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Abstract

In this paper, I posit that our minds inevitably internalize the external in the process of metaphysical enquiry because they naturally rely on abstraction, categorization, simplification and association. I first focus on the idea of substratum by claiming that it cannot exist independently of our minds. Second, I opine that both primary and secondary qualities are significantly dependent on our minds. Last but not least, I extend the shadow of relativity over the notion of motion. Finally, I postulate that even though there is certain external reality upon which our enquiry can converge, the external world is neither perfectly nor particularly closely knowable.

On the Inevitable Internalization of the External in the Process of Metaphysical Enquiry

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Abstract

In this paper, I posit that our minds inevitably internalize the external in the process of metaphysical enquiry because they naturally rely on abstraction, categorization, simplification and association. I first focus on the idea of substratum by claiming that it cannot exist independently of our minds. Second, I opine that both primary and secondary qualities are significantly dependent on our minds. Last but not least, I extend the shadow of relativity over the notion of motion. Finally, I postulate that even though there is certain external reality upon which our enquiry can converge, the external world is neither perfectly nor particularly closely knowable.

John Locke opined that a certain set of qualities is always attached to a core that holds these together. This Lockean substratum is described as something non–extended, for extension itself is a property. Even though I hold that the principle of substratum is incompatible with the basic framework of dualism to which Locke adhered, I must credit Locke’s brilliant mind for posing one of the most fundamental questions that metaphysicians have ever come to entertain – can we conceive of substances independently of their qualities? I believe that the search for an answer to this conundrum may help us uncover the truth about certain basic principles upon which the human mind operates. This will in turn enable us to draw reasoned conclusions in the epistemic discussion of the relation of the internal, i. e. our minds, and the external.

Locke saw extended objects as a set of qualities held together by a substratum. For the sake of clarity, let us consider such a mundane object as a table. This table would have certain size and shape, these qualities would in turn result in certain color, smell or even taste. In the Lockean framework, all of the aforementioned qualities would then be held together by their core substratum. The key difficulty is encountered when we pay closer attention to the actual definition of specific objects and their parts. It is utterly unreasonable to deny that the table itself can be the subject of our discussion, but the same truth applies to its legs. Taking this thought to its deliberate conclusion, we must

posit that the legs are not the only parts of the table but that we can also identify specific parts of the legs which could undeniably be labeled as fairly independent objects. Along the same logic, the table itself once used to be part of a tree. Two self-evident conclusions can be drawn from this demonstration. First, most objects evolved from, and will evolve into, other objects for there is a wide consensus regarding the tenet that matter cannot be simply annihilated or created *ex nihilo*. Rather, matter is subject to continuous transformation. Second, an infinite number of objects can be identified within an object. This is necessarily true, because each of these can be assigned certain qualities.

Several questions arise from these conclusions. First, when does a newly created object receive its own substratum? Similarly, does the table, which has its own substratum, contain also many other substrata for the identifiable parts of this table? Let me make the implications of the substratum tenet even more lucid before I proceed to answering these concerns.

It is fairly obvious that we can describe an infinite number of objects that form what we refer to as the external world. Whenever we encounter a part of this world, it can be described with more or less precision. That would not only mean that there is an infinite number of substrata, it would also entail that certain substrata would be overlapping their “scope of authority.” Furthermore, this conclusion seems to be hard to reconcile with the basic dualist framework of passive bodies and minds as “thinking things.” Let the reader be reminded that non-extendedness is a quality that the dualists have consistently ascribed to minds, which are in this respect incomparable to the external extension, for non-extendedness cannot be extended and, similarly, whatever is extended cannot be characterized by non-extendedness. Accordingly, asserting that substrata have no extension brings them unprecedentedly close to the concept of mind. One fairly obvious solution is capable of withstanding the scrutiny of the forepresented analysis by turning its weak points into an advantage. It is the Cartesian notion that the universe is a plenum – the whole cosmos – rather than individual substances. Yet, let us postpone the discussion of this idea by several passages for it has its proper place in the metaphysical framework that I labor to embed.

