

# A Philosophical Refutation of Reductionism

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Ronald Knox once quipped that "the study of comparative religions is the best way to become comparatively religious." The reason, as G. K. Chesterton says, is that, according to most "scholars" of comparative religion, "Christianity and Buddhism are very much alike, especially Buddhism."

But any Christian who does apologetics must think about comparative religions because the most popular of all objections against the claims of Christianity today comes from this field. The objection is not that Christianity is not true but that it is not the truth; not that it is a false religion but that it is only a religion. The world is a big place, the objector reasons; "different strokes for different folks". How insufferably narrow-minded to claim that Christianity is the one true religion! God just has to be more open-minded than that.

This is the single most common objection to the Faith today, for "today" worships not God but equality. It fears being right where others are wrong more than it fears being wrong. It worships democracy and resents the fact that God is an absolute monarch. It has changed the meaning of the word honor from being respected because you are superior in some way to being accepted because you are not superior in any way but just like us. The one unanswerable insult, the absolutely worst name you can possibly call a person in today's society, is "fanatic", especially "religious fanatic". If you confess at a fashionable cocktail party that you are plotting to overthrow the government, or that you are a PLO terrorist or a KGB spy, or that you molest porcupines or bite bats' heads off, you will soon attract a buzzing, fascinated, sympathetic circle of listeners. But if you confess that you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, you will find yourself suddenly alone, with a distinct chill in the air.

Here are twelve of the commonest forms of this objection, the odium of elitism, with answers to each.



## The Issue

The most usual position among philosophers in the Western world today, in fact the most usual position among academics generally, is some kind of reductionism. By "reductionism" I mean simply the belief that the world-view, or implicit metaphysics, of most people, or ordinary people, especially people of previous eras and cultures, errs by believing too much; that Hamlet's Shakespeare was exactly wrong when he said to Horatio that "there are *more* things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in your philosophy." The prevailing view among modern Western intellectuals is that there are in fact *fewer* things, or fewer *kinds* of things, or fewer *dimensions* of things, in heaven and earth, that is, in objective reality, than in most people's philosophies or beliefs. Thus most modern philosophers see the role of philosophical education primarily as a disillusioning, a debunking of myth, superstition, and naivete.

This contrasts sharply with the way Plato and most classical philosophers saw the role of philosophy and the purpose of philosophical education. They saw it as a "leading-out" (that is the literal meaning of our word "education": from the Latin *e-ducare*), leading the student out of a smaller, narrower belief-system that was like a little underground cave into a radically larger world. For Plato, this meant a world with more than the two metaphysical dimensions that most people believe exists: objective matter and subjective spirit or mind. It meant a third dimension, the dimension of objective Platonic Forms, objectively real Ideas that were not dependent on subjective minds.

Plato's "cave," the most famous image in the history of philosophy, and Plato's "theory of Forms" or "theory of Ideas," the most famous theory in the history of philosophy, exemplify the claim that Shakespeare was right. For they claim that that there is not just another world, but another whole *kind* of world, another whole dimension of reality, which is neither subjective consciousness nor objective matter, but objective Form, essence, Idea, meaning, or "whatness."

When Shakespeare had Hamlet utter his famous statement comparing the number of things in heaven and earth, that is, in objective reality, with the number of things in your philosophy, that is, in subjective consciousness, he probably did not have Plato's theory of Forms in mind explicitly. Hamlet was simply telling Horatio that ghosts are real even though Horatio did not believe they were; that heaven and earth were more commodious than Horatio's thoughts because they contained real ghosts. But what is common to both Plato and Shakespeare is the view that ordinary thinking errs not by believing too much to be real, but too little.

Certainly, most traditional philosophers, that is, most pre-modern philosophers, held this view. This is certainly true of Eastern philosophy, of Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist philosophy. (We can call these religions "philosophies" insofar as they are examples of the human "love of wisdom," though not primarily through the instrument of reason). It is true also of most pre-modern Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers. But the modern tendency in the West is the opposite. It could be called "reductionism." It seeks to reduce rather than to expand the student's objects of belief. This tendency is already clearly present in Bacon, Machiavelli, Descartes, and Hobbes. In fact, it began with William of Ockham's Nominalism, the denial of objectively real universals, which even in the 14th century was called the "via moderna," the modern way.

