



# ESSAY

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<Do Virtue and Vice Exist Independently from the Human Mind?>

## 1. Introduction

The question of morality regarding what is right and what is wrong has been the subject of interest for our species for millennia. As countless examples of religion and folklore from civilizations all over the world attest, the battle between good and evil, virtue and vice seems to be an underlying theme of the human condition. David Hume, in his work *A Treatise of Human Nature*, contends that the concepts of virtue and vice are merely perceptions in our minds rather than qualities in objects. In this essay, I will first analyze Hume's argument regarding the nature of virtue and vice. Then, I will proceed to argue that while Hume is justified in his belief that virtue and vice are perceptions in the mind, his belief that physical concepts such as color and sound only exist in the mind needs reconsideration.

Hume, a steadfast empiricist, believed that all knowledge could be traced back to what he calls "impressions," which we derive from our perceptions of the world. Hume believed that all knowledge, no matter how complex, could be traced back to an impression from which that knowledge was birthed. In this context, it is not surprising that Hume compares virtue and vice to sensory perceptions such as "sounds, colors, heat and cold," which he claims are not innate qualities and rather the result of human perception. This seems to coincide with the concept of Idealism, which is the belief that there is no objective truth or reality, and that our subjective perception of reality is all that it is comprised of.

Hume's argument that virtue and vice are no more than perceptions seems to reside on the following premises:

1. Sensory information such as color and sound exist only in the mind.
2. Virtue and vice are comparable to color and sound.
3. Therefore, virtue and vice are only perceptions in the mind.

I shall proceed to delve into Hume's argument by addressing each premise.



## 2. The Nature of Perception and Existence

Let us first address the question of whether the information we receive from our sensory organs exists independently of our perception. We find it silly when a child closes his eyes in a game of hide-and-seek, believing that if he can't see you, then you can't see him. To the immature and underdeveloped mind of the child, the world seems to disappear whenever he closes his eyes and blocks his ears. The child is yet unaware of the concept of object permanence, the understanding that objects do not cease to exist when they are hidden from view. However, when we observe the peculiar behavior of quantum particles, we find that the child was not entirely flawed in his understanding. As demonstrated by the famous thought experiment known as Schrodinger's Cat, the quantum state of a particle is undetermined until the very moment we observe it. The quantum physicist Schrodinger imagined a box which contained a cat and a bottle of poison, which was programmed to break open when a particular substance underwent radioactive decay, resulting in the death of the cat. The radioactive decay of the substance was to be determined by the laws of quantum mechanics, and it was hypothesized that it had an equal chance of being stable as it had of being unstable. Schrodinger came to the conclusion that since the radioactive decay of the substance had an element of quantum duality, which is the state of being in two different states simultaneously, it would be reasonable to say that the cat was somehow alive and dead at the same time. It is only when he opens the box that the state of the cat is determined. In other words, unlike the world around the child which remains in existence even when the child closes his eyes, certain physical phenomena such as the quantum behavior of a particle or the well-being of Schrodinger's Cat, exist only in the context of human observation.

If sensory information such as sounds and colors only exist within the human mind as Hume believes, one would quickly arrive at the following questions: "If human perceptions in the mind are all there is to reality, then how can different individuals with differing perceptive abilities agree upon facts such as the height of the Eiffel Tower or the mass of a ten-kilogram dumbbell? Wouldn't it be reasonable to assume that some quantitative truths such as mathematical measurements and scientific data exist regardless of human perception?" In his theory of transcendental idealism, Immanuel Kant put forward the notion that while the physical world, or "noumena," exists, humans will only every be able to perceive imperfect interpretations of the world, or "phenomena." Kant believed that due to the physical limitations of human perception, it would be impossible to transcend the imperfections of our interpretation of the physical world. While this does not provide any direct evidence of whether the world exists regardless of our perceptions, it does convey the idea that perceptions, or phenomena, must stem from something that is firmly rooted in existence, or noumena.

