

Existence of the External World

Mediators - Collin and Matt

Rene Descartes - Chris

David Hume - Victoria

George Berkeley - Patrick

John Locke - Josh

Collin: Thank you all for coming to today's panel discussing the existence of the external world. With us to discuss their philosophies on the matter are four esteemed philosophers: Rene Descartes, David Hume, George Berkeley, and John Locke. My name is Collin and this is Matt and we will be the moderators for today's talk. To start off, let's get all of our panelists' personal philosophies on the existence of the world. Mr. Berkeley, can we start with you?

Question 1 [EVERYONE]: In a brief overview, what are your thoughts on the reality or the possibility of the external world?

Berkeley: The existence of an idea consists in its being perceived. All knowledge comes from sense experience and we are only able to perceive our own sensations. Despite our best efforts, we cannot abstract material objects from these ideas; therefore we cannot abstract anything beyond an external world. We know only our sensations; we have no sense of what is causing them except for our perception of God. God would not waste His time creating material things.

Matt: So essentially you're saying that no external objects or matter lie beyond our very sensations, and that these sensations alone do not constitute anything "material"? OK, thank you George. Next we'll hear from Descartes:

Descartes: The external world must exist. We know that we are not in a constant state of dreaming since we can see that dreams are never joined by memory with other actions of life. We also know that God is not a deceiver since God is perfect in all respects. Since we can at the very least seem to sense objects, and God is not a deceiver, material things exist as objects of pure mathematics. Thus, matter is the extension of pure mathematics.

Collin: So you deduce that, if we accept an omnipresent God, that he would not try and trick us into simply seeing the illusion of an external world, and therefore the one we see and perceive exists? We might just not perceive it perfectly. Alright, next up is Locke:

Locke: I believe in the existence of an external world that we can come to understand through experience. Since there is no such thing as innate knowledge, everything we have come to learn must be derived from the senses. Although our senses may sometimes mislead us, we must not

completely disregard them, but instead be aware of the primary-secondary distinction. Secondary qualities, like color, taste, and smell, are entirely dependent on our senses, and possess no physical reality in the external world. However, there are certain qualities which do not rely on sensory perception. These primary qualities, such as extension, motion, and number, are present in external objects regardless of whether we are using our senses to observe them. This suggests the existence of an external world which is independent of our perceptions.

Matt: You seem to take a more empirical approach to rationalizing the existing of the external world, not feeling the need to doubt something so basic as our own existence within a world at all. And yet still understanding that the traits of an object required by our senses are not necessarily innate to the object. Lastly, we'll hear from Hume:

Hume: And you've saved the best for last. It is only human for us to think that there is a world outside of our lives, a world that exists independently from us and would exist even if we were not alive. External objects are simply the manifestation of our conscious thought and activity, and the impressions we have. Impressions are the direct products of our immediate experiences while ideas are simply copies of these original impressions. "Our consciousness presents us with a reality that seems coherent and predictable." I'm highly skeptical of not just the laws of science but the very claim that our impressions and experiences necessitate the existence of an external world.

Collin: In other words, you're saying that our consciousness determines our exterior environment, so you're skeptical specifically of Descartes's and Locke's certainty in the existence of an external world. Great. Moving on, we'll get into some more specifics about how we perceive our external world, if there is one. Mr. Hume, what determines our sense experience of the external world?

Question 2: What determines our sense experience of the external world?

Hume: We all believe in cause-and-effect relationships and base our assumptions on the nature of things on our past interactions and understandings of them. Principles of the past tell us how an object will act in the present and future. However, there is no certainty or necessary condition in which an object must follow its past properties. Therefore, our conception of cause-effect relations are not based on the causal forces of the external world, but our habits of thinking. We have a common belief in the continued existence of objects because of the resemblance between our ideas. Knowledge is limited to sense-experience - our impressions and ideas provide the basis for knowing the reasonings behind things. When I'm holding a ball, I will expect it to fall if I let it go. I know this from past experience and my understanding of the laws of gravity.

Matt: So our sense experience of the world is constantly filtered and structured by our past experiences, and what these allow us to expect and perceive from the world?

Descartes: The body is separate from the mind, and because the body must have some method to transmit detected sense experience to the mind, that method is prone to imperfections and error. We can say nothing about things based on sense experience because we can be deceived by our senses or simply be dreaming. It is not that God deceives us through our senses, but that our senses themselves are extensions of our body which is by nature imperfect, and so the senses sometimes deceive us. Thus, our perception and experiences of the external world can at best be taken as resemblances of objects in their pure form.

Collin: In other words, we can't trust our sense experience, but this doesn't mean we have no access to the external world or understanding it. We just have to rely on our intellect and cogito instead of our sense experience.

Locke: I disagree with the intensity of Descartes' doubt, and I believe that he is not giving enough credit to the senses. By acknowledging the difference between primary and secondary qualities, we can form ideas about the external world. Although these ideas are not perfect, I believe that they can very closely resemble the world itself.

