

Moving From Idealism To Materialism

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Abstract

There are two principal starting points in metaphysics. One is materialism, which maintains that all that exists is physical things. Alternatively, we have idealism, which maintains that all there are is ideas. A whole metaphysics is then built on top of those starting points. This essay shows the relationship between those differing viewpoints.

1 The Materialist's Argument

The materialists argue that all there are are physical things. If you do not have things, you have nothing. For example, without a physical brain, there are no thoughts. When a person speaks their mind, they cause physical air to vibrate. These physical vibrations of air vibrate the receiver's physical ears. Those ears send physical messages to the receiver's physical brain. At every given point, you have physical things interacting with other physical things. At any point, if you eliminate the physical thing, you have nothing left. Therefore, everything that exists is physical.

2 The Idealist's Argument

The idealist argues that the only thing I can know for sure is my own thoughts. Although it seems like I am experiencing events in the physical world, I could be dreaming, imagining, or something artificial could be generating these unreal experiences. (Think The Matrix.) There is no way for me to know for sure. The only thing I can be completely certain of is that I have thoughts and

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experiences. All of the rest *seems* true but could very well not be. The only thing that truly exists is ideas. Ideas are the fundamental bases of all that exists.

3 The Problem

The problem, of course, is that we're left with two fundamentally different views that are not only different, but they are completely different. We have two entirely different models for the same thing — the world we live in. Understanding the world in which we live is pretty fundamental. It seems like something we need to settle before we can build a more complete understanding of the world we live in.

4 The Solution

What we're going to do now is reconcile those two views into a single understanding that, to the best of our ability, explains the truth of things.

The idealists have the starting point right. We can be absolutely certain beyond any doubt that:

1. I have experiences.
2. Whatever is having those experiences I call "me," i.e., I exist!
3. Some of those experiences I like; some I do not.
4. I would like to minimize the things I do not like and maximize the things I do.

These are all things I cannot doubt.

Let me tell you a story that will be helpful in the next step. Imagine a friend tells you they've invented a device that can cause you to see and feel things that don't really exist. This is a little like watching TV. They put the device on your head and tell you that when they turn it on, you will see and feel your hand burning. They assure you that nothing is really happening to you. It isn't real. You're just experiencing it.

They turn the device on, and you see and feel your hand burning. The pain is tremendous. What you would likely do is scream at them to turn the device off and get it off your head immediately!

Once they do this, you see and feel that your hand is undamaged. You likely do not want to repeat the experience!

The point is that the ultimate reality of the experience is unimportant. It seems real to you, and you didn't like the experience!

When we're first born (or more likely before), we have experiences. Some we like, and others we do not. It appears that, to varying degrees, we have some control over the experiences we have. For example, if I am cold, I can put on a sweater, and I feel better. Although I can't be completely certain of my effort or what my effort did, I am certain about the experiences I have. The truth of the matter matters little. The end result, my experience, is what is real and important to me.

Over time, I see the relationship between my effort and the resulting experience. I begin to build a model in my head that would explain this relationship. Although I have no way of knowing the real truth of the matter, I am building a model that appears to enable me to better minimize pain and maximize pleasure.

I appear to be able to interact with other individuals who share my values (need air, food, warmth, etc.). Through this interaction, I discover that the other individuals seem to have built models in their heads that are very similar to my own. We call this objective reality.

Again, although we cannot tell if it is a correct model, it is clear that it is a functional model — it enables us to minimize pain and maximize pleasure.

The model we create is of a physical world. In this model, all things are physical. This is the materialist view. Although we can never know the ultimate truth of our model, we can say that the use of the model is consistently functional. Thus, we start with what we know: experiences and ideas. We build a model that helps us understand and control these experiences. This model is completely material.

What we have done is start with something certain (experiences, ideas) and built a model to help us understand and manipulate these experiences to our benefit. The things we know for certain (experiences) will only take us so far. The truth of our model is ultimately unprovable, but it has served us well.