

The Illusory Nature of the So-Called Objective World

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Abstract: This paper investigates the human perception of the world around us and the way we perceive and experience it. Driven by curiosity about the “real world,” and if it truly exists, our senses as a way of interpreting the real world are explored. I also analyze theories about this topic presented by Rene Descartes and British empiricists: John Locke, David Hume and Bishop Berkeley, while ultimately disproving certain aspects of them. In this quest of exploring reality, ideas like the mind, primary and secondary qualities and subjective sense experiences are addressed. I ultimately argue that there is no way of knowing if the real world exists, because we can only know what we experience. Furthermore, if the real world did exist, it would by definition not be as it appears to us, because our senses can only interpret the real world-not perceive it as it truly is.

In the practice of being skeptical of all widely held beliefs, philosophers began to question the concept of reality. They became interested in the relationship between the mind, what we experience and the physical world. This type of skepticism led philosophers to question if what we experience through our senses is what the physical world is really like, or are we victims of our subjective illusions while assuming that our perception is coherent with the real world. The main philosophers who were concerned with these ideas were British empiricists John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume. Exploring their theories will lead us to conclude that we cannot prove that there is a real world, but if we could, it would by definition be different than it appears to be.

One of the first philosophers whose theories touched on the subject of the real world and our experience of it was Rene Descartes. Descartes was a 17th century philosopher who was interested in experience, existence and knowledge. Searching for absolutely certain knowledge, he wanted to know if the physical world really exists or if it is just an illusion. He concluded that the only undoubted fact that always had to be true was that one truly exists. In order to think about existence, one must exist: “I think therefore I am.” Moreover, Descartes realized that the only way we can know if the physical world is an illusion or not is by our senses. However, our senses cannot be trusted since they can be deceiving; we can never know what the real world is like. An

example he gave was looking at a wooden stick in water. To a naked eye it appears bent, but if we feel it with our hands it feels straight, meaning our senses can be unreliable and contradicting. We cannot trust them since there is no way we could know when they are deceiving us and when they are not. In other words, we can never know if what we are experiencing is true. Another concept that Descartes had about the physical world was the real versus the apparent world. In his theory, the real world was what he referred to as the mind, while the apparent was what he referred to as the world (Husserl 21). In my opinion, the problem with this theory is that he referred to the mind as a material thing. Thus, an object that is experienced must be either in the mind or in the world. If it was in the world, we would not be aware of it. Also, it is in the view of phenomenologists that since the mind cannot be experienced sensorially, it cannot be referred to as a material object or place; we can only experience consciousness or awareness which is immaterial (Glynn, “European Philosophy and the Human and Social Sciences” 110). If we take a chair as an example, we do not experience the chair, but its constantly changing appearances. Meaning, since all we can know is what we experience, we do not know what the real world is like.

When it comes to ideas such as knowledge and experience of the physical world, British empiricists were the leading philosophers in this field. John Locke, a 17th century English philosopher,

was a pioneer of empiricism, a theory in philosophy that argues that all knowledge is acquired through sense experience. Locke believed that all of our knowledge comes from the process of reflecting on our senses, which he called experience (Locke). He suggested that we cannot have any knowledge independent from our sense experiences. Building on this theory, Locke also concluded that we experience properties of our environment. He defined substance as that which has properties. He also believed that we do not see the actual substance, but we experience its properties, which are not independent from our experience. The problem with Locke's theory is his conviction that properties come from the real world. In reality, we can never know where these properties come from because we are not able to perceive objects outside of our own experience. Trying to distinguish the real world and our experience of it, Locke developed a theory that included concepts of primary and secondary qualities. The primary qualities included actual properties of an object, or the objective reality, which in essence represented matter. Thus, primary qualities consist of mass, number, extension and shape (Locke). Since we can measure these quantitative properties, Locke suggested these qualities are the only properties we can be certain of. However, since all properties are relative to observation they appear to be secondary. This concludes that Locke's theory is wrong. When taking an elevator, we feel lighter while going down and heavier while going up. This example proves that primary qualities are also entirely subjective, and not objective as Locke theorized. Meaning, all properties are secondary. On the other hand, secondary qualities represent the power of the object to produce ideas in us, or subjective appearances. The properties included in these qualities are color, smell, sound and taste (Locke 30). Locke believed that secondary qualities are subjective. He also believed that colors do not exist in reality. Instead, he thought they are interpretations of light that are reflected by an object. Since light consists of wavelengths it has no colors, meaning that our eyes create them. This idea essentially makes colors a subjective by-product of interaction between light, objects and perceptual organs. It is the same with sound. Sound waves travel through a medium, which are interpreted by our ears and then manifested as sound in our minds. As a result, if there

are no ears to interpret the sound waves, there is no sound. The real world reflects the sound of silence, which means that sound, just like color, is a subjective illusion. Furthermore, smell and taste are also our interpretations of the physical world through our senses. For example, if we blindfolded someone, put a slice of an apple under their nose and then fed them a slice of a pear, he/she would experience the taste of an apple. In conclusion, everything that we experience through our senses can be labeled as a subjective illusion.