Collin: So what you're saying is that we should trust our senses to interpret the outside world but also use reason to interpret these perceptions. Mr. Berkeley, would you like to comment?

Berkeley: I disagree with the other philosophers on this subject, but my ideas align more closely with Hume's. Our sense experience derives from God, who created our minds. He is the sole known cause of our perceptions and sensations. We can use memory to form general ideas of these perceptions, but we can only focus on one particular abstract idea at a time. We also cannot form a material extension of these ideas like the one Descartes talks about. God causes abstract ideas rather than a material world, and He would not waste his time creating matter to go along with these ideas.

Matt: It seems, going back to your first answer, that no material objects exist beyond our abstract ideas. So since no material extension can come from these ideas you're saying that all we're capable of sensing are the perceptions we receive from God?

Question 3: What are each of your thoughts on Locke's idea of the existence primary/secondary quality distinction?

Descartes: Mr. Locke makes a distinction of primary and secondary qualities that erroneously depends completely on observation. In order to perceive an object fully one must first have an innate idea of that object in their mind given by God. I agree that there is a distinction between

primary and secondary qualities, but the source of these qualities cannot come fully from observation of the external world.

Berkeley: Mr. Descartes, it is natural to conceive of your idea of the material world because it is more accessible than perception existing by itself. We base the existence of matter on the ideas of things, however their possibility is not sufficient cause for them to exist. God is the cause of these unknown ideas that we have in our minds, but he does not create unthinking, unperceiving material objects. It is impossible for our thought and perception of the world to come from a material, unperceiving subject.

Collin: So, Mr. Descartes, you're saying that you agree with Locke's distinction, but not his method, while Mr. Berkeley you're saying that no object can contain an attribute because no objects exist and only our perception of objects do and therefore these attribute's come from the perceptions and not the objects. Mr. Locke, since you're the man who proposed this distinction, what are your thoughts?

Locke: Mr. Descartes, I am glad that you can agree with me that there is a primary-secondary distinction, but as I have said before, we do not need innate knowledge in order to form ideas about the external world. Mr. Berkeley, while I understand your skepticism regarding the existence of an external world, you do not seem to recognize the significance of primary qualities. Instead, you claim they are the same as secondary qualities, which are entirely dependent on sense experience and bear no resemblance to the outside world.

Matt: It is your opinion, then that the primary secondary distinction is clear due to our perception of objects and does not require innate ideas. As a final question, what are the practical implications of each of your philosophies regarding the external world? Mr. Locke, we'll start with you.

Question 4: What are the practical implications of your philosophy?

Locke: As an empiricist, I believe that we can determine the existence of an external world and learn about it through experience, without having to rely on innate ideas. Although our senses provide us with both primary and secondary qualities, we are able to that determine that primary qualities, such as solidity, extension, and motion, truly describe external objects. Thus, we should feel comfortable using our senses to form ideas about the world around us.

Hume: We cannot base our lives on cause-effect relationships because contradictions can exist in which a cause will not lead to a usual effect. When I hit a billiard ball, I expect that it will move in a straight line towards other balls. However, the ball may just as likely change paths and go right into the pocket. Our knowledge is based on observations, logic, and definitions, we are not given ideas a priori. When living the human life, it is important to be skeptical about the laws

of nature, science, and causation, and to not fully trust our ideas of things.

Descartes: The essential property of all matter is extension. Consider a piece of wax. When it has first been taken freshly from the hive, it retains its odor, figure, size. It is hard, cold, easily handled, and if struck with a finger, it will emit a sound. But if we move the wax towards fire, its smell evaporates, the color alters, the figure is destroyed. It becomes liquid and difficult to handle. Surely we must admit that this substance we called wax is the same before and after. Then it follows that the wax was not that sweetness of honey, its figure, or that sound it emitted. All that remains then is a certain extended thing which is flexible and movable. Thus, to understand the essence of matter, it must be done through pure reason since all matter is an extended form.

Berkeley: I agree with Hume that humans should live their lives skeptical of laws of nature, science and causation. The only cause we have in the world is God and our only knowledge consists of our perceptions. Because they are created by God, we can trust our sensations and our perceptions, but we cannot expect the world to behave in a particular way because our perceptions could change at any given moment. Since we cannot abstract an external world from our sensations, there are not many practical rules that we can live by. Instead, we should trust our perceptions moment to moment rather than using general rules set forth by memory, misconception and the perceptions of others.

Collin: What I'm hearing from each of you is that as humans we must choose to either trust in our abilities of prediction determined by scientific law and reason or choose to live skeptically of these supposed facts knowing we cannot determine our world's laws because we are essentially separated from it by our senses. In this sense, our belief or disbelief in the external world must be determined by our trust of the senses and whether we can reason through their interpretations enough to achieve a clear idea of an external world.

Matt: Thank you for coming to this panel discussion. At this time we would like to open the floor to questions.