

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

Mar '12

Philosophy is Everybody's Business

Nº 659



A TALE OF TWO TABLES AND A CHAIR

*A Philosophical Problem Concerning Human Existence
with a solution by Mortimer Adler*

**Max Weismann interviews
Mortimer Adler (2001)**

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In 1912, the British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, wrote a book entitled, *The Problems of Philosophy*. In the first chapter, he said that the distinction between appearance and reality is one of the distinctions that causes the most trouble in philosophy.

In examining the history of philosophy, one finds that various aspects of the problem of appearance and reality have been important issues with the great philosophers from Plato to Kant, including many contemporary philosophers. In addition, advancements made in the last century in the physical sciences, have prompted increased discussions of this problem amongst some of this centuries most eminent physicists.

What is notable here is not that this problem has and continues to cause trouble in philosophy, but why it does not cause much trouble beyond the domain of philosophy? Lord Russell did not ad-

dress this question.

The problem of appearance and reality takes many forms; all of them involve discrepancies between the way things really are and the way they appear to us.

This inquiry will examine aspects of these apparent discrepancies that have arisen from the theoretical and experimental work of modern physicists. We will examine theories that conflict with our common sense view of reality and that have consequences in our understanding of the existence of things, and in particular, human existence.

At this point, you may be inclined to ask why is this matter important to me? Why should I be concerned with what seems to be an esoteric matter of interest only to philosophers and physicists? What knowledge can philosophy contribute to scientific knowledge and our understanding about the reality of physical phenomena? What has this to do with my own existence?

I think you may be surprised when you learn the significance that a correct understanding of these matters has to do with living a good life.

Knowing that he has devoted considerable time and effort in addressing these questions, I decided to consult with my colleague Mortimer Adler to see what light he could shed on this subject.

WEISMANN: Dr. Adler, what do think that people usually have in mind when they inquire about the existence of anything?

ADLER: First of all, they are usually asking about whether the thing in question has reality. Does it exist in the real world quite independent of our minds and whatever we think or know, or is it only an object that exists for us when we use our powers of perception and thought?

A second question they may have in mind concerns the manner of existence. Does it exist in and by itself, not as a part or aspect of anything else, or is it merely the latter? If it exists alongside other things which, taken all together as an organized aggregate, constitute the whole of reality, then, of course, it exists as a part, and not entirely in and by itself. But if, when one of these other things ceases to exist, it still continues in existence, then it is not a part of that thing in the sense in which the leg of a chair would cease to

exist if the chair did.

WEISMANN: Can what you just said about the leg of a chair be also said about its color, its shape, its weight, and so on?

ADLER: Yes, these are attributes or characteristics of the chair. As such, they do not exist in and by themselves: they exist in the chair, and continue to exist only as long as the chair does.

WEISMANN: “As long as” prompts me to ask you about the duration or durability of existence; the existences of events in relation to the existence of things?

ADLER: As compared with a thing, or even with its attributes, events are existences of a short duration. A lightning flash, for example, we regard as an instantaneous event; a long peal of thunder, as an event of short duration, having a beginning, middle, and end within a brief span of time. We would not, therefore, refer to it as a thing. In contrast, a house that has been standing for a century or more, undergoing change during that time, is not an event but a thing.

WEISMANN: If I understand you correctly, you are saying in the world of physical phenomena, events do not change and that things are the only existences that are the subjects of change. My question now is do the attributes of a thing ever change?

ADLER: That’s a very good question, and an important distinction to be made, and the answer is no. Let me give you two examples: the greenness of an apple that has not yet ripened does not become red when the ripening occurs. On the contrary, it is the apple that has altered in quality, changing from green to red. It is the apple that changes in place when it is moved from here to there. And it is the human baby that changes in size and weight, and in many other respects, when it grows, not the attributes or characteristics that are “replaced” by other attributes or characteristics when these changes take place with growth.

The mutable existence of things involves another point of great importance. For a thing to change in whatever respect, it itself must remain that one and the same thing throughout the process. If it did not remain the same thing, how could we possibly speak of “it” as changing?

WEISMANN: How then, do we as human beings exist?

ADLER: Our common sense of the matter, based upon our common experience, is that human beings exist as individual things, having many attributes with respect to which they change while they remain one and the same enduring thing that is subject to all these changes.

Our own sense of our personal identity is that, from moment to moment, sleeping or waking, we are one and the same individual, the same whole of parts, the same bearer of many attributes. We do not cease to be that one individual thing, even if, with surgical amputation, we lose a part of our body; or, in the course of aging, we undergo radical changes in our physical characteristics, our personal attributes, our temperamental traits. We regard other human beings in the same light in which we view ourselves. They, too, have an identifiable identity, an enduring oneness while they undergo change.

Our common sense of the matter goes further than that. All the physical objects in the world of our daily perceptual experience—the chairs and tables, the houses and automobiles, the pet animals, the trees and plants in the garden, the stones and statues—all these are individual things, have enduring identities that are subject to change. And we think of them as possessing the various sensible qualities—the colors, textures, odors, and so on—that we experience them as having

WEISMANN: So far, what you've said comports with a common sense view of the matter. Now explain to us, what it is that the modern physical scientists are asserting that is so problematic?

ADLER: This common sense picture of the world in which we live appears to be shattered by what we are told by the physical scientists of our day.

Before we proceed and to help illustrate this point of view, I would like to quote the opening paragraphs of the introduction to his book, *The Nature of the Physical World*, by Sir Arthur S. Eddington, one of this century's most eminent physicists.