George Berkeley represents the second wave of empiricism and is most known for challenging John Locke's theories. He did not agree with Locke that there are primary and secondary qualities, but he thought that all properties are subjective, and in other words, secondary (Berkeley). In other words, he thought that even primary qualities are experienced subjectively, and that they only exist in our experiences- not the "real world." For Berkeley, all sensations are included in ideas, which are mind dependent (Berkeley). Since we all have separate subjective experiences, in the absence of God who experiences everything, we do not know if these experiences of the world exist independently of our experience. Berkeley backs up his theory by claiming that we either experience something or we don't; we are not aware of something that we do not experience. An example that he used to justify his theory is putting a cold and a warm hand into water at room temperature. The water will feel cold to one hand and warm to the other. Without God, he claims that heat and cold are only sensations that exist in our minds (Berkeley). Even though he hypothesized that all these experiences happen in our mind, he did not believe that the mind is in our head. Essentially, he believed in awareness but did not know how to describe it properly.

Building on his empirical theories Berkeley concluded that what we experience is a series of ideas instead of independently existing objects. He concluded that objects need to be perceived in order to exist: to be is to be perceived (Berkeley). This brings up a conflict that questions what happens to objects that are not being perceived by anybody. When one leaves their car at the parking garage, there is hope that the vehicle will be there upon their return. In the meantime, we

assume that it still exists while we are not perceiving it. However, we can never be certain that our car is really there, because we are not experiencing it while we are away from it. This type of thinking resulted in Berkeley's conclusion that there must be somebody who perceives that object while everyone else is away. Objects cannot just disappear and appear again when we return, so for Berkeley, that somebody is God (Berkeley). Since God is the only one who can perceive the whole physical world at the same time, he is making sure that objects do not disappear while we are away from them. The problem with this part of his theory is that Berkeley uses the less probable, the existence of God, to prove the more probable existence of the real world. Individuals can perceive the world and make assumptions about if what we are experiencing is real or not, making its existence very probable. However, since we cannot perceive God, we cannot experience him. This conclusion puts God's existence into question, making him the less probable to exist compared to the existence of objects in the world, which are more probable to exist.

The last of the British empiricism legacy of philosophers was David Hume. His theory built on both Locke's and Berkeley's conclusions making it the closest one to the truth according to modern empiricists. Hume believed that we do not experience reality, but appearances instead. He thought that even motion and extensions are appearances, and that appearances are ultimately subjective (Hume). In order to prove his theory he used an example of three different people watching the same train in motion. One person is watching the train as it is becoming smaller while it is going away from him/her. For the person that is actually on the train, it stays the same in size. Since the train is approaching the last person, to him/her it appears that the train is getting bigger. This example proves that we only experience appearances, which are created in our mind by interpretations of the real world through our senses. The train is actually in the real world, but we are only experiencing its appearance, which is created in our mind.

In terms of the real world, Hume divided reality into subjective and objective reality. According to him, subjective reality is always interrupted, changing and different from different angles. On

the other hand, the objective reality is always uninterrupted, relatively unchanging and the same. The objective reality serves as the definition for the real world. The midline between subjective and objective reality is experience, which represents similarity, continuity and unity (Glynn). Hume hypothesized that the reason we believe that the real world exists is that there must be something that is causing our experiences. However, the problem with his theory is that he uses causality to back it up (Hume). Causality implies that the relation between two events is linked by the cause, and a physical consequence of the first event called the effect. This theory has been disproved by the example of throwing a rock at a window. If somebody throws a rock at a window and the window breaks, it makes sense to us that the rock is the cause of the broken window. However, correlation does not imply causation. Correlation is something that is made up in our mind, because there could also be a case when the window does not break when we throw a rock at it. Internal conflicts like these disprove the theory of causality. As a result, we cannot know if the real world is truly causing our experiences or not. Therefore, we cannot know if there is a real world at all.

In conclusion, the examples above have established that we cannot know if there is a real world; we can only know what we are experiencing. What we are experiencing are appearances of the objects that are in the real world. However, the appearances that we are constantly experiencing are subjective, and do not tell us anything objective about the world as such. Moreover, the real world is by definition constant and uninterrupted, while appearances are continuously changing, different and interrupted. Even if there is a real world, it cannot by definition be as it appears to us.

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