I will label these two directions in philosophy "reductionism" and "transcendent-alism," just to have two handy, one-word terms. I mean by "transcendentalism" not the particular philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau but simply Shakespeare's view that there is more, not less, in objective reality than we usually think.



## **The Thesis**

It is usually thought today, by both reductionists and transcendentalists alike, that reason (in the modern sense of severely logical reasoning rather than in the older sense of the word "reason" that included intuitive or contemplative wisdom) leads to reductionism, and that the only way to justify transcendentalism is to reduce reason to a secondary or instrumental status and to exalt

something else over it -- for instance, intuition, desire, imagination or religious faith. The purpose of this paper is to refute that idea by demonstrating, by strictly logical reasoning, (1) that reductionism is self-contradictory, and (2) that transcendentalism is self-evident once we admit data from our three most valued and distinctively human powers, namely our power to think anything true, to choose anything good, and to appreciate anything beautiful.



## **Narrowing the Definition**

We must first define transcendentalism more carefully. For in one sense, transcendentalism is obviously and non-controversially true: there are a larger *number of entities* in the world than we know about, more than any one individual human being and even all human beings, are aware of: more galaxies, more bacteria, more craters on the moon, more species of insects, etc. But that is merely quantitative. What is controversial is *qualitative* transcendentalism, which claims not merely that there are more *things* but more *kinds* of things than we think, more dimensions; that there are, in addition to rocks and dogs and stars, also things like gods or God, ghosts or angels, Platonic Ideas or Hegelian dialectical triads, attributes of Brahman or of Allah, and after-death experiences of reincarnations on earth or levels of Heaven and Hell. I do not claim to demonstrate the truth of any one of these *particular* versions of transcendentalism, but simply to demonstrate transcendentalism in principle.

Other meanings of "transcendence" are either too broad or too narrow for our purposes here. The term is too broad if it means simply any kind of moreness, for no one denies the purely quantitative moreness I mentioned above. Also no one denies the literal, physical transcendence of a flying airplane over the ground, or of a tall person over a short one, or the quantitative transcendence of the number 4 over the number 3, or of the amount of territory in the United States in the 21st century over the amount of territory in the United States in the 18th century, or the psychological transcendence of an act of disobedience to a law over the intention of the lawmaker to limit such acts. I want to use the term more narrowly and controversially than that.

On the other hand, "transcendence" is often used in a specifically theistic sense, as asserting a transcendent Creator-God. This is only one case in point of what I mean by "transcendence," though probably the most important one. But I want to include also things like Plato's "Ideas," Plotinus's "One beyond being," Buddha's "Nirvana," Spinoza's "natura naturans," and even Shankara's nondualistic notion of Brahman, which is monistic or pantheistic or pan-entheistic and thus not transcendent in the theistic sense. What all of these have in common is the claim that there are more kinds of things in reality than we ordinarily believe.



## **Summary**

I will first refute reductionism in general, then three of the most important forms of reductionism in particular, namely the reduction of thought to something material, of moral choice to something relative, and of aesthetic experience to something subjective. Metaphysical

materialism, moral relativism, and aesthetic subjectivism are three of the most popular forms of relativism, among ordinary people as well as philosophers. And they are all logically refutable.



## The Refutation of Reductionism in General

Here is my logical refutation of reductionism.

The formula for reductionism is that "S is nothing more than P", or "S is only P," or "there is no more in S than P." For instance, we may say "He's nothing but a fake," denying that he is authentic, or trustable, or truth-telling. Or we may say "that monster was nothing but a dream," denying that it exists outside the dream. Or we may say that "love is nothing but lust" or "thinking is nothing but cerebral biochemistry," or "evolution is nothing but the survival of the fittest" or "religion is nothing but superstition." My argument here is not with the content but with the logical form of these assertions, so my point applies to all assertions that have this logical form, no matter what their content.

"S is nothing but P" means "there is nothing more in S than there is in P." This, in turn, means that "there is no more-than-P S," or "there is no trans-P S," or "S does not transcend P." For instance, "love is nothing but lust" means "there is no more-than-lust love," or "there is no love that transcends lust." Thus the formula for reductionism can always be expressed as an E proposition, a universal negative.

