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Research Paper

The Existence of an Objective Reality Independent of the Mind

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Abstract
This paper examines the longstanding philosophical question of whether an objective reality exists independently of the human mind. Through an exploration of realism, rationalism, idealism (including transcendental and objective idealism), and their critiques, alongside cognitive psychology and neuroscience, the study evaluates both the ontological and epistemological implications of objective truth. The analysis integrates classical philosophical positions, such as those of Descartes, Berkeley, Kant, and contemporary perspectives including Donald Hoffman's conscious realism. Furthermore, it investigates the role of cognitive processes, such as top-down and bottom-up perception, and cognitive biases that influence human understanding of reality. The paper concludes that while an objective reality likely exists, its nature remains inaccessible and the accuracy of human perception in reflecting this reality is ultimately unknowable.

Keywords
Objective Reality; Realism; Idealism; Transcendental Idealism; Consciousness; Cognitive Bias; Epistemology; Metaphysics; Perception; Rationalism

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I. Introduction

Whether a mind-independent objective reality exists is an ongoing and historic debate. Objectivity is defined as "of, relating to, or being an object, phenomenon, or condition in the realm of sensible experience independent of individual thought and perceptible by all observers : having reality independent of the mind" *(Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2018)*. Through a comprehensive analysis of major philosophical theories and cognitive and neuroscientific evidence, it can be concluded that an objective, perhaps inaccessible reality exists outside of the mind, yet the accuracy of our perception of that reality, whether it is reflective or contradictory, is unknown and unmeasurable.

Philosophical Principles

Firstly, realism is the ontological view that objectivity exists independent of the mind. Metaphysical realism asserts that properties, objects, relations, and essentially the structure of the world exists independent of whether the human mind perceives it or acknowledges its existence *(Smart, 1982)*. Specifically, scientific realists believe that the best scientific theories are, or at least approximately are, accurate of the objective reality (*Boyd, 1980*), so theories that have been validated by scientific discourse contain objective facts about the world *(Chakravartty, 2011)*. This leads to the "no miracles argument" from Hilary Putnam that the immense success of science cannot be a miracle - it must be true *(Putnam, 1975)*. Due to this success, scientific realists argue that what is described by science is true, or at least closely approximated to the truth of the world, independent of our mental frameworks (*Boyd, 1980*).

Rationalism, another school of thought, puts forth that reason, intuition, and deduction are essential to gaining knowledge whilst rejecting the necessity of sensory information *(Markie &Folescu, 2004)*. Rene Descartes delivers the argument "Cogito, ergo sum"*(Descartes, 1641),* which translates to "I think, therefore I am." The fact that an entity *is thinking* proves its fundamental existence. In addition, the "a priori" principle explicits that the world is intelligible; it functions in a structured and orderly manner, and the mind has the innate ability to make interconnections to differentiate true and false *(Descartes, 1641 / 2013)*. However, Rene Descartes' substance dualism, where the mind is a non-material substance containing thought and distinct from the material brain *(Descartes, 1641 / 2013)*, enlightens the critique of the "explanatory gap" *(Levine, 1983)*. How does a non-

material mind experience "qualia" *(Lewis, 1956)* from physical processes?There must be some factor of physical connection and external stimulus to prove causality.

Next, the correspondence theory of truth posits that correspondence to a fact or state of affairs suggests objective truth *(Russell, 1912; Joachim, 1969)*. Thomas Aquinas' version similarly propounds that something is true if it conforms to external reality *(Aquinas, 2018)*. These declarations, however, are vague. If everything *only* holds true when corresponded to a fact, where does the first "fact" or "state of affairs" correspond to? Furthermore, the constitution of a "fact" may be strongly influenced by subjective biases, leaving its definition ambiguous.

