

Can a person realize that objects exist even when he cannot perceive them?

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The question of whether objects continue to exist when no one perceives them belongs to epistemology and metaphysics. Epistemology asks how we know, while metaphysics asks what exists and what existence means. The original essay approaches the problem through John Locke, George Berkeley, and René Descartes. It correctly identifies Berkeley's formula *esse est percipi*—to be is to be perceived—and Descartes's attempt to find certainty through doubt. However, the positions need to be separated carefully. Locke does not claim that existence means being perceived, and Descartes does not conclude that everything is nonexistent. Each philosopher uses perception to answer a different question.

Common sense tells us that a chair remains in a room when we leave, that a mountain existed before we saw it, and that another person continues living while asleep or absent. Yet direct perception gives us only present experiences. Philosophical analysis asks what justifies the move from an experience in the mind to a continuing object outside it. The answer depends on whether objects are material substances, collections of ideas, causal explanations, or structures within experience.

What Does It Mean for an Object to Exist?

In ordinary language, saying that an object exists means that it is part of reality and can have effects whether or not a particular person currently notices it. Existence is not normally equated with present visibility. A key may exist inside a drawer, a planet may exist beyond unaided sight, and a sound source may exist when no one listens.

Perception is evidence of existence, but it is not always conclusive. Dreams, hallucinations, illusions, mirrors, recordings, and virtual images can produce experiences without the object being present as it appears. Conversely, lack of perception is not evidence of nonexistence when distance, obstruction, weakness of the senses, or inattention explains the absence.

Direct and Indirect Realism

Direct realism holds that perception ordinarily puts us in contact with mind-independent objects. When a person sees a shell, the object itself is seen through its visible properties. Experience may sometimes mislead, but normal perception is not an inner picture completely separated from the world.

Indirect realism argues that we are immediately aware of ideas, sensations, or representations caused by external objects. The mind does not access material substance without mediation. Locke is often read within this tradition because he distinguishes ideas in the mind from qualities in objects.

The difficulty for indirect realism is the “veil of perception.” If we know only representations, how can we compare them with the external objects they represent? The theory must explain why the best cause of ordered experience is a mind-independent world.

Locke’s Account of Ideas

John Locke argues that the mind receives ideas through sensation and reflection. Sensation gives ideas connected with external objects, while reflection concerns the mind’s own operations. We know the world through ideas, but Locke does not conclude that objects exist only when perceived. (Locke)

He distinguishes primary and secondary qualities. Primary qualities, such as solidity, extension, figure, motion, and number, belong to bodies and resemble the ideas they produce. Secondary qualities, such as color, taste, sound, and smell, are powers in objects to produce sensations in perceivers. A shell has a structure capable of producing brown appearance in normal light, though “brownness” as experienced depends on the perceiving system.

Locke and Knowledge of External Existence

Locke believes we possess sensitive knowledge of particular external things while perceiving them. The involuntary, vivid, coherent character of sensation supports the belief that an external cause acts on us. We cannot choose at will to see sunlight with the same force as we can imagine it.

Our certainty about an object’s continued existence after perception is weaker than present sensitive knowledge. We rely on memory, regularity, testimony, and causal expectation. When the shell is placed in a drawer, prior experience tells us that reopening the drawer will reveal it unless another cause moved or destroyed it.

Locke therefore supports a realist answer: objects can exist unperceived, though our knowledge of their current state is fallible. Probability and reasonable judgment guide life where demonstration is unavailable.

The Example of the Shell

The original essay describes finding a hard brown shellfish or shell at the beach. What is perceived includes shape, hardness, color, temperature, texture, and weight. Locke would distinguish the idea of hardness and extension from the physical qualities causing it, while recognizing that color as

experienced depends on interaction among surface, light, eye, and mind.

If the shell is placed behind the observer, its continued existence explains why another person can see it, why it blocks another object, and why it can be found later. The object participates in causal relations beyond one person's present awareness.

Berkeley's Idealism

George Berkeley rejects material substance as an unnecessary and unintelligible abstraction. We experience ideas—colors, sounds, tastes, shapes, resistance—and cannot form a meaningful conception of matter existing entirely outside perception. His formula *esse est percipi* applies to sensible objects: their being consists in being perceived.

