

METAPHYSICS: WHAT THERE IS IN REALITY

MORTIMER ADLER

PART 2 OF 2

4

In *Some Questions About Language*, I misused the word “idea” as an omnibus term to cover all the cognitive contents of the mind—such items as percepts, memories, images, and concepts. It is in that sense of the word “idea” that, in my earlier book, I was compelled to ask the following very difficult question: How can two or more numerically distinct ideas be the means whereby one and the same object of thought is apprehended?

If, for example, the concept of liberty in my mind, being a formal sign, causes me to apprehend liberty as an object of thought, and that same object is apprehended by you because your concept of liberty causes you to apprehend it, do we not have here two numerically distinct causes of one effect? How is it possible for two numerically distinct causes to have one and the same effect?

I cannot do better in answering this question than the answer I gave when I first confronted the problem. I am therefore going again to resort to quoting my original solution. If the problem itself does not have interest for readers, they may skip the rest of this section and move at once to the section that follows.

It is important at the beginning to reaffirm the proposition that gives rise to this problem. The theory we have presented holds steadfastly to the proposition that two or more men are able to converse about one and the same object, an object which they apprehend in common and to which their name-words refer. That proposition, in fact, is the theory’s point of departure. With that as an unquestioned given, the theory then undertakes to account for the communicative use of language by what it says concerning the role of subjective ideas as the means by which objects are apprehended, and by what it says concerning

the role of objects as the significates or referents of name-words, words which acquired their referential significance by being voluntarily imposed upon the objects of perception, memory, imagination, and thought.

The theory, however, also asserts that the ideas that each man has exist only in his own mind. Hence when two men appear to be talking about one and the same object which they, both apprehend, each of them must have an idea by which he apprehends that object, an idea which is numerically distinct from the idea in the mind of the other man. If one of the men were to cease to be, the idea which exists only in his own mind would also cease to be; but its ceasing to be would leave totally unaffected the idea existing in the mind of the other man.

This being so, it is certainly reasonable—more than that, obligatory—to ask how two numerically distinct ideas can be the means by which one and the same object is apprehended. Since the ideas are intrinsically inapprehensible, i.e., unexamined or uninspectable, we cannot answer the question by examining the ideas themselves; nor can we answer it by assuring ourselves in a variety of ways that the two men are in fact talking about one and the same object. When we do examine instances of human discourse in which men appear to be talking about one and the same object, we find that what appears to be the case is not always actually in fact the case. Sometimes, the course of a critically conducted and sustained conversation will reveal that the participants in it are operating with different ideas and so have different objects in mind, objects that overlap in certain respects but are distinct in others. On the other hand, the steps in a conversation which attempt to check the identity of the object being discussed will sometimes confirm beyond reasonable doubt that the two men are in fact using words to refer to one and the same object, an object that is commonly apprehended by both of them.

This leads us to a restatement of the problem to be solved. The task is not to show that two men, having numerically distinct ideas, are necessarily referring to one and the same object when their use of words suggests that they are talking about an object common to them both. Rather, the task is to show how it can ever be possible for a conversation about one and the same object to take place, in view of the fact that the persons engaged in discourse necessarily have numerically distinct ideas by which they apprehend the object they appear to be discussing.

A first approximation to a solution of the problem is as follows. The plurality of ideas, when two or more men are engaged in conversation, is an existential plurality which may be, but is not necessarily, combined with a unity of intention. Your idea and my idea, by which we apprehend a certain object, can be two in number existentially, even though they are identical in intention, each being an idea that functions as a means of apprehending the object in question.

When two men successively utter the same word, the fact that the two utterances are numerically distinct does not prevent the sound they have uttered from being the same word; nor does it prevent that word from having the same referential significance. The case of two numerically distinct ideas would appear to be similar. Though they are numerically distinct, they can be the same idea in intention, just as the twice-uttered word can be the same word and have the same meaning. There is, in short, nothing intrinsically impossible about there being in the minds of each of two men an idea that, functioning as a natural sign, has the same natural significate or referent. Each man has a numerically distinct instance of the same idea, an idea that is the same precisely because what it signifies or intends is the same, namely, the object which it is the means of apprehending. Hence we seem able to reach the conclusion that when the idea in the mind of one person is only numerically distinct from the idea in the mind of another, and identical in all other respects, the two ideas can be the means whereby the two men apprehend one and the same object.