Opposite to realism and rationalism is idealism. The rudimentary ontology behind objective and subjective idealism is that objective truth stems from the mind. Firstly, George Berkeley's subjective idealism uses the principle "esse is percipi", translating to "to be is to be perceived," to maintain that perception constitutes reality, regardless of material objects *(Berkeley & Wilkins, 2002)*. Berkeley asserts that, the existence of the world, whilst unperceived by humans' finite mental substance, is maintained through God's infinite mental substance *(Berkeley & Wilkins, 2002).* However, this theory is incomplete: if the world is merely figments of imagination, then it ceases to exist, but this is proven otherwise by science and quantum physics.

Objective idealism claims that material objects exist independent of the human mind, whilst the mind acts on these objects to form our perception of the world *(Guyer & Horstmann, 2015)*. For example, Charles Sanders Pierce explains how the mind shapes material objects according to feelings present to consciousness *(Peirce, 2022)*,and Friedrich Schelling identifies that spiritual conceptual structures of this world are so strong that mind and reality essentially become indistinguishable *(Schelling & Vater, 2001)*. Objective idealism accepts the existence of external material objects but refines that our understanding of them is limited to our mental frameworks.

Finally, Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism integrates rationalism, empiricism, and idealism to advance that objects we see in space and time are merely appearances and not constitutive of the objective reality *(Kant, 1998)*. Instead, Kant considers these subjective appearances as "phenomena." "Noumena," on the other hand, are the "things in themselves" that comprise external reality and are independent of mental influences. The entirety of our "a priori" thinking are confined to the phenomena domain, as all of our conscious reasoning stems from subjective experience *(Kant, 1998)*. Consequently, the extent to which our observations are reflective of reality is unknown and reality may be inaccessible.

Pragmatic theories believe that truth and facts are susceptible to modification when it has practicality, such as being a result of inquiry, proven, warranted, or assertable in discourse *(Capps, 2019).* Moreover, the coherence theory of truth expresses that for an assertion to be true, it must cohere with a specific set of related propositions. A fact is verified as true only when it logically connects with a system of related ideas *(Young, 1996)*. The coherence and correspondence theories differ in the way they constitute something as a fact. These two theories are the main competitors and alternatives to the correspondence theory. They label truth as either being intrinsically consistent with ideological systems or practically useful rather than being an accurate image of external reality.

Donald Hoffman's conscious realism compares our conscious reality to a computer, where our tables, trees, lakes, and more are merely "icons" on our "user interface," much like a computer *(Hoffman, 2008)*. These functions do not represent the natural world, and their functions, to us, is to aid survival by providing four qualities: friendly formatting, concealed causality, clued conduct, and ostensible objectivity *(Hoffman, 2008)*. Hoffman's user interface emphasizes the coexistence of both Kant's noumenal realm and subjective experience.

Psychological and Neuroscientific Insights

In modern psychology, information processing and perception are some of the most widely researched fields. Research has shown that instead of being a passive reflection of reality, the brain actively constructs and "makes sense" of external stimuli through various processes such as bottom-up and top-down processing, while also being influenced with cognitive biases.

Bottom up processing starts with pure sensory input from an external stimulus, and relays information starting from the sensory receptors to the brain. On the other hand, top-down processing uses established experience and mental sets to interpret and even predict sensory information, which can often lead to errors *(Katsuki &Constantinidis, 2013)*. Humans engage in both processes simultaneously as we constantly anticipate and understand the sensory information around us, drawing conclusions in a split second manner, yet these conclusions are often inaccurate due to countless concealed cognitive biases.

Cognitive biases, often coined as heuristics, are mental shortcuts based on our past experience that assist in evaluating and speculating our surroundings but cause systematic errors in our interpretations *(Joy, 2020)*. Some common cognitive biases include the anchoring bias, the availability heuristic, confirmation bias, the misinformation effect, the halo effect, and the fundamental attribution error. The confirmation bias, for instance, is "a tendency to search for information that supports our preconceptions and to ignore or distort

contradictory evidence" *(Myers & DeWall, 2020)*. Concurrently, the "anchoring bias is the tendency to rely heavily on the first information you learn when you are evaluating something" *(Joy, 2020)*. Both examples are epistemological challenges to accurate reflection of truth and reality in the mind of a human, as human perception is a mixture of top-down and bottom-up processes.

