

Three Dialogues

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UP: Take the case of a solid cube, or any other 3-dimensional object.

P. What is a 3-dimensional object? Objects are what we perceive, and dimensionality is part of our perception.

UP. Take any object, walk around it, change the distance, look at it from different perspectives and our perceptions are different. You agree with that?

P. I do agree.

UP. And you also agree that none of those perceptions are true characters of the object, only pure visual images of them, which exist in our minds, and are dependent upon our particular perspectives, positions visavi, the object.

P. I very much do, but I take exception to your claim of different positions, it does not make any sense.

UP. I agree, this is hindsight, it does not make any sense, I can dispense with it, but I just wanted to make it clearer to you, because although you claim to ignore the independent existence of the external world, you often argue as if you at least implicitly take it for granted. My point is that you perceive a succession of visual images, and those images are in your mind, because you can only see and experience directly what you can perceive.

H. This is what I often have felt too, that P just pretends to be ignorant of the external world, but I have been unable to formulate it in any polite way.

P. This is true. You can only perceive what you can perceive, and that is what you have gotten.

UP. Now out of those images you form an idea of a supporting external body. A body which is inferred and which you cannot directly perceive, because every visual perception is a flat representation, and the inferred material body cannot be adequately represented by a flat image.

P. But the inference is still conjectural. It is an idea, and ideas belong to the mind. They do not exist outside the mind and hence are not independent of the mind.

UP. So far you are right the inference we make is provisional. It makes sense, but that is, I grant it, not enough to confer to it an independent reality. My point is that we can conceive of entities that go beyond single visual imaginations. It is true that we do not form a direct notion of the object, we do not conceive of its entirety at one go. In a way the object which we infer is similar to the abstraction we make of a general triangle. We cannot perceive or manifest a triangle without making it particular, great or small, obtuse or not. The same thing with an object. We cannot perceive it except from a particular point of view. Any artist that paints a chair, a table, takes into consideration perspectival distortions, although I agree that distortions is a misleading word, implying that there would be some flat image with no distortions.

P. I do not see how you push the argument any further by your rather round-about way of stating the obvious. And besides I do not agree with you that you can talk about abstract triangles, without specifying their particulars. A triangle is something we imagine, we cannot imagine something that lack specifics. That is indeed a spectral thing.

U: Mathematicians do it all the time.

P. This is hardly an argument in its favor.

U. What ever you think of mathematicians is of little concern, it is mathematics that matters. Say that somebody claims to be able to view triangles and other related things abstractly and from this purported power of vision, is able to state a few general and non-obvious facts about triangles, that you will be able to verify in each particular case of your own choosing. And mind my word, of your own choosing, as those words are very important. If this would happen to you, would you not admit that the man, for all his mumble-jumble, would be up to something.

P. I would not know what I would think, you better give me an example.

U. This would be easy, but I think also unnecessary, as there will be even more elementary instances of my point, which you would have an even harder time to ignore.

P. Such as?

U. My point is that we infer external objects all the time, and that those external objects have more properties than we put into them. They are not just ghosts of our imagination. They seem to have a coherency of their own. If we imagine a cube say as out there, not only are we going to be passive receptors of perception, we are even going to be able to predict how it will look like, either by walking around it or handling it in our hands. If we turn around a cube, we will not expect it suddenly to look like a sphere.

P. This is true, but I do not see how it proves your point. If we imagine those things, we should not be surprised at having those behave as we predict, we have after all imagined them and all their possible visual predictions. In fact your argument seems rather to strengthen my case.

U. So to you a hallmark of external reality is its unpredictability. If you would be thrown into a perceptual frenzy where one thing would follow another with dizzying speed, without rhyme or reason, you would imagine that it would be real?

P. As I have been trying to say all along. Perceptions are real, they exist in our minds, and therein lie their reality. I do agree though that we have no control over our perceptions, they are thrown at us.

U. So you are suggesting that the things of our minds are beyond our controls, in what sense can they then be seen as part of our mind? What is in the mind is clearly controlled by it. Is this not the meaning of 'being inside our minds'?

H. This is a valid point, why did I not think of that myself?

P. When we dream we are also enjoying a sense of perceptions being thrown at us independent of our volition, but surely you do not mean that the phantoms that populate our dreams exist out there, rather than in the private mind of the dreamer? This would be absurd.

H. This is a valid point too, how come I never thought of that either?

U. You use the word 'phantom', this implies again your implicit acknowledgment of things which are not 'phantoms'. In what sense do the phantoms of our dreams differ from

the phantoms we see when awake? Do we have two minds, a dreaming mind, to which we should not pay any serious attention, and a waking mind, whose perceptions, although phantom, nevertheless are of serious importance to the continuation of our lives, i.e. the continuation of this unending spectre of phantom images to which we have grown so fond. In our dreams we can allow us extravagant actions, such as throwing ourselves from great heights, trusting that they will have no consequences (the worst maybe that we wake from the dream), but in so called real life, you do not undertake such extravagant actions, because you can predict their consequences and they are not to your liking. By your arguments dreams are more real than waking life, because the latter is more predictable.

P. You talk with such vehemence and force as if you thought that you could win argument by violence alone. You do confuse so many things and represents the views of others to the point of absurdity, the easier to dispel them. What you offer is nothing but sophistry. A sterile cleverness which may dazzle but is of no substance. I do not deny that the perceptions I make are not external to me, they come to me unbid and I have no control of them. My mind is not to be confused with that of the universe, I simply say that all ideas are of the mind, and that hence there must be a superior mind, namely that of God. Things exist because God thinks of them. There is no need to postulate the existence of material things, unless you play with words and give them strange meanings the easier to fool innocent people. If you mean by matter simply God, of course I will have no quarrel with you, except of course as to your strange use of words. By material thing we simply mean unthinking objects with no mind, and the idea that the mere movements of such bodies will create mind and its perceptions is to me so absurd that I cannot even entertain it for a moment, and I believe this goes for most people at least if they make the effort to think. What do you think H.?

