

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

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A person does not normally stop believing that a chair exists when leaving the room, that a book remains on a shelf when the lights are turned off, or that a mountain disappears when clouds block the view. Ordinary thought therefore assumes that objects persist independently of our present perception. Philosophy makes that assumption difficult by asking what justifies it. Direct perception gives us only what appears to consciousness at a particular moment. Once an object is hidden, absent, or beyond the range of the senses, belief in its continued existence depends on memory, causal reasoning, testimony, and assumptions about the stability of the external world.

This is not merely a puzzle about eyesight. It belongs to the broader epistemological problem of the external world: how can perceptual experience justify beliefs about mind-independent objects? Contemporary philosophical discussions still frame the issue in this way. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes the central problem as explaining how perception can provide knowledge or justified belief about things outside the mind, especially when sensory appearances can sometimes mislead (Pautz, 2023). The classical positions of John Locke, George Berkeley, and René Descartes remain useful because each accepts that perception matters while giving a different account of what exists beyond immediate experience.

Three Philosophical Answers to the Persistence of Objects

Locke: perception gives evidence of a material world

Locke's theory begins with ideas received through sensation and reflection (Locke, 1689). Sensation presents the mind with ideas associated with external objects, while reflection concerns awareness of the mind's own operations. Locke distinguishes between ideas in consciousness and qualities attributed to bodies. This distinction has often been interpreted as a representative account of perception, although scholars continue to debate whether Locke should be classified straightforwardly as an indirect realist. What is clear is that Locke does not identify existence with being perceived. He accepts a world of material objects that can continue to exist whether or not one person is currently experiencing them.

His distinction between primary and secondary qualities illustrates the point. Solidity, extension, figure, number, and motion are treated as qualities that belong to bodies in a way that grounds our ideas of them. Color, taste, smell, and sound are different: they are powers in objects to produce particular experiences in perceivers. The redness of an apple as experienced therefore depends partly on the perceiving system, while the apple itself does not cease to exist when no one is looking at it.

Locke also recognizes a difference between present perception and continued existence. While perceiving an object, a person may have what he calls sensitive knowledge that something external is affecting the senses. Once the object is no longer perceived, certainty becomes weaker. A person relies instead on memory, regularity, and reasonable judgment. If a book is placed in a locked drawer, there is no current sensory experience of the book, but previous experience and the absence of any reason to think it has been removed justify the belief that it remains there.

This position fits ordinary realism because it treats perception as evidence rather than as the condition of existence. The mind may sometimes be mistaken about the qualities or location of an object, but error does not require that objects depend on being perceived. Indeed, the possibility of correcting an error usually assumes that a stable external object continues to constrain later observations.

Berkeley: sensible objects do not exist as unperceived material substances

Berkeley rejects the material substance assumed by Locke (Berkeley, 1710). His famous principle *esse est percipi*—to be is to be perceived—applies to sensible objects understood as collections of ideas. Colors, shapes, tastes, sounds, textures, and other sensible qualities exist only in relation to a perceiving mind. Berkeley argues that it is incoherent to imagine a sensible object existing entirely outside any perception, because whatever qualities are attributed to the object are themselves conceivable only as possible experiences.

This does not mean that Berkeley thinks the world disappears whenever an individual closes their eyes. That common caricature misses the role of God in his system. Finite human beings perceive only some objects at some times, but the orderly continuity of nature is sustained by an infinite perceiver. A tree in an empty garden does not become nothing merely because no human is present; its continued order exists within divine perception. Berkeley therefore rejects mind-independent matter while trying to preserve the ordinary stability of tables, trees, houses, and bodies as experienced objects.

His argument also attacks Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities. If color varies with lighting and the perceiver, shape and size also vary with distance, perspective, and conditions of observation. Berkeley concludes that there is no secure reason to place one set of sensible qualities in mind-independent matter while treating another set as mind-dependent. The more radical solution is

to understand all sensible qualities as ideas.

Berkeley's position changes the answer to the original question. A person can believe that an object "continues to exist" when they do not perceive it, but the explanation is not that an unseen material substance persists independently of all minds. It is that the object belongs to an ordered system of possible and actual ideas ultimately grounded in divine perception. The disagreement with Locke is therefore metaphysical, not simply psychological.

Descartes: certainty begins with the perceiver, not the object

Descartes approaches the problem from a different direction. Rather than starting by describing what external objects are, he asks what can survive radical doubt. The senses occasionally deceive, dreams can resemble waking experience, and a hypothetical powerful deceiver could manipulate perception. These possibilities are not meant to establish that the world does not exist. They are methodological devices designed to determine which beliefs can be held with complete certainty.

