

## **Commonsense Dualism**

### **Abstract**

In this paper we present the notion of commonsense dualism as introduced by Bloom and examine some of the empirical and theoretical issues it raises.

### **1 The notion of commonsense dualism**

According to Bloom (2004), the idea that we have souls distinct from material bodies is not just a possible philosophical position but a widespread attitude in everyday life which reflects deep-seated human intuitions about what the world is like.

He suggests that this tendency to separate body and soul is manifested in various ways. For instance, in language we refer to our body and its parts - my body, my heart - not only to pick them out, but more as if there was some further entity to whom they belong which cannot be identified with any of these parts. Similarly, the fact that we are able to think of the same person across bodily changes, or conceive of many people in one body, suggests that we separate our notion of personal identity from material form. This kind of dualism is also evident in religion as in moral thought, where questions are raised about when an object counts as possessing a soul.

### **2 Commonsense dualism and commonsense theories**

It is widely recognised that humans' everyday expectations about the world - in the areas at least of physics, psychology and biology - are guided by specific bodies of knowledge which are to some extent innately determined, tend to mature (excepting pathology) according to identifiable developmental stages, in ways which are predictable and relatively stable across individuals and cultures on the basis of exposure to certain kinds of experience (see e.g. Hirschfield & Gelman 1994, Medin & Atran 1998, Malle, Moses & Baldwin 2001). So we might ask, what is the relation between commonsense dualism and other areas of core commonsense knowledge?

We doubt that commonsense dualism is a commonsense 'theory' on a par with those which equip us with our ordinary understanding of the world. The relation between minds and bodies would seem a strange domain in which to be equipped with specific ideas. However, it may be that the existence of commonsense dualism is the inevitable result of the interaction of other commonsense ideas and requires some conscious effort to be overcome.

### 3 From anecdotal material to empirical evidence

So far, the claims about commonsense dualism have been illustrated by appeal to intuition. In this part of the paper we will present some further evidence and consider how to test it.

#### 3.1 *Establishing the claim*

Do people really disconnect minds and bodies? It certainly seems to be the case that children need to be taught that the brain is responsible for their mental life, both thinking and feeling. But this is perhaps unsurprising; to claim that we are commonsense dualists simply because we fail to make that connection on our own would seem unfair.

However, according to Bloom, even once children understand the relevance of the brain, they interpret its role in a particular way. Specifically, they see the brain as responsible for more intellectual or automatic cognitive processes like those involved in thinking and teeth-brushing, but not for things like dreaming, pretending or loving. He also suggests that there is an early emergence in children of the idea that a body can die while a mind continues to exist. While these results have not been tested on a large sample size, it is relatively easy to see how they could be so tested by posing similar questions to children of different ages and cultures.

#### 3.2 *Testing the claim*

What are the consequences of commonsense dualism? Bloom suggests that babies are “either/or”, that is, that they take the things they encounter to be either a person or a material object, and on this basis they have different expectations about them. If we assume that children are commonsense dualists, as Bloom does, we can make two kinds of empirical prediction, which we will consider in turn:

P1: children would not be surprised by people not obeying physical laws

P2: children would be surprised by material objects behaving intentionally

Concerning P1, Bloom’s suggestion for an experiment was that children would not be surprised to see someone walking through a wall. While it is entirely an empirical question, we have doubts that children would not be troubled in such extreme cases. However, we would like to point out that there are many ways in which something might not obey physical laws - for instance, levitating, flying, disappearing. And we think it would be interesting to explore in which of these cases children are surprised or not. In cases where they are not surprised we could infer that they are attributing something immaterial to whatever was behaving strangely, and in this way are dualist about it.

Concerning P2, Bloom’s suggestion for an experiment was to put a child in a room with a talking table. Again, we would point out that there are various ways for something to behave intentionally and we suggest that talking is perhaps a very strong cue. It would be interesting to discover under what other conditions surprise arises - for instance, non-linguistic sounds, reactive behaviour or indeed any kind of movement. A further issue is whether any surprise elicited in these cases is due to attribution of intentionality or just general recognition of an expectation not having been satisfied.

## 4 Conclusions

We have argued that in everyday thinking there is a tendency to separate our thoughts about minds from our thoughts about bodies. However, a lot of work remains to be done to establish exactly at what point, for what reasons and to what extent this tendency arises. We have made some suggestions about how to take forward this investigation.

Furthermore, we expect that commonsense dualistic assumptions persist beyond childhood and would like to test adults as well to confirm this prediction. If commonsense dualism is a perspective we find hard to abandon, it may have important theoretical repercussions. It could explain why we are able to reconcile our everyday conception of the environment with what science tells us about the physical world whereas we are much more reluctant to do so in the case of the mind.

## References

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