A rough physical analogy may help to illustrate what has just been said. From the negative of a motion-picture film, two prints can be made. If the prints are properly made, they will be numerically distinct but identical in all other respects. If these two prints are then placed in two projectors, the projectors can be so focused that they throw perfectly overlapping images on the screen; in effect, one image projected from two films. Alternatively, images might be projected from the two films on screens placed side by side, and the most careful observation of them would not be able to discern any difference between them, other than the fact that they are two.

The identity of an object being discussed by two men, each with his own idea as a means of apprehending it, is established by the discovery of no discernible difference between the object that one man is apprehending and the object apprehended

by the other. There are two numerically distinct ideas at work here, just as there are two films running in the two projectors; but just as there is only one set of projected images on the screen, or two sets that are different only numerically, so there is only one object to which the two men are referring; or if there are two objects, they are different only numerically and in no other respect.

If someone were to ask why it is that two ideas can have one object, but one idea cannot have two objects, the answer should be like the answer one would give if asked why two children can have one father, but one child cannot have two fathers. In the case of children and fathers, the fact that a father can have many children, but a child cannot have more than one father, is grounded in the very nature of the procreative relation. So, too, in the case of ideas and objects, the fact that one and the same object can be apprehended by many numerically distinct ideas, but one idea cannot be the means of apprehending more than one object, is grounded in the very nature of the cognitive relation which exists between an idea as that by which an object is apprehended and an object as that which is apprehended by an idea.

One point of perplexity remains to challenge the solution thus far offered. ... I said that ideas, which are themselves products of the mind's activity, produce the objects that we apprehend. Without the act of perceiving, and the percept thus produced, there would be no perceptual object; without the act of understanding, and the concept thus produced, there would be no conceptual object; and so on. Considering the causal relation between an idea and the object it produces, we are compelled to say that, if two numerically distinct ideas can be the means by which two men apprehend one and the same object, it must follow that two numerically distinct causes can be productive of one and the same effect.

It is a generally accepted view that this cannot happen in the physical world. In the realm of real existences, the operation of numerically distinct causes would necessarily result in the production of numerically distinct effects. If two causes were only numerically distinct, and identical in all other respects (e.g., the striking of two matches), the two effects (e.g., two flames) might be only numerically distinct, while identical in all other respects, but they would, nevertheless, be at least numerically distinct. How, then, can we say that two ideas are productive of one and the same effect—one apprehended object?

Two answers suggest themselves, the first less satisfactory than the second. If one were to concede that, in the sphere of cognition, causality operates exactly as it does in the realm of physical things, one would be led to the conclusion that when each of two men has an idea that is only numerically distinct from the idea in the mind of the other, the objects causally produced by those ideas must also be numerically distinct. To this, we must add that if they are distinct only numerically, and different in no other discernible respect, then their numerical twoness can be overlooked, for they have the identity of indiscernibles in all other respects. The two men have one object before them.

It is, however, not necessary to make the concession indicated. Apprehended objects are entities that exist intentionally. They are not physical entities possessing real existence. The difference between real and intentional existence, and with it, perhaps, the difference between the mode of existence that is appropriate to physical things or events and the mode of existence that is appropriate to apprehended objects, may explain why, in the realm of intentionally existing objects, one and the same object may be the single effect produced by the causal operation of numerically distinct ideas, whereas in the realm of really existing things, that can never be the case (i.e., a single effect cannot be produced by the operation of numerically distinct causes).

Fully to understand the force of what has just been said requires an understanding of the role of matter in the determination of the numerical diversity of two physical things that are two only in number or in space-time, and identical in all other respects. If one could fully understand how matter is the principle of individuation, causing two physical things which are otherwise identical to be distinct in number or in space-time, one might then also fully understand why individuation does not take place in the case of objects which do not have physical existence and do not involve matter.