But there is a well-known difficulty in justifying universal negative propositions. To say that "there is no S that transcends P" means that "there is *in all reality* no S that transcends P." For instance, to say that there is no real Santa Claus is to say that there is no real Santa Claus anywhere in the world, either at the North Pole or at the equator or in your closet.

Let us define Santa literally, as the entity in the popular story, the fat man in the red flannel suit who lives near the North Pole, employs elves to make toys, and flies magical reindeer through the skies to deliver presents to children around the world every Christmas. Even asserting skepticism about the existence of this literal Santa Claus has a logical difficulty. It is this: to claim that there is no Santa Claus is to claim *that you know* that there is no Santa Claus; and that is to claim that you know this universal negative, that you know that there is no Santa Claus anywhere in objective reality, as distinct from subjective reality, or consciousness, or imagination, or belief.

The difficulty is that in order to know that a proposition of this kind is true, we would have to know all of objective reality. For if we do not, then we cannot be sure that the thing we have denied existence to might not exist in some corner, or dimension, or part, or area, of objective reality that we did not know about.

The difficulty can be overcome, however, and the assertion that there is no Santa can be reasonably verified. For it does not require a universal knowledge of *every particular*, only of some empirical facts. For instance, we do not need to search every closet to be sure there is no

Santa. For Santa, as defined, lives and works at the North Pole, and we have mapped all the regions around the North Pole and are quite sure that there are no factories there capable of producing enough toys for all the world's children. Also, the laws of physics prevent anyone, even if he had magic flying reindeer, from flying to every child's house in the world and depositing Christmas presents in one night.

(By the way, I do not think that magic flying reindeer are refuted in the same way by the laws of empirical physics, any more than any other kind of magic is. It is not logically impossible that some entities perform acts which defy physical laws, if those entities are not *merely* physical entities. We ourselves defy gravity whenever we decide to jump, because while we live we are not merely physical entities, but have souls or minds or wills, which interfere with matter, as a hand interferes with a sword's tendency to fall whenever that hand swings the sword. But when we die, we (or what is left of us in this world) become merely physical entities. That is what we bury in cemeteries. And what we bury in cemeteries never jumps around and defies physical laws, just as a sword always drops to the ground and stays there when no longer wielded by a hand.)

Now let us substitute *God* for Santa Claus. (According to atheism, that is exactly what we do when we grow up.) God is not the only example of transcendence, but He is clearly the one most important, most interesting, and most argued about. So let us analyze what we are saying when we say "there is no God."

Let us define or describe God as most people do, as "the being that created the universe." Thus God by definition transcends the universe. So when we say that there is no God we are saying that there is in all reality no being that transcends the universe, that there is nothing more in reality than there is in the universe.

Now in order for us to know that there is nothing more in all reality than there is in the universe, we have to know something about all reality -- in fact, we have to know enough about it to be sure that it excludes God. And if the idea of God is neither logically self-contradictory nor refuted by any empirical fact, then in order to justify the assertion that there is no God, we must know that there is no corner of reality, no kind of reality, and no dimension of reality, in which God can possibly exist. And that means that we have to know every corner, every kind, and every dimension of reality. The word for that kind of knowledge is "omniscience." It is an attribute of God. If there is an omniscient being, that being is God. So the claim that we can know that there is no God logically implies that the person who makes that claim has omniscience, that is, is God. So to claim to know that there is no God is to imply that there is a God, and that he is now speaking.

Merely refuting reductionism does not yet give us any positive evidence for transcendentalism, however, just as merely refuting atheism does not give you positive evidence for theism. We might well be stuck in agnosticism, unable to prove either of the two contradictory propositions, that there is or that there is not a God, or a Santa Claus, or any S that is more than P. So I offer three proofs for transcendentalism, in three different areas of human experience: thinking, choosing, and loving, which are our attempts to get at, or know, or attain, or deal with, the three ideals that we usually believe raise us above the animals, the three ideals everyone wants, and

wants without limit: truth, goodness, and beauty. The three commonest forms of reductionism in these three areas are metaphysical materialism, moral relativism, and aesthetic subjectivism.



