

## Philosophy of Religion Essay 1

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When it comes to whether or not the existence of the universe came to be as a result of some other reality, we must first look at the definition of reality. What is truly real? What is not? And how can we know the difference? Although these questions appear to open up what could turn into an endless discussion, by comparing the work of philosophers like Descartes, Berkeley, and John Locke as well as the concept of substance dualism and Plato's shadow world parable, we are better able to understand what reality is and how it relates to the existence of the universe. After looking at all these viewpoints, it could be argued that the only intelligible explanation for the existence of the universe is not necessarily by some reference to a reality beyond itself because the concept of existence is contingent on how we define reality. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that there is a 'greater reality' that brought the universe into being, however, I argue that this 'greater reality' simply does not exist, or it is that which we are not yet aware of and are unable to define.

If we look at reality in terms of radical skepticism, it is likely Descartes will be brought up. Descartes posited that reality only exists within our own mind and, therefore, reality is only what we have direct knowledge of (Johnson 680). His famous quote "cogito, ergo sum" or "I think, therefore I am" (Haldane and Ross 324) suggests that everything that is outside of the mind, including the body, has no proof of existing. Descartes also used this logic to argue for the existence of a higher reality, believing that humans are born with knowledge of certain things, like their own existence. The problem that arises from this idea that reality exists only within thought, is that we are sensory beings. Take, for instance, this paper you are holding. It has a specific weight, feels smooth in your hands, smells like fresh ink, and is black and white; it is near impossible to doubt its existence, because you are

holding it and experiencing it as part of your reality. Descartes, however, believed that things could only be known through pure “reason and knowledge” (Arponen 85). To travel further into this concept, George Berkeley defined reality as “*esse est percipi (aut percipere)* — to be is to be perceived, or to perceive” (Downing 4). Berkeley essentially argues that it is possible to be a disembodied mind that is perceiving thought as reality. This is where the brain in a vat hypothesis comes in (Johnson 681). Berkeley believed that it is possible we may be a brain existing in a vat and all that we define as reality is simply our perception of thoughts. In this case, the only intelligible explanation for the existence of the universe must be by some reference to a reality beyond itself, because the only known reality would exist within a single person’s mind.

It is interesting because where Descartes would say that nothing is able to be known as real outside of oneself, Berkeley evidently believed that everything we know as reality is just a perception and that matter as a whole may not truly exist. This leaves humans themselves as non-existent unless someone or something is directly perceiving them (Downing 9). Then, it could be argued, that the world around us may not exist, because without some greater perceiver, there is nothing being perceived; therefore, everything would cease to exist if no one was watching it. Berkeley argued that this “greater perceiver” is God (Downing 9). If God is perceiving the universe, it must continue to exist. However, without blind acceptance that this is true, the concept of reality existing only within the mind is problematic because there is evidence of the world existing around us. We can see things, interact with people, feel physical objects, etc. Although, sometimes our senses play tricks on us. For example, you might feel as though you are being followed after watching too many true crime documentaries, or as if cold water feels hot after playing in the snow for hours. And due to these types of instances, it is reasonable and rational to be skeptical of that which we cannot know for certain, in this case, any reality that is outside of the mind. However, it is incredibly difficult to look at the world and not see it as reality because, as I noted earlier, we can feel, see, smell, touch and taste it. Without taking into account that which is able to be directly sensed, we are limited to believe that the universe does not exist, that it is just a result of thoughts and perception. Again, it is not unreasonable to be skeptical of that which

we cannot, without doubt, know, but if we broaden the definition of reality to include what we can directly experience through our senses, this may help us answer whether or not some other form of reality, that we are not directly aware of through thought, brought out the existence of the universe.