Stated another way, if two objects were identical in all respects except number, there would be nothing to individuate them and make them two in number. Hence two numerically distinct ideas which are identical in intention can be the means of apprehending one and the same object, even though that one object is causally produced by two numerically distinct ideas. The numerical diversity of the ideas results from the numerical di-

versity of the persons in whose minds they are; but since the object apprehended by the two minds does not exist in the two minds that apprehend it, the twoness of the minds does not result in a numerical diversification of the object apprehended. Nor can any other factor be thought of which might result in such diversification.

This is as far as I can carry the solution of the problem we have been confronting. That solution calls attention to a number of points which deserve consideration; it overcomes certain difficulties while, at the same time, engendering others. It succeeds in solving the problem only to the extent that one is able to understand matters that lie at the very heart of the problem upon which the solution rests, such as, for example, the source or root of numerical diversification.¹

5

Having established the intentional, but not real existence of all objects of thought, let us now compare the scope of the thinkable with that of the knowable reality that exists independently of our acts of thought. Let us postpone for the moment the further question whether everything that really exists is knowable, adequately or inadequately.

Among the objects of thought that exist in reality, some are mutable and some immutable. The former constitute that realm of reality known as the realm of becoming—of things or entities that come into being and pass away—and that, while in existence, are subject to changes of various sorts while retaining an enduring identity.

As long as they have that identity while undergoing change, they have the inertia of being; that is, whatever are the causes of their coming into being, they remain in being by inertia until counteracting causes terminate their being and they pass away.

All material or physical existences are temporal and mutable beings, but not all temporal and mutable beings are material or physical. Reality also includes contingent and necessary beings; the former capable of coming into being and passing away, the latter incapable of not being; and among contingent beings, some are superficially contingent, suffering transformation into something else when they lose their identity, and some are radically contingent, passing into nothing when they cease to be.

¹ Ibid., pp.106-112.

In the realm of becoming, which is the realm of time, the real existence of things is qualified by temporal modalities—past, present, and future. Entities that once existed no longer are actual, but they still have intentional existence insofar as they are objects of memory. But much of the past is not remembered at all, so it has no present reality.

Actual existence is always in the present; and conversely, whatever exists at any present moment in the passage of time exists actually, and may also exist intentionally as a perceptual object or an object of thought. But the content of reality is not exhausted by what once did really exist in the past and what does actually exist in the present, for reality includes the future as well as the past and present.

The future is that aspect of reality in the realm of becoming that includes everything possible. Possible entities or events are that which can be, and may or may not be, among which are those things that, with some degree of probability, will be. The possible is not limited to the probable. It includes everything that can be and may be, only a small portion of which may now have intentional existence—imaginable, conceivable, and predictable. There is much that is possible which we can neither imagine nor conceive; and as *possible* it is an aspect of reality that is not actual. Another word for such realities is “potential.”

The fundamental metaphysical distinctions are (1) between that which exists subjectively and privately and that which exists objectively and publicly; (2) between intentional and real existence; (3) between real and potential real existence; (4) between contingent and necessary real existence—that which may or may not be and that which must be. What lies completely outside reality in all its modes of being is the impossible—that which cannot be and is, therefore, absolutely void of being; or, that is, nothing. What once was called the antithesis of being and non-being can also be called the antithesis of reality and nothingness.

When in some theistic religions it is said that God created the world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) what is referred to is not the nothingness of impossibility, but rather a possible reality that is not actually in existence. When it is said that God could have created other worlds than this, what is being said is that reality includes other possibilities that were not actualized.

The distinction between the mutable and temporal aspects of reality and the immutable and nontemporal involves the distinction

between time and eternity. Eternity is not everlasting time—time without beginning or end. The physical cosmos may be everlasting or infinite in time, but it is not eternal. All contingent beings are temporal ones; only that which exists necessarily and immutably is eternal.