The result is the cogito. Even if every perception of an external object were false, the act of doubting would still require a thinker. "I think, therefore I am" establishes the existence of the thinking subject before the existence of bodies. Descartes then attempts to rebuild knowledge of the external world through further arguments concerning clear and distinct ideas, God, and the causes of sensory experience.

The philosophical importance of the method is that present experience cannot by itself eliminate every skeptical alternative. A vivid dream may contain apparently solid objects; a hallucination may seem perceptually real; a deceptive environment could produce appearances without the objects one thinks are present. Descartes therefore forces a distinction between what appears and what can be known with certainty.

Yet he does not remain a skeptic about material things. In the *Sixth Meditation*, he argues that sensory ideas have causes external to the mind and that material bodies exist. Contemporary scholarship continues to debate exactly how direct or indirect his theory of perception is, but the structure of his argument is clear: knowledge of the external world requires more than simply noticing that an experience feels vivid (Newman, 2023).

Why Belief in Unperceived Objects Is Rational Even Without Absolute Certainty

The three philosophers show why the question changes depending on what standard of knowledge is used. If knowledge requires eliminating every logically possible error, belief in an unseen object

becomes difficult to establish. A skeptical scenario can always be invented in which the object vanished, was replaced, or never existed outside experience in the first place. If knowledge instead requires justified and reliable belief, ordinary evidence is much stronger.

Consider a key placed in a drawer. Several facts support the belief that it continues to exist when the drawer is closed. The person remembers placing it there. The drawer remains locked. Another observer can later open the drawer and see the same key. A camera could record the key while no human watches. The key can produce effects, such as preventing another object from occupying the exact same place. When the drawer is reopened, the key's location and condition usually fit what happened during the interval. A persistent object explains these observations more simply than the hypothesis that the world is recreated whenever it is perceived.

This kind of reasoning is an inference to the best explanation. It does not provide Cartesian certainty, but much of ordinary and scientific knowledge operates in the same way. Scientists believe in entities that cannot be perceived directly with unaided senses because instruments, experiments, predictions, and independent measurements converge on the same explanation. Electrons, genes, distant planets, microscopic organisms, and geological events are not known only through direct visual presence. Evidence extends beyond immediate perception.

Psychology uses the term *object permanence* for the developing understanding that objects continue to exist when hidden. The concept is useful but should not be confused with the philosophical problem. An infant's ability to search for a hidden object shows a cognitive expectation of persistence; it does not prove a metaphysical theory of matter. What it demonstrates is that treating the world as stable beyond current perception is a basic feature of successful cognition.

Memory performs a similar role in adult reasoning. A person who remembers placing a laptop on a desk expects it to remain there unless some event moved it. Memory can fail, but fallibility is different from total unreliability. Testimony also extends knowledge beyond direct perception. A person can reasonably know that a building exists in another city without seeing it personally because maps, photographs, records, travelers, satellite images, and the testimony of independent observers converge.

The problem of other minds makes the same structure visible. No one directly perceives another person's consciousness. People observe speech, behavior, facial expression, and action, then infer the presence of a mind similar to their own. Absolute demonstration may be unavailable, but rational life depends on explanations supported by patterns of evidence. The Stanford Encyclopedia's discussion of other minds connects this problem with Cartesian skepticism about the external world for exactly this reason: many justified beliefs concern realities that are not directly present to consciousness (Avramides, 2019).

Berkeley remains important because he shows that persistence does not automatically prove materialism. Even if experience is stable when no individual observes an object, an idealist can explain that stability through a larger system of perception. Locke and ordinary realism instead

explain stability by positing mind-independent bodies. Descartes reminds both sides that the existence of the perceiver is epistemically different from the existence of an external object. The debate therefore concerns both ontology—what exists—and epistemology—what justifies belief.

A person can consequently realize that objects exist even when they cannot presently perceive them, but the strength and meaning of that claim depend on the philosophical framework adopted. Locke gives the most familiar realist answer: material objects cause experience and continue to exist when unperceived. Berkeley denies unperceived material substance while preserving continuity through minds and divine perception. Descartes demonstrates that sensory experience is less certain than the existence of the thinking subject but ultimately argues for an external material world (Descartes, 1641).

The most defensible everyday conclusion is that direct perception is not required for justified belief in existence. We routinely know about absent, hidden, distant, microscopic, and past objects through memory, testimony, causal inference, instruments, and repeated observation. Such knowledge remains fallible, but demanding absolute immunity from every imaginable skeptical possibility would eliminate far more than belief in hidden objects. Perception begins much of our knowledge of the world; reason allows that knowledge to extend beyond what is present to the senses at a single moment.

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