If we take an approach which includes a belief in the existence of the universe outside of our own mind, John Locke's philosophy that knowledge is attained through the senses is worth noting. Locke posits that "the senses provide the best possible grounds" for belief (Dicker 14) and that "simple ideas must come from external objects operating on our senses in a natural and regular way," (Dicker 8). This defines reality as inclusive of everything that exists in the material world because we can use our senses to determine it is real. Reality, by this definition, is comprised of what is directly known and experienced through the senses, as well as the material world and beings we interact with. Unlike Descartes, Locke posits that we are born as blank slates, or "tabula rasa" (Uzgalis 82) and it is through our experiences and interactions with the material world that we come to believe in certain things, knowing them to be true and defining them as reality. This seems more likely than the idea that reality exists only within the mind, because it opens up the possibility of a reality we can physically interact with. Think of it this way, if there were a virtual reality that was exactly like real life, where you can feel, touch, taste and ultimately experience everything the same as you would in real life, but the only difference is that you know this virtual world is all in your head, it somehow feels less authentic. Since we are not able to know for certain what truly exists and what does not, a real sensory reality seems more likely because we have the ability to experience it by using our senses. So, what about things that we cannot directly take in through the senses, like, for example, outer space? There is no way to determine whether or not space exists through the senses unless we go there ourselves. But even then, we would be inside a spaceship, not directly sensing and interacting with outer space. Does this mean that outer space is not part of reality because it cannot be experienced through the senses? What about the existence of God? One could argue that, from a materialist position, it is unlikely that the universe exists in reference to some other reality, because that other reality would simply not exist.

This compels us to look at concepts of reality that include more than just what we can directly think, perceive or sense. If we look at substance dualism, reality is made up of two parts, the physical and the mental (Swinburne 153). Everything that exists fits into one of these categories, either mind or matter. God, for example, exists within the mind, whereas, the brain is pure matter. In this view, the mind is separate from the brain but since God can exist within the mind, there is reference to something within our reality that brought about this reality. Therefore, according to substance dualism, God is part of this reality. Essentially, this means that the only intelligible explanation for the existence of the universe is not due to a reality beyond this one, because if God exists, he exists within the mind and is therefore a part of this current reality. And for those that do not believe in God, everything in the universe still falls into the category of matter, and therefore, continues to be a part of reality. The universe can be brought about by mind or matter, which, according to substance dualism, are both a part of reality (Swinburne 162). With the definition of reality including everything, so long as it exists in some capacity—whether within the mind or the material world—that would mean that the most likely explanation for the existence of the universe is not necessarily by some reference to a reality beyond itself, because it is included within this reality.

This brings us to Plato and the concept of the shadow reality and the higher reality. Plato's analogy to explain reality comprises of three prisoners in a cave whose only reality is seeing shadows on the cave wall created by their own fire (Goser 119). Because they never see anything but the shadows, they have no concept that a three-dimensional world could exist. One of the prisoners escapes to the world above and realizes that there is more to sensory reality than shadows, but, when he returns and tries to explain this to the other prisoners, they believe he is crazy (Goser 120). Although the other prisoners believe he is crazy, that does not discredit the fact that this other, higher, reality exists. This is to say that, the reality we are currently experiencing could just be a "shadowy approximation" of what else exists or could exist (Goser 122). But we could also already be in the higher reality and therefore, this is all that there is. For Plato, reality exists in shadow reality and higher reality, which is similar to substance dualism where reality exists in mind or matter. In this case, the

higher reality can only exist in the mind of the other two prisoners, but for the prisoner that escaped, it is reality through matter. Either way, the universe exists without reference to a reality beyond itself, because, even though there could be a shadow reality and a higher reality and things can exist as mind and matter, they are, ultimately, still all defined as reality.

Essentially, for Descartes and Locke, it is not possible to believe the universe came to be as a result of some reality beyond itself, because for them, there is no reality beyond itself. Therefore, unless we are willing to define reality as something broader than what exists only within the mind or is directly experienced through the senses, the universe cannot exist due to some reality beyond itself. However, if we look at substance dualism and take a Platonian viewpoint, that reality includes everything, both existing for ourselves and in higher forms, it would seem that the existence of the universe came about due to some part of what would be included within the term 'reality'. If we define reality as everything that is real, everything that has been experienced by any being at any given time, then there is no need for a reality beyond this to explain the existence of the universe. It simply has always existed in reality and will continue in some form, regardless of whether or not we have experienced, or are part of, both the shadow and higher reality. Is it reasonable to agree that the only intelligible explanation for the existence of the universe is by some reference to a reality beyond itself? Well, no, but I also do not think there is a satisfactory explanation at this point. The argument seems to lie in whether we believe that we exist in Plato's higher reality, or the shadow reality, and then, whether we define both of these as current reality or separate them in terms of mind and matter. As for myself, I believe that all of these definitions hold some truth, but ultimately, I have no way of knowing. That said, I believe it is our duty as intelligent beings to do our best to ask these questions and try to find an explanation. No matter which of these viewpoints you take, the universe, and reality, can exist without reference to something higher.

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