Reality, in short, is that which has existed, does exist, can exist, may exist, and will exist, whether we think about it or not, and no matter how we think about it. To all the clauses in this statement should be added the antithetical modalities of the necessary and the contingent, the mutable and the immutable, the temporal and the nontemporal or eternal. Outside reality is the impossible—the unthinkables.

6

There are still other modalities to consider: whether that which exists exists in itself or in another (i.e., as an individual substance or as an accident or attribute thereof); as a part of an organized whole or as an organized whole; or as the member of the whole that is merely an aggregate, not an organized whole; as members of a class or as a class that has members. This last distinction calls for one comment. When the mind conceptually apprehends an object of thought concerning which the question is whether that object also has actual existence in reality, the question asked can be answered by saying either (1) that perceptual instances of that class of objects can be found or (2) the class conceptually apprehended as an object of thought cannot be perceptually instantiated, but its existence in reality can only be inferred, or not.

This brings us, finally, to the mention of the great metaphysical arguments: for the reality of God; for the reality of free will; for the immateriality of the human intellect; and for the immortality of the intellectual soul. These arguments, if sound, are, over and above all the distinctions we have so far considered, the fundamental core of metaphysical knowledge.

In each case, the question about existence in reality is being asked about an object that has intentional existence as an object of thought. One could not ask, for example, whether such incorporeal entities as angels have existence in reality, unless it was first possible to hold angels before our minds as objects of thought. That is why the statement by Thomas Hobbes (that the word “angel” is without any meaning at all because it refers to an incorporeal substance) is such a serious error.

If one could not use words to name objects of thought that have only intentional, but no real existence, as well as those that have both intentional and real existence, the great problems of metaphysics would be precluded from being raised. Being able to raise such metaphysical questions leaves open the question whether they can be answered affirmatively. If materialism could ever be proved by well-grounded negative answers to the metaphysical questions that have just been posed, that would turn materialism from dogmatic and unfounded opinion into metaphysical knowledge. 📖

Excerpted from his book, [The Four Dimensions of Philosophy \(1990\)](#)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Max,

My remarks at St. John's College Homecoming on September 26, '09:

I was born on August 20, 1937 on an island in the Atlantic Ocean off the east coast of Canada. I remember my mother telling me as a boy that I came into the world at 6:30pm. At that very moment which was 5:00pm in Annapolis, President Barr announced another birth, the birth of the new program from his office here on campus and his message which was carried live on a Baltimore radio station, traveled through space and I believe glanced off the ionosphere and was reflected back to earth somewhere on the east coast perhaps near my cradle.

I wandered for years and years across Canada seeking education and coming to rest for awhile in the belief that I had found it in business and law degrees. In the late 1970s after wandering for over 40 years, and at the same time as St. John's was reviving the spirit of Barr and Buchanan with the establishment of the Graduate Institute, I stumbled on a book by Mortimer Adler. I knew right away that this was what I had been seeking. On the second page of the preface I read, "liberal arts makes free minds. Without free minds we cannot be free men." A few pages further on I read, "the only College trying to turn out liberals artists in the true sense of the word is St. John's College in Annapolis, Maryland."

It has been a joy and a wonderful experience to discover that before St. John's the closest that I came to real education was right at home before my wandering began. I tell you that because Euclid's theorems were presented to us in the original numbers, and a grade 10 history question in 1954 was, "What is the difference for a boy

growing up in Sparta and a boy growing up in Athens?” The opening question by Geoff Comber at my first seminar in Annapolis in 1983 was, “What is the difference living in Sparta and living in Athens?”

With me tonight is my daughter Jennifer from the Graduate Institute ‘99. Also, my son-in-law Scott from Annapolis ‘99. and my grand-son Oliver from the class of 2020. Here’s to the Graduate Institute and God bless Mortimer Adler.

Frank Rodgers

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Lani Makholm

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

published weekly for its members by the

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE GREAT IDEAS

Founded in 1990 by Mortimer J. Adler & Max Weismann

Max Weismann, Publisher and Editor

Ken Dzugan, Senior Fellow and Archivist

A not-for-profit (501)(c)(3) educational organization.

Donations are tax deductible as the law allows.