Instead of looking for numerous and somewhat external substrata, I could entertain the idea that primary qualities are the very essence of the external world and that the size of a certain extension appears to be the extension itself. Yet, my position is closer to that that our minds decide, or at least significantly participate in the process of deciding, what is a whole and what is a part and then bundle the appurtenant properties together. Even though I recognize that this statement is unprecedentedly provocative and daring, I am of the opinion that I have set on the path that will lead me to a more complete understanding.

Let me now elaborate on the notion that the universe can be conceived of as a plenum rather than a set of individual, divisible, and clearly definable objects. I will first focus on the Cartesian definition of matter as an extended substance. In his *Principles of Philosophy*, René Descartes posits that a key difference between minds and matter is that bodies are extended. This brings us to the very definition of matter. One may ask whether space, seemingly empty, is different from matter. Descartes clarifies this by asserting that “after taking from a certain space the body which occupied it, we do not suppose that we have at the same time removed the extension of the space, because it appears to us that the same extension remains there so long as it is of the same magnitude and figure” (Descartes). As has been mentioned above, Cartesian thinkers held that the essence of matter is extension. It follows that whatever is extended must be considered matter, whether this matter is composed of what we usually refer to as bodies or simply space. Since the external world is not a mind but an extended substance, it then follows that the external world is extension. If all of the external world itself is extension, then it also is matter. Hence, it must be a perfect and continuous plenum.

Rather than succumbing to the notion that matter can be divided into parts, I must suggest that matter as it occurs to us seems to be diversified so that we err in believing that distinguishability equals divisibility. We are further led to posit that this distinguishability is enabled by secondary qualities of the same continuous and inherently indivisible plenum. The Cartesian thinkers had correctly observed that secondary qualities, often represented by color, sound or taste, are to a great degree dependent on the observer himself and that they, along the same reasoning, can be separated from the external objects themselves. Yet, the more I entertain this notion, the more I am drawn to the conclusion that we find it hard to distinguish primary and secondary qualities purely by sensory perception. It seems to me that whatever we may see in this world is not only extended, but also endowed with certain color. Furthermore, the color itself seems to be extended over the whole extension or, in other words, the extendedness of any extension appears to be enabled by the secondary quality of color. Even though the notion of separability of the secondary quality of color did not withstand the test of mere perception, it may still be immune to our doubt as long as our reasoning will lead in a different direction. Yet I find it equally, if not more, difficult to even conceive of extension without any particular relationship to my visual experience. I repeatedly attempt to conceive of crystal clear extension, only to realize that this effort is a mere mask for my proclivity to link extension with more or less sharp visual perception. The reader may pose the question whether I am claiming that a man born blind cannot conceptualize extension. In order to answer this concern, I must bring the reader’s attention to the famous Molyneux problem. The fact that a man born blind is not able to link two distinct perceptions of extension further evidences that the complete notion of extendedness, as it is present in our intellect, is formed by our minds from complementary sensations.

I must now ask myself: Does the fact that I am troubled by the tenet of separability mean that I am to abandon the principle of primary and secondary qualities? This I resist to do because the reasoning that led me to assume that distinguishability does not equal divisibility and that cosmos is a plenum still seems to stand. Therefore, I must conclude that primary qualities are truly accessible only with the necessary assistance of secondary qualities. Even though it seems that these two categories can theoretically be separated, the more we delve into the subject, the more we realize that such a project can hardly be completed and the more we understand that the true nature of the primary quality of size is not significantly more accessible than that of the secondary quality of color.