## **The Demonstration of Metaphysical Transcendence**

The commonest form of metaphysical reductionism, and the most philosophically interesting and controversial one, is materialism, which is the claim that everything that is real is material; that there is not a second dimension or kind of reality that is immaterial, or spiritual, or mental, but that what we call mind and mental phenomena can be reduced to and explained as merely material phenomena. According to materialism, all that happens when we calculate that  $21+31=52$ , or when we judge that murder is evil, or when we believe that God exists, or that we perceive the sky as blue, or when we predict that we will die, is that certain bundles of physical energy are doing certain physical things, like moving across synapses or producing chemical reactions, in our brains. The claim is that there are no immaterial phenomena that cannot be explained as material phenomena.

Now there is one very easy refutation of this argument for materialism. It is simply that the premise does not entail the conclusion. For even if we grant the premise that we find no immaterial phenomena that cannot be fully explained as material phenomena, this does not logically entail the conclusion that there are no immaterial phenomena, any more than the fact that we find no convex curve in the Canadian border of America that cannot be explained as a concave curve in the American border of Canada entails the fact that there is no Canada but only America.

In fact, the very same argument that the materialist uses to justify materialism can be used, with equal force, by an immaterialist, that is, by someone who believes that matter does not exist and all is mind. For we can find no material phenomena that cannot be explained as immaterial phenomena, as projections of consciousness or forms of consciousness. For as soon as you think about a thing, even if that thing is a supposedly material thing like a rock, that thing has become an ingredient in your consciousness. It is in principle impossible to think of a rock that cannot be explained as the *thought* of a rock.

(And if the thought is true, by the most common definition of truth, there is *nothing different* in the thought than in the thing, that is, nothing different in the "rock" in quotation marks and the rock without quotation marks, except the quotation marks; and the quotation marks are not part of the material inside the quotation marks. Insofar as there is any difference between the thought in the quotation marks and the thing outside the quotation marks, the thought designated by the quotation marks is not true, because it is not the same as the thing.)

You can explain all supposedly material phenomena as immaterial just as you can explain all supposedly immaterial phenomena as material. Imagine the two sets of phenomena listed in two parallel columns. There is no phenomenon in either of the two columns that does not have an identical twin in the other column. The two columns match perfectly, so that monistic materialism, common sense dualism, and monistic spiritualism all explain the data. (So does

William James' "neutral monism," although that one neutral stuff that is neither matter nor spirit cannot be defined or conceived except negatively.)

But this leaves us undecided among the three (or four) alternative metaphysics. It does not refute any one of them, all of which explain the data. It only refutes the materialist's claimed refutation of spirit and the immaterialist's claimed refutation of matter. I want to go farther: I want to refute materialism, as my primary example of metaphysical reductionism.



## **The Refutation of Materialism**

The refutation depends on one simple and obvious premise: that *the knowledge of a thing is not one of the parts of that thing*. I shall first prove this premise (that will take some time), and then I will use it to prove my conclusion that knowledge transcends matter (that will not take much time at all).

Let's say you want to know x. Let's say x is Beatrice and you are Dante. Now all knowing, insofar as it is *knowing*, is true, is accurate. And this means, according to common sense, that it is all that the thing known is. Aristotle's "identity theory" of truth is simply what common sense means by truth. A true thought matches the real thing so that there is nothing added or subtracted. If there is a lack of identity between the objective thing and the subjective thought of it, there is a fault in the thought, a lack of knowledge. There is no such thing as false knowledge.

Of course none of us can have complete knowledge of anything or anybody, not even a flea, much less Beatrice. Only God is omniscient and infallible, by definition; that is, only God, the creator and designer of Beatrice, if He exists, could know everything there is to know about her. And we are not God. (I apologize if this news upsets any of you.) Yet not only do "all men by nature desire to know," as Aristotle famously said, but we want to know everything there is to know about everything there is to know, in Bernard Lonergan's formula. That is what curiosity means.

Now let's suppose you are Dante, and you know something new about Beatrice: that she ate a plum this morning. Then that knowledge is a new fact about you, a new piece of knowing for you; but your knowing this new fact about Beatrice does not add anything new to Beatrice, as the plum did. If it did, then that would falsify the Beatrice you want to know, which is Beatrice-as-she-is-in-herself, not merely Beatrice-as-known-by-you. There is no problem at all in knowing Beatrice-as-known-by-you; that happens automatically, by definition. You want to know more than that; you want to know Beatrice-as-she-really-is-in-herself; and because you usually do not succeed at this task, it is a struggle and not an automatic success.