Indeed, considering the process by which humans receive and interpret information, it is unreasonable to say that perceptions are all there is to reality, since that model is unable to explain exactly where the perceptions come from in the first place, and how different individuals with differing perceptions can agree on certain statements about the universe. While it might be true that Schrodinger's Cat is never truly alive or dead until the moment we observe it, that does not render it nonexistent. From the same logic, I conclude that physical concepts such as



sound, color, heat, and cold are not merely perceptions in the mind as Hume believed. It is logical to assume that such concepts have a basis in reality that is independent from our perceptions to some degree in order to account for certain occurrences that are otherwise inexplicable. If colors and sounds only exist within the human mind, how do animals, which are thought to be incapable of exercising reason, hunt and gather their food using visual and auditory cues, and why would their perception of color and sound agree with those of humans?

### 3. Physical and Abstract Existence

Let us return to the second question of whether virtue and vice are comparable to colors and sounds. Although we have previously established that colors and sounds are not entirely limited to our minds, the concepts of virtue and vice need further scrutiny, as they possess very different characteristics. For example, while we find the idea of killing an innocent baby horrifically immoral, many would agree to perform the act if they were somehow capable of knowing that the baby would in fact grow up to become a ruthless dictator responsible for the deaths of millions. While many would condemn the general act of killing a baby as “vicious”, they would also agree that killing a prospective mass murderer is “virtuous”.<sup>1</sup> One would therefore be able to make the observation that the scope of disagreement for statements regarding abstract concepts is much larger than that of statements regarding the physical world (While many would hesitate to decide whether an action is virtuous or vicious, few would disagree upon the height of the Pyramids of Giza).

This is not, however, an effective way to indicate the difference between physical and abstract existence, as whether the scope of disagreement is large or small is too subjective of a criterion. Instead, the answer lies in the reason why statements regarding abstract concepts are so much more difficult to agree upon compared to physical ones. While physical statements have a physical reference in the perceivable world around us, that is not always the case for abstract ones. We can say, for instance, that there is one moon orbiting the Earth without much debate, whereas many would disagree on the statement that the moon is beautiful. This is because while the word “moon” has a physical reference that we can perceive with our sensory organs, the word “beautiful” does not. Some may argue that the fact that one moon is orbiting the earth exists only in our minds, or that the word “one” does not have a physical reference that is perceivable. However, the first argument fails to give a valid explanation for as to why the specific idea of a large body of rock revolving around our planet was conceived in the mind of so many different individuals in different spatiotemporal contexts. The second argument can be resolved by rephrasing the statement as such: “There is x such that ‘y is a satellite that orbits the earth’ is true when, and only when, x is y.”

Similarly, while the concepts of color and sound have physical entities that we can refer to, such as “photon with a frequency and amplitude of x,” the concepts of virtue and vice are abstract because they do not have a specific and perceivable physical entity that corresponds to their ideas. As is the distinction between physical and abstract concepts, Hume is not justified in his comparison between color and sound and virtue and vice, as they belong in different categories altogether.

### 4. Virtue and Vice as a Social Construct

We have observed that while physical concepts do not solely exist within the mind, virtue and vice, which are abstract concepts, are distinct from physical concepts. This distinction,



however, is not sufficient for the conclusion that abstract concepts exist only within the mind. Do abstract concepts only exist within our minds without a physical representation in the material world? Let us consider a world in which rational beings, such as humans or other possibly intelligent life, have never been brought into existence. Would one be justified in saying that abstract concepts such as virtue and vice, justice and beauty still exist in that world? If there is no rational being to perceive and make judgements on natural occurrences, it is unreasonable to assume that abstract concepts exist independently from the judgements themselves. Unlike physical concepts that rely to some degree on the material world, virtue and vice are subjective concepts that entirely belong to the human mind.

## 5. Conclusion

In this regard, while Hume was justified in saying that virtue and vice are concepts in the mind, his belief that physical concepts also solely pertain to the mind needs some reconsideration.

Although I have established that the world is not comprised entirely of ideas and perception, that is not to say that it is purely materialistic and independent of reason. Just as reason without experience is empty, experience without reason also lacks objectivity. If the world were to be comprised of nothing but physical entities and objective truths, As Aristotle believed that a virtue is the mean between the two most extreme choices according to his doctrine of the mean, I find it reasonable to conclude that the physical world is not entirely idealistic nor materialistic, but comprised of a mixture of both.

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<sup>ii</sup> Deontologists, such as Kant, would still believe that the act of killing is immoral in and of itself, but for the purpose of illustrating how the concepts of virtue and vice are subjective, I have written it as such.