The hard problem of consciousness is a regularly debated topic ontologically, epistemologically, and scientifically. It expands on the "explanatory gap" *(Levine, 1983)* that is evident between the structural and functional properties of the brain and the subjective experience of an individual. The subjective "states of experience" *(Chalmers, 1995)*, or "qualia" *(Lewis, 1956)*, is the hard problem that is difficult to explain in reductive scientific terms. "When we see, for example, we *experience* visual sensations: the felt quality of redness, the experience of dark and light, the quality of depth in a visual field" *(Chalmers, 1995)*.

Chalmers' "hard problem" leads to a discussion of two opposing stances: physicalism and dualism. Physicalism is the prominent view in modern science that all brain activity, including consciousness, stems from the basic functions of the brain, such as neuron firing. Oppositely, dualism promotes that mind and brain are two distinct substances or properties. For example, property dualism reckons that certain mental experiences are irreducible to trace causality at a physical level, such as consciousness *(Jackson, 1982; Levine, 1983)*. Moreover, emergent dualists claim that "in the course of evolutionary development, an individual mind, not just a set of mental properties, has emerged from the brain," a mind that is separate from the brain but acts on the material world *(Dilley, 2003)*. Both types of dualism stand that subjectivity in the mind, though stemming from brain activity, is indescribable in physical scientific terms.

II. Evaluation

Whilst both the realist and idealist viewpoints contribute valid arguments towards the matter of objectivity, they also reveal nuances in their respective reasoning. These nuances, combined with cognitive and neuroscientific understanding, can be pieced together to form a more consolidated explanation regarding the nature of objectivity - one that is intimately similar to Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism.

First, realism and rationalism provide good reason to trust the power of science and the innate logical ability of the human mind. Modern science has become extensive and well-rounded, and considering Putnam's no miracles argument, there is no denying that verified scientific depictions are true, or at least reflective of our most common observations and perceptions. However, since our brains run on fundamentally the same structure as well as function, such as top-down and bottom-up processing, the scientifically confirmed "truth" may only be a shared false appearance that is not representative of the real external truth. There is no denying the subjective influence in our interpretation of the world.

It is false, though, to contend that objectivity is purely a subjective mental construct. George Berkeley's subjective idealism, for example, is incomplete. He theorizes that perception constitutes reality. However, even if reality is merely mental substance, referring back to René Descartes' "cogito, ergo sum," the simple fact that an entity *is thinking* proves the existence of that entity. Furthermore, Levine's "explanatory gap" in mind-body dualism proves that there must be a physical connection between the conscious mind and the brain, and since the brain engages in bottom-up processing, there must be sensory information triggering brain activity, and thus there must be an externally existing object, whether it is accurately represented mentally or not, that exists.

The view that our subjective experiences stem from an objective external reality is similar to Kant's transcendental idealism. "Noumena," as suggested by Kant, must exist, because these are the sources of sensory stimulation that activate the brain. "Phenomena," on the other hand, are the "illusions," whether accurate or not, that the brain creates based on sensory stimuli and are potentially full of flaws and misconceptions. Therefore, scientific inquiry and intersubjective discourse must be undergone to mitigate inherent subjective biases and maximize objectiveness. Though Kant states that intersubjective confirmation may be a decisive piece of evidence supporting an objective truth, the extent to which our conscious perceptions are accurately reflective of the objective reality remains unknown, and whether this reality is accessible at all remains unknown.

III. Conclusion

To conclude, by comparing the opinions of realists, rationalists, and idealists, and referencing them with cognitive and neuroscientific knowledge, objectivity exists independent of the mind, and the accuracy of our perception compared to the objective reality is unmeasurable and unknown; we may well be living in an illusive narrative nonfiction.

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