Let us now examine the primary quality of motion for it seems that the skepticism developed in the recent meditation cannot be upheld against something so obvious as motion. We should not expect the tenet of the universe as a plenum to cause particular confusion in this domain since it not only allows but also calls for motion, albeit circular. I recall countless experiences in which I clearly observed that certain objects, or shall we call them parts of the plenum, were changing their position and relation with respect to one another. I continuously comprehend that what my sight perceives today is utterly different from what it grasped last week and I have no doubt that it will be clearly distinguishable from what I may find around me tomorrow. So far the notion that motion must exist seems to be very durable, which is considerably dissimilar to other long-held beliefs that have been scattered in the course of this meditation. It seems inevitable that motion must exist, but we may find it more troubling to ascertain the various relations of motion, i. e. to determine what stands and what moves, in which direction or with which speed such motion takes place. We have made it clear that the changing surroundings of myself do indeed necessitate some change, which we choose to call motion, to take place. Ultimately, it appears to be a lot harder task to learn whether such change results from one object lying idle and another moving or whether both considered objects move in the same direction, but the slower pace of the first causes the increasing distance from the second. Having suggested this relativity, I now recall moments in which I kept staring at a high tower, believing that the passing clouds are static and that it is the building that changes its location. I now recall my knowledge of physics which taught me that the Earth is moving through the universe with an impressive speed and that the entire solar system as well as our galaxy are spinning through the darkness of the unknown which seems to be somewhat hard to reconcile with the immediate fact that I am sitting in this peaceful classroom in the middle of the night, completely ignorant of the velocity with which I myself am spinning through the universe.

Despite the unsettling results of this meditation, I am not ready to give up the notion that I may know something of this world since I have been able to navigate through life with substantial success. My experience with my existence has been remarkably

consistent and my communication with others has repeatedly assured me that at least some parts of this world are understood similarly and enjoy fairly universal assent. The very fact that I have undertaken this meditation convinces me of one notion that may provide us with at least partially satisfying conclusion. I now realize that the key task of the human mind is to make sense of the environment in which we happen to find ourselves. We constantly strive to draw conclusions and find definite answers for life without doing so would truly be unbearable. I now realize that the true and fundamental task of my mind is to synthesize the various perceptual inputs it is provided with in order to give me a more or less precise picture of whatever is located outside of my own existence so that I can survive. I now come to understand that my senses do not only provide me with individual perceptions but furthermore, they work on a complementary basis that enables my mind to construct a comprehensive and wholistic picture. Let us once again consider the example of a table, a piece of wood. I realize that the idea of the object as I possess it does not only include the individual qualities of brown color, the perceived shape, the sound of knocking on wood or the size of the table. All of these taken together form the unique idea. All of these taken together are more than a mere sum of the individual parts. Similarly, our experience with a consumed meal is significantly altered when we lose the ability to smell it.

This is not to suggest that the external reality is dependent on us, this is to suggest that we do not really have access to this external reality because all that we can encounter is the reality mediated by our own limits. There are four distinct methods that our minds employ in order to fulfill their prime task – to make at least a partial sense of the world around us. These are abstraction, categorization, simplification, and association. By means of abstraction, we attempt to get rid of seemingly unimportant details and particularities so that we can form some overarching understanding. To provide an example, we may refer back to the overarching understanding of what a table is. By means of abstraction, we are able to ascribe to it certain general concepts such as functionality. By means of categorization, we, similarly to abstraction, ignore subtle differences in order to fit what we observe and learn to a number of categories, which is inexorably smaller than the actual number of varieties. It must also be noted that we often categorize based on the concepts reached in the process of abstraction. Therefore, not rarely do we categorize anything that performs the function of a table as one, relying on the concept of functionality. Both abstraction and categorization are in turn enabled by means of simplification. And finally, rather than accepting the unbearable uniqueness of every little part that forms the external world, we look for concepts and ideas we already possess to help our understanding. Let me provide the reader with an instance in the concept of infinity. We have learned to use the term superfluously, with more or less precision. However, when we truly focus our attention on that concept, we find that it is hardly intelligible. We may appease our minds by imagining that an infinite number is simply very high, but in reality, we cannot fully grasp the concept of

infinity. Even though it is very abstract, it is hard to categorize, simplify, or associate with anything we know.

I can now conclude that the external world most probably does exist, but it is neither perfectly nor particularly closely knowable. It can never be particularly closely knowable because the only way to examine the external world with sufficient objectivity would be to step out of our own minds. Naturally, we will never be able to step out of our own minds, and therefore, we only infer, albeit after a careful meditation, that there is certain external reality upon which our enquiry can converge. We will never reach that epistemic certainty because of the inevitable internalization of the external in the process of metaphysical enquiry.

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