H. I agree with you, it is indeed strange to imagine that out of unperceiving, inert bodies, there will emerge mind.

P. There you see, what explanation does modern science have of it, and do they have any idea of what is material, i.e. that which is beyond our perception of it?

UP. Indeed it is a major problem to understand how out of material unconscious things something conscious can emerge. That we, with our emotions, perceptions, wills and desires, would in the ultimate analysis, just be the workings of senseless, inert, bodies, the mere movements of particles, be there ever so intricate. Most people claim that it can be done in principle, and they do effect some attempts at solutions, that satisfy no one let alone convince any one at all, especially not themselves if I may so say. Some try to get out of this quandary by claiming that there are indeed explanations, but that they are beyond human power to understand, others that there is in fact consciousness in the smallest particles, but such people are considered to be on the philosophical fringe, mad except by being philosophers they have a license to be so, at least when they are on duty, everybody expecting them to adhere to scientific orthodoxy in their ordinary lives.

P. I must admit that I find some sympathy in the position you refer to as being mad. What about the notion of matter in the modern age. I cannot conceive of it, but maybe you could give me some hints.

UP. The more the matter of matter has been pondered on in science, the more elusive it appears...

P.... just what I thought...

UP. Matter is definitely not composed of small round solid bodies.

H. So what is it composed of, I have always wondered, but have been unable, or rather forbidden by my friend, to imagine them, because by definition whatever I imagine is an idea of my mind, and matter is supposed to be independent of the mind.

UP. This is hard to reply to. In fact the more you think of it, the more science have thought of it, the more immaterial they appear. It is like slicing an onion, after all the layers have been peeled off, nothing remains.

P. See, am I not being vindicated!

UP. Not quite. One thinks of matter more like fields of force..

P. And pray what is that?

UP. I would say that those are mathematical abstractions, or rather as most scientists would call them mathematical models which allow us to compute and predict and within that framework explain.

P. So just sophistry. Or maybe I should be more polite, after all matter is nothing but ideas in the mind.

UP. There certainly is much to what you say. They are indeed ideas in the mind, sets of equations that are to be solved. On the other hand, to you things are concrete objects which are to be identified with your perceptions of them, and in this way you solve elegantly a thorny problem, am I right?

P. Indeed you are, as indeed I am.

UP. But you are missing the point. You claim, or pretend to, that you can only perceive instances and particulars, not abstractions. Matter is if anything an abstraction. You would only see the letters on the page in which those abstractions are being temporarily manifested, and you would hardly be the wiser.

P. Certainly your kind of sophistry would only confuse me, as it was meant to do.

UP. The world is very confusing, this is why it is such a triumph when we occasionally are able to cut through the confusion and discern, however dimly, some general abstract principles of explanatory nature. Some people would even say that therein lies the meaning of life.

P. The meaning of life is quite clear to me. It is to exalt in God.

UP. But God does not explain anything, hence he cannot be denied, he is but a name that can stand for everything and anything.

P. God surely is much more than a mere name, in fact he is everything.

UP. Was that not just what I said, he is everything.

P. So then what are we arguing about after all?

UP. If about God, nothing at all it seems. Yet of course you think of God as something rather specific. Something that on one hand can be fathomed by the mind because he is but mind, a purification of our own immediate perceptions of ourselves as thinking, willing entities, however, shorn off all imperfections, on the other hand something so much beyond human conception that we cannot even to begin to understand him. This is sophistry if anything I would say.

P. Do you understand all truths, do you know all true facts, and as a mathematician do you know of all the infinite natural numbers?

UP. Of course not.

P. Yet you claim that you do have an idea of truth, even if you are unfamiliar with all of its manifestations, and you claim to know what a number is even if you only have a direct idea of very few. So why do you censure my conception of God which is formed admittedly by only vague notions, you too are apt to make dramatic not to say momentous extrapolations.

UP. When it comes to number you are wrong and I can easily explain. True there is an infinite number of numbers, but the concept of number is based on some very simple principle, so simple and basic in fact that we can hardly think of anything simpler and more basic. But of course we are unable to comprehend all manifestations of it. When it comes to truth, which like your God is a meta-physical concept, you have a point. Truth, of which we know so little, may have the most unimaginable surprises in store for us. We cannot comprehend all its manifestations, be those comprehensions so ever vague and abstract; yet it gives us guidance and we believe we can recognize it when we see it.

P. So with God. His ways are inscrutable but we can always recognize his finger.

UP. Of course it would at this stage be tempting to equate God with Truth, although I suspect you would find this mere sophistry. The difference is that Truth comes with a way of understanding it, of gradually finding out more and more of it, while your notion of God, and mind you those being metaphysical entities, we cannot manipulate them, only acknowledge them as part of an inescapable context, your notion of God is just a strategy of getting to know him, and here your notion is sterile, he will for ever be inscrutable, and any attempt to get closer to him, is to be repelled. He is but a balloon, filled with the hot air of your own paltry imagination. Rather than we made in his likeness, he is made into ours, an ideal image of ourselves. Only when you have the courage to abandon this limiting anthropomorphic view, can you start making progress in appreciating him. That is the truth.

P. So what is your conclusion.

UP. There is indeed much to be said for idealism in the modern world. You are quite correct that our perceptions is what we know immediately and that our explanations for those are also our own ideas, thus products of our minds.

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