to real life. But a lot of times our dreams are ordinary, mundane, common — I mean, I'm sure everybody in the audience has, for example, dreamt that they were at work or dreamt that they were sitting, reading a book, or
dreamt that they were out playing with their kids.

And the point that Descartes makes is this. He says, “Look. If it is possible while dreaming to have identical experiences to those that we have while awake, how do we ever know at any given time that we are not dreaming but that we are awake?” Any evidence that you might bring to claim — “No, no, no, I’m not asleep. I’m awake. I’m not dreaming; I’m awake” — could be part of a dream. In short, if I’m gonna try and prove to you — prove right now that I’m not dreaming but rather awake, that I’m not dreaming that I’m giving this lecture but rather that I’m really giving it, how would I go about proving that? I couldn’t say, “Well, I know I’m really giving the lecture because I can hear my voice.” Because of course you can hear things in a dream. I couldn’t say, “Well, I know I’m giving the lecture and not dreaming it because I can feel the podium.” Because you can feel things in your dreams.

Descartes draws the very radical conclusion that there is no way in principle to tell that one is not dreaming but rather awake. And again, the point is not to say that we really are dreaming or to say that we don’t know any of the things that we know. Rather, the point is to say there are at least some doubts — we can raise doubts about the things that we think we know. I think that I know that I’m standing here giving this speech, but it is indeed possible that I’m not standing here at all. It is indeed possible that I’m lying in bed, dreaming that I’m giving a speech.

Okay. Now, what does all of this have to do with mind/body dualism? I’m glad that you asked. On what basis does any person believe that he or she has a body? I know that this sounds weird. But what is my basis for believing that I have an arm? Or my basis for believing that I have a stomach, ample as it is? The basis, of course, is my senses. The reason I believe I have an arm is because I can see my arm, I can feel my arm, I can smell my arm. But, now, isn’t it possible that I don’t really have an arm at all? Isn’t it possible that I have no body at all? Isn’t it possible that I am merely
a thinking entity living in a perpetual dream, and in that dream I have a body and live in a physical world and go to work and give lectures, and so on and so forth. Again, Descartes is not making the foolish point that we should think that that is the case. His point merely is it could be the case. And because it could be the case, there is at least some reason to doubt that I have a body.

However, Descartes also realizes that there’s one thing that he cannot doubt on any grounds and that is that he is thinking. He may be able to doubt that he has an arm because he might be dreaming it. But could he doubt that he’s thinking on that basis? How would one doubt that one was thinking? I currently doubt that I am thinking. Well, if I doubt it, then I’m doing it, aren’t I? After all, to doubt is to think. I would submit to you and Descartes says that one cannot doubt that one is thinking because to doubt is to think. And Descartes concludes that what this shows is that the belief that I am currently thinking is necessarily true but the belief that I have a body is only contingently true. That is, it might be false. And Descartes thinks that some very important conclusions can be drawn from this.

Let me read you the relevant quotations. Page 21 in your readings. “I have convinced myself that there is nothing in the world — no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies.” He’s convinced himself of this because he’s — he’s said to himself, “Well, I could be dreaming them.” Or even worse, he also imagines a kind of science-fictiony possibility of being deceived by what he calls an evil genius, sort of a matrix type situation in which everything that you believe is true is actually simply being fed into your mind by a machine that you’re hooked up to, vis-a-vis wires and such.

So he says,

I’ve convinced myself that there is nothing in the world — no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies. Does it now follow that I, too, do not exist? No. If I convinced myself of something, then I certainly existed. But there is a deceiver
of supreme power and cunning who is deceiving me. In that case, too, I undoubtedly exist if he is deceiving me. He will never bring it about that I am nothing so long as I think that I am something. So I must finally conclude that the proposition “I am, I exist” is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.