Berkeley does not claim that ordinary objects vanish into nothing whenever one human looks away. He argues that ideas exist in minds and that the continuous order of nature is sustained by God, an infinite perceiver. The tree in an empty garden remains within divine perception and can reappear consistently to finite observers. (Berkeley)

Berkeley also distinguishes ideas from spirits. Ideas are passive objects of perception, while minds or spirits perceive and act. A mind does not exist by being perceived in the same way a color does; its being involves perceiving and willing.

Berkeley's Attack on Material Substance

Berkeley asks what is meant by a material object existing with no relation to any possible perception. If all known qualities are sensible, removing every connection with sensation seems to leave an unknown "something" supporting qualities. He argues that this support explains nothing.

He also challenges Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Shape and size vary with distance and perspective just as color varies with light. If variation makes color mind-dependent, similar reasoning seems to affect extension and motion. Berkeley concludes that all sensible qualities exist as ideas.

Does Berkeley Deny Reality?

Berkeley considers his view a defense of common sense rather than skepticism. The table is real because it is perceived within an orderly world; an imagined table is less vivid, less stable, and more dependent on personal will. He denies matter, not tables, trees, and bodies as experienced.

Critics argue that divine perception is introduced to preserve continuity and that the theory makes the distinction between appearance and reality difficult. Supporters respond that material substance

is equally theoretical and that Berkeley explains the order of experience through a divine language of nature.

Descartes and Methodical Doubt

René Descartes begins by doubting beliefs that can be called into question. The senses sometimes deceive, dreams can resemble waking experience, and an imagined powerful deceiver could manipulate thought. This doubt is methodological: he does not permanently believe that everything is false. He suspends belief to discover something indubitable.

Even if a deceiver tricks him about every object, the act of being deceived requires thought. From this Descartes reaches the cogito: while thinking, he cannot doubt that he exists as a thinking being. The conclusion establishes certainty of the thinking subject before certainty of the external world. (Descartes)

“I Think, Therefore I Am”

The cogito should not be understood as a general slogan that every daily choice is uncertain. It is a foundational judgment: the performance of doubt confirms the existence of the doubter. If I wonder whether I exist, the wondering itself is occurring.

The argument establishes a thinker, not immediately a body, table, or shell. Descartes must later attempt to justify trust in clear and distinct ideas, God’s nondeceptive nature, and the existence of external bodies. Philosophers have debated whether those later arguments succeed.

The Dream Argument

Dreams show that an experience can feel perceptually real while its apparent objects are not present. A person may dream of a fire without an actual fire nearby. This weakens the claim that vivid perception alone guarantees external existence.

However, dreams usually borrow elements from waking experience and are less coherent across time. Waking life allows shared observation, stable memory, measurement, and successful action. These differences provide practical grounds for distinguishing dream from waking, even if absolute proof remains difficult.

The Evil Genius

Descartes imagines an evil genius capable of deceiving him about mathematics and perception. The

device radicalizes doubt so that no unexamined assumption remains. The original essay describes this as proof that the world is nonexistent, but that is not the conclusion. It is a hypothetical test.

The scenario shows that certainty of the external world cannot be based solely on current sensory appearance. It also reveals the strength of the cogito: deception still requires a subject who is deceived.

Descartes's External World

Descartes argues that he has a strong natural inclination to believe sensory ideas come from bodies. If God is not a deceiver, this inclination cannot be entirely false. Material bodies therefore exist, though their true nature is extension rather than every quality as experienced.

This argument depends on Descartes's proof of God and has attracted criticism. The Cartesian circle objection claims that he relies on clear and distinct perception to prove God and then relies on God to guarantee clear and distinct perception.

Perception and Error

The senses are not useless because they sometimes deceive. A bent-looking stick in water can be explained through refraction. The correction depends on additional perception, measurement, and theory. Error often arises when judgment goes beyond what experience warrants.

Perception should therefore be treated as evidence interpreted within a larger network. Multiple senses, repeated observation, independent observers, instruments, and causal predictions increase confidence.

Common-Sense Realism

Common-sense realism holds that ordinary beliefs about persistent objects are justified unless specific reasons undermine them. We do not need a philosophical proof each time we leave a room. The success of action and communication assumes an enduring environment.

If objects existed only during each individual's perception without shared continuity, coordinated life would be difficult to explain. Two people can observe the same shell from different angles, leave it, return, and find predictable changes. The hypothesis of a persistent object unifies these experiences.