“I have settled down to the task of writing these lectures and have drawn up my two chairs to my two tables. Two tables! Yes; there are duplicates of every object about me—two tables, two chairs, two pens.



“This is not a very profound beginning to a course which ought to reach transcendent levels of scientific philosophy. But we cannot touch bedrock immediately; we must scratch a bit at the surface of things first. And whenever I begin to scratch, the first thing I strike is—my two tables.

“One of them has been familiar to me from earliest years. It is a commonplace object of that environment which I call the world. How shall I describe it? It has extension; it is comparatively permanent; it is coloured; above all it is substantial. By substantial I do not merely mean that it does not collapse when I lean upon it; I mean that it is constituted of “substance” and by that word I am trying to convey to you some conception of its intrinsic nature. It is a thing; not like space, which is a mere negation; nor like time, which is—Heaven knows what! But that will not help you to my meaning because it is the distinctive characteristic of a “thing” to have this substantiality, and I do not think substantiality can be described better than by saying that it is the kind of nature exemplified by an ordinary table. And so we go round in circles. After all if you are a plain common sense man, not too much worried with scientific scruples, you will be confident that you understand the nature of an ordinary table. I have heard of plain men who had the idea that they could better understand the mystery of their own nature if scientists would discover a way of explaining it in terms of the easily comprehensible nature of a table.

“Table No. 2 is my scientific table. It is a more recent acquaintance and I do not feel so familiar with it. It does not belong to the world previously mentioned—that world which spontaneously appears around me when I open my eyes, though how much of it is objective and how much is subjective I do not here consider. It is part of a world which in more devious ways has forced itself on my attention. My scientific table is mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed; but their combined bulk amounts to less than a billionth of the bulk of the table itself. Notwithstanding its strange construction it turns out to be an entirely efficient table. It supports my writing paper as satisfactorily as Table No. 1; for when I lay

the paper on it the little electric particles with their headlong speed keep on hitting the underside, so that the paper is maintained in shuttlecock fashion at a nearly steady level. If I lean upon this table I shall not go through; or, to be strictly accurate, the chance of my scientific elbow going through my scientific table is so excessively small that it can be neglected in practical life. Reviewing their properties one by one, there seems to be nothing to choose between the two tables for ordinary purposes; but when abnormal circumstances befall, then my scientific table shows to advantage. If the house catches fire my scientific table will dissolve quite naturally into scientific smoke, whereas my familiar table undergoes a metamorphosis of its substantial nature which I can only regard as miraculous.

“There is nothing substantial about my second table. It is nearly all empty space—space pervaded, it is true, by fields of force, but these are assigned to the category of “influences,” not of “things.” Even in the minute part which is not empty we must not transfer the old notion of substance. In dissecting matter into electric charges we have traveled far from that picture of it which first gave rise to the conception of substance, and the meaning of that conception—if it ever had any—has been lost by the way. The whole trend of modern scientific views is to break down the separate categories of “things,” “influences,” “forms,” etc., and to substitute a common background of all experience. Whether we are studying a material object, a magnetic field, a geometrical figure, or a duration of time, our scientific information is summed up in measures; neither the apparatus of measurement nor the mode of using it suggests that there is anything essentially different in these problems. The measures themselves afford no ground for a classification by categories. We feel it necessary to concede some background to the measures—an external world; but the attributes of this world, except insofar as they are reflected in the measures, are outside scientific scrutiny. Science has at last revolted against attaching the exact knowledge contained in these measurements to a traditional picture-gallery of conceptions which convey no authentic information of the background and obtrude irrelevances into the scheme of knowledge.

“I will not here stress further the nonsubstantiality of electrons, since it is scarcely necessary to the present line of thought. Conceive them as substantially as you will, there is a vast difference between my scientific table with its substance (if any) thinly scattered in specks in a region mostly empty and the table of everyday conception which we regard as the type of solid reality—an incarnate protest against Berkelian subjectivism. It makes all the differ-

ence in the world whether the paper before me is poised as it were on a swarm of flies and sustained in a shuttlecock fashion by a series of tiny blows from the swarm underneath, or whether it is supported because there is substance below it, it being the intrinsic nature of substance to occupy space to the exclusion at least, but no difference to my practical task of writing on the paper.

“I need not tell you that modern physics has by delicate test and remorseless logic assured me that my second scientific table is the only one which is really there—wherever “there” may be. On the other hand I need not tell you that modern physics will never succeed in exorcising that first table—strange compound of external nature, mental imagery, and inherited prejudice—which lies visible to my eyes and tangible to my grasp.

“We must bid good-bye to it for the present for we are about to turn from the familiar world to the scientific world revealed by physics. This is, or is intended to be a wholly external world.

““You speak paradoxically of two worlds. Are they not really two aspects or two interpretations of one and the same world?”

“Yes, no doubt they are ultimately to be identified after some fashion. But the process by which the external world of physics is transformed into a world of familiar acquaintance in human consciousness is outside the scope of physics. And so the world studied according to the methods of physics remains detached from the world familiar to consciousness, until after the physicist has fashioned his labours upon it. Provisionally, therefore, we regard the table which is the subject of physical research as altogether separate from the familiar table, without prejudging the question of their ultimate identification.

“It is true that the whole scientific inquiry starts from the familiar and in the end it must return to the familiar world but the part of the journey over which the physicist has charge is in foreign territory.”

WEISMANN: I must say that I was taken aback by Sir Arthur’s claim that Table 2 is the only one which is “really there.” What was your reaction?

We welcome your comments, questions or suggestions.

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THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

is 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.

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