In other words, to use our matrix example, it’s possible — the machine, the matrix can convince Neal, the Keanu Reeves character, that he lives in a city when he really doesn’t. He’s really lying in one of these sort of jelly packs and they’re simply broadcasting into his mind the impression that he lives in the city. So he could be wrong about the belief that, quote, “I live in the city.” But could he be wrong about the belief, quote, “that I am currently thinking”? Of course not. For even if the machine is feeding him images, he’d have to be thinking them. In other words, the fact that the machine is deceiving him proves that he exists as a thinking thing.

And that’s why — I mean, you’ve probably heard the famous Descartes quote, “I think; therefore, I am” and that’s in a sense what Descartes is saying here. He’s saying that thought necessarily exists because simply to do it is to do it. You can’t be tricked that you’re doing it because to be tricked is to do it. That thought necessarily exists wherever it is present and that if thought exists, then the thinker exists — that is, the mind that thinks exists. That’s why he concludes that — the quotation I just read you — with the statement that “the proposition I am, I exist, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.”

Let me just mention one weakness about this argument and then I will draw some final conclusions about dualism in general. The argument shows only that mental existence is necessary while bodily existence is contingent. It does not show that bodies do not exist or that minds are non-physical entities. Descartes wants to say something like this. He wants to say, “Look. My body might not exist at all. I might
just be a floating consciousness, living in a perpetual dream. My thought, however, must exist. The fact that I’m thinking is necessarily true. And thus, I might exist without my body. Therefore, I must simply be a thinking thing, a non-physical mind, a thinking entity, as opposed to the body which is a physical entity.”

But notice the argument doesn’t really show that at all. It simply shows that the belief in the existence of my body and the belief in the existence of my mind have different standings. That is, that one is more certain than the other. It doesn’t prove anything about what the body is actually made of. It doesn’t prove anything about what the mind is actually made out of. It could be true that I might not have a body, that it’s possible that I don’t have a body, but that it’s necessary that I have a mind and still also be the case that the mind and the body — that the mind is part of the body.

So I just simply don’t think that what Descartes thinks follows from his argument here really does. At most he’s shown that the belief in one’s mental existence and the belief in one’s bodily existence have different statuses as beliefs. That one is more certain than the other. He certainly has not proven that the mind and the body are separate or that the mind is a non-physical entity, despite the fact that he thinks he has.

Let me talk in general about a few difficulties with dualism, general difficulties with dualism. The view is no longer widely held. Indeed, it’s really no longer a viable view — at least in secular thought. To the extent to which people are dualists, they tend to be dualists with respect to soul and body which, as we discussed earlier, is not an exact — does not map on exactly to Descartes’ notion of the dualism of mind and body but it’s pretty close.

But really the only remaining dualism today are in the religious sphere and, of course, religious belief has a very different sort of basis than philosophical or scientific belief. And so the fact that — in other words, one might believe in dualism as a matter of religious belief while at the same time not be a dualist about mind and body as a
scientific matter, as a matter of fact about the nature of the human being.

The reason why dualism has really been sort of discarded from modern secular thought — there are several reasons. First, if dualism is true, then there’s a fundamental mystery about how mind and body interact. We understand perfectly well what it means to say that A causes B where A and B are both physical events. So when I say that the cue ball hitting the eightball caused the eightball to go into the corner pocket, we all understand what conception of causality we’re working with. We all understand what we mean when we say that the first made the second happen or the first caused the second to happen.

But it’s very difficult to see or to understand what such talk means when the cause is a non-physical thing and the effect is a physical thing. In other words, to say that a non-physical mind causes a physical body to do something, I would submit, is a fundamentally mysterious thing to say in that we’re not sure what it means. How could a non-physical thing cause a physical thing to do anything? When I teach this course in a classroom setting, I often like to give my students the example. I say, “Imagine a ghost trying to drive a bus. How could a ghost drive a bus? If a ghost is a non-corporeal, non-physical entity, how could it hold on to the wheel? How could it push down the gas? How could it sit on the seat?”