Inference to the Best Explanation

One way to justify unperceived objects is inference to the best explanation. A mind-independent world explains the stability, involuntary character, and shared structure of experience. The hidden key's continued existence explains why it is found later and why a camera records it while no person watches.

This is not absolute certainty. Alternative skeptical scenarios may be logically possible. Rational belief does not require eliminating every imaginable possibility; it requires the explanation best supported by evidence.

Scientific Realism

Science regularly posits entities not directly perceived, including electrons, genes, distant planets, and past organisms. Their existence is supported through instruments, predictions, experiments, and convergence of evidence. Perception extends through tools and theory.

Scientific realism argues that successful theories provide reason to believe in unobservable entities. Instrumentalists may say theories need only organize observations without committing to literal existence. The debate repeats the larger question of how evidence supports reality beyond immediate perception.

Object Permanence in Psychology

Psychology uses the term object permanence for the understanding that objects continue to exist when hidden. Infants gradually demonstrate search behavior and expectations concerning concealed objects, although researchers debate the age and interpretation of particular tasks.

Psychological development does not settle metaphysical truth, but it shows that belief in persistence is a basic cognitive achievement. The ability allows planning, attachment, navigation, and causal learning.

Other Minds

The problem extends from objects to people. We perceive another person's body, words, and actions but not the person's consciousness directly. We infer another mind because behavior, language, and similarity provide the best explanation.

Radical skepticism about other minds is difficult to refute with absolute demonstration. Yet refusing belief would undermine communication and ethics. Reasonable knowledge often depends on

inference rather than direct access.

Memory

Memory connects past perception with present belief. When we remember placing a book on a desk, we expect it to remain unless another cause intervened. Memory can fail, so confidence depends on conditions and corroboration.

The persistence of objects also supports memory's practical success. If the environment were recreated independently at every moment, stable learning and prediction would be mysterious.

Language and Shared Reference

Language allows people to refer to objects not presently perceived: yesterday's storm, a distant city, or a future building. Shared reference presupposes continuity across speakers and times. A name can pick out the same object through changing appearances.

Idealists can explain shared reference through coordinated ideas, while realists explain it through one mind-independent object. Both must account for public agreement.

Virtual Objects

Digital environments complicate the question. A virtual object may persist as data when no user renders it on a screen. Its existence is not identical to a physical chair, but it has causal organization and can reappear. The example shows that existence may have several modes.

Perception is not the only criterion. A database entry can exist without current display, while a visual image may appear without corresponding physical object. Ontology must specify what kind of thing is under discussion.

Can We Be Certain?

If certainty means impossibility of error, Descartes suggests that present thought is more certain than any external object. Skeptical scenarios cannot be ruled out by sense experience alone. If knowledge means justified, reliable belief, we can know that objects persist through perception, memory, testimony, causal reasoning, and successful prediction.

Philosophy should distinguish logical possibility from reasonable doubt. It is logically possible that a hidden object vanished and was replaced perfectly, but without evidence this possibility does not defeat ordinary knowledge.

Comparing Locke, Berkeley, and Descartes

Locke is a realist who believes ideas are caused by external objects and that objects persist when unperceived. Berkeley rejects material substance and identifies sensible objects with ideas, while preserving continuity through God's perception. Descartes begins from certainty of the thinking self and attempts to rebuild knowledge of the external world through reason and divine nondeception.

The original essay blends Locke and Berkeley by attributing "to be is to be perceived" to a conclusion drawn from Locke. The phrase belongs to Berkeley's idealism and is opposed to Locke's material realism. Descartes's methodical doubt does not prove nonexistence; it establishes the thinker before the world.

Conclusion

A person can reasonably know that objects exist even when they are not currently perceived, though the justification differs among philosophers. Locke explains persistence through material objects that cause ideas. Common-sense and scientific realism support this view through stable causal evidence, shared observation, and prediction.

Berkeley challenges the concept of unperceived matter and argues that sensible objects exist as ideas perceived by minds, with God preserving continuous order. His position does not make the world disappear whenever an individual closes the eyes. Descartes shows that external objects are less certain than the immediate fact of thinking, but he does not remain in total skepticism.

Absolute certainty about the external world may be difficult, yet ordinary knowledge does not require absolute proof against every imagined deceiver. The continued existence of objects is the best explanation of coherent experience, memory, interaction, and scientific success. Perception begins knowledge of objects, but reason allows belief to extend beyond what is visible at one moment.

Works Cited

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