If Beatrice sees you looking at her, this changes her; this is a new fact about her. But if she does not see you looking at her, your looking does not change her, only you. New facts about you do not of themselves constitute new facts about her.

(If you are thinking about Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle here, and wondering whether the observation of B by A might not change B as well as A, I am here assuming that Einstein was right and Heisenberg wrong about the Uncertainty Principle; that the act of knowing a thing, mentally, does not change the thing, unless it also changes it physically, by interfering with light waves, for instance. If the mental act of knowing B changed A (whether B is Beatrice or a subatomic particle), then knowledge of B would be impossible, because things would change and jump outside our knowledge as soon as we knew them, as if the target would jump away from the arrow just as the arrow was about to enter it, so that no arrow would ever hit its target; no knowledge would ever know its intended object -- even the mental object labeled 'Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle.' Thus the Uncertainty Principle, interpreted ontologically, seems self-contradictory, like all forms of universal skepticism.)

(I am also implicitly assuming an epistemological realism in assuming that we are like archers, and acts of knowing are like arrows, and bows are like minds, and targets are like the things we want to know. I am assuming that ideas are not targets but arrows; that ideas are means-of-knowing or acts-of-knowing, not objects-of-knowing; that real things are our targets, or objects-of-knowing. I am assuming that Aquinas is right in ST I, 85, 2 when he defines ideas as means of knowing and real things as objects of knowing, and that Locke is wrong in the very first sentence of his *Essay*, when he defines an idea as the object of knowing. For if that were true, then we could never know whether or not any of our ideas corresponded to or were identical with the real world, and we would have to draw Hume's skeptical conclusion. We would be like prisoners in a jail cell who saw only pictures of the outside world on a TV screen; without a direct knowing of the outside world, we could never know which of the pictures were true and which were not.)

So Beatrice's plum is a new part of Beatrice, not of me (Dante), and my knowing this is a new part of me, not of her. That this must be so can be shown by a merely logical analysis. Let us suppose that 9000 facts about Beatrice constitute the whole Beatrice. If my knowing these 9000 facts constituted fact # 9001 about her, then I could not know her, because the Beatrice I knew would be "Beatrice minus fact #9001," and that is not the true Beatrice, any more than Beatrice-without-a-plum is not the true Beatrice this morning.

Knowledge cannot commit suicide in the very act of coming to life; and that is what it would do if each act of knowledge changed the old object to a new one in the very act of trying to know the old one.

From this crucial premise, that I have taken such a long time to expound, I quickly deduce the falsity of materialism. I do this by adding just one more premise, namely that modern science is possible. Modern science claims to know some principles that are true for the whole universe, principles like  $F=MA$  or  $E=MC$  squared. Now since the universe is the sum total of all material things (matter, time, and space being correlative), it follows that modern science knows some truths about all of matter.

Now take this second premise -- that by science *we can know the universe*, and combine it with our first premise, *that the knowledge of any thing is not one of the parts of that thing*, and you get the conclusion that *our knowledge of the universe is not part of the universe*, but an addition to it, transcending it.

The conclusion is shocking to the reductionist. As C.S. Lewis puts it in *Miracles*, it gives us a metaphysic that is like the moon: a material body pockmarked with craters caused by things that came from outside, like meteors, fingerprints of transcendence. Each of these meteors symbolizes an act of knowing. Reductionism gives us a picture of reality that is like the moon with craters caused from within by its own volcanoes (which many astronomers believed to be the true source of lunar craters until the middle of the 20th century). Transcendentalism gives us a picture of the universe that is like the moon with craters caused by meteors that come from beyond the moon. Intelligent extraterrestrials looking at the farms and cities of our globe from their space ship would not explain these things in the same way as they would explain earth's geological formations, for they are effects not just of material forces but of acts of knowing material forces and knowing how to change them.

The simple "bottom line" is that since any act of knowing transcends its object, the act of knowing the universe transcends the universe. Of course, this conclusion is intuitively obvious to those whose "right brain" is still working well, because mere matter can't know anything at all, only mind can, however dependent on brain matter and external matter its actions may be. But sometimes it is necessary to prove what is intuitively obvious, to someone whose "right brain" has abdicated all its authority to the left.