I always think that one of the silliest things about ghost movies is that the ghosts don’t simply sort of dissipate through the walls and through the ground. What’s sort of keeping them in their place if they’re really non-physical entities? What is it that keeps them bound to the spot that they’re on? And so any talk of mental/physical causality on a dualistic view can only be metaphorical. Which is fine, so long as we’re simply engaging in ordinary speech — you know, sort of common discourse. But the minute that the view sort of is taken seriously — for example, in a psychological context where we really need to talk about the causes of behavior, the mental causes of behavior — a
dualistic view in a sense renders any such talk impossible. Or at least renders such talk so mysterious as making it without basis.

A second and related problem is that on the dualistic view the mind and its thoughts are not directly observable. In other words, if the mind is a non-physical entity, then by definition it cannot be observed. It cannot be perceived. Only a physical thing can be perceived. Well, the question then arises, “Well, how do we know anything about the mind? How do we know anything about thoughts?” Again, this is not a problem necessarily just sort of in our ordinary daily lives. We infer other people’s thoughts on the basis of their behavior. We don’t generally take into account these sort of problems like the problem of other minds in ordinary speech nor should we. It is always a misuse of philosophy to sort of bring these kinds of skeptical arguments to bear in ordinary context, in ordinary conversation. The points of these sort of skeptical arguments is to test the limits of what we know, not to cast doubt on our ordinary daily knowledge practices, if you want to call them that, in our ordinary daily speech.

But the unobservability of the mind becomes a real problem again once we’re bringing the discussion to a more serious, scientific context. I mean, one of the basic principles of science is to identify general laws of cause and effect, general laws relating causes to effects. That requires that both the causes and the effects be observable. Now, if one is a dualist, then the mental causes of behavior are always going to be unobservable in principle. This again will make any sort of scientific psychology impossible.

So both of these problems — the problem of mental/physical causality, this idea of how does a non-physical mind interact with a physical body, and this problem of the unobservability of the mind on the dualistic view make for serious problems in any scientific approach to psychology. And, of course, as we’ve already seen, if the mind is
a non-physical thinking substance and cannot be observed directly, then we have no choice but to infer minds and thoughts from external behavior and we’ve seen that there the other mind’s problem arises.

Okay. Next time we’re gonna begin talking about John Locke’s theory of personhood and personal identity. I know that we’ve covered a lot of material and I know that it may seem like it was kind of — we’ve covered it kind of quickly. First of all, in an introductory level course, we want to give a general survey or overview of views. We don’t want to necessarily go too deeply into any one view. That’s something that we’ll do in an upper level course. But secondly, one of the advantages of this format, I think, is that you can listen to the lecture again. And so it cuts down the need on a lot of repetition on my part. And so rather than repeat myself and reiterate things like I might do in an ordinary classroom, I’m going to assume that you can play the lecture again and play parts of it again if you want to remind yourself of certain arguments.

So I’m gonna move on to our next philosopher which, as I said, is John Locke. Next time we’re gonna talk about John Locke’s theory of personhood and personal identity. Totally different from Descartes. Totally different focus. And here’s two things to think about while you’re reading — and again, they’re gonna sound strange until you actually do the reading and get yourself in the mindset that Locke is in.

But here are the two questions I’d like you to think about while you’re doing your reading. First, how is it possible for something to change and yet retain its identity? That is, is there another fundamental puzzle about saying that X has changed and yet is still X? Second question — and this is gonna sound really strange without the context — what is the relative essential difference between a pile of dog parts and a dog? So imagine the dog and now imagine the parts of the dog — every single piece, every hair, every bone, every muscle, but in a pile. The question that I’m asking you to think about is what is the relative difference between the dog and the pile of its parts? This is
going to be a crucial point with respect to understanding how Locke conceives of identity, of this sort of spectrum of identity conditions that Locke is going to talk about. How different things at different levels of description have different principles of identity. So that’s what we’ll be talking about next time and I thank you very much.