

Materialism or Immaterialism?

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a material painting



an immaterial painting

I've been working on an article called [Are You Minding What Matters?](#) for several months now. I haven't posted any of it on the site yet, but I figured I'd do so now. The article is composed of

several “lessons” the first of which is regarding the nature of reality. Here it is:

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### Lesson One: A Firm Foundation

If the set of principles by which we make our decisions is not grounded in reality, we don't have much of a chance of heading the right way. It would be like a compass that doesn't point north or a map depicting a fictional world. We might find the compass interesting and we might like the fictional world depicted in the map, but the fact is, using it to find directions would be delusional. We need a means of navigating the real world, and for that, we need a basic awareness of the nature of reality.

There are multiple views as to what constitutes reality, but we can put these views into two broad categories: Materialism and Immaterialism. Materialism is the view that the one and only substance of which reality is composed is matter – physical “stuff” – three-dimensional stuff with size, position, shape, structure, and so on. Immaterialism is the view that non-material, or non-physical “stuff” exists. Some forms of immaterialism state that both material and immaterial things exist while other forms of immaterialism state that all existence is ultimately immaterial, matter being an illusion. In any case, if any form of immaterialism is true, materialism is false. And if materialism is true, all forms of immaterialism are false. The two views are genuine opposites, one being the direct negation of the other.

Knowing whether reality is fundamentally material or whether immateriality exists is not a question of highfalutin philosophy with no relevance to everyday life. On the contrary, the answer to this question has downstream effects on virtually every other area of inquiry, including religion, health, politics, and the list goes on. Essentially, the answer to this question (whatever it may be) tells us the nature of truth. When we hear an idea and ask, “Is that true?” what are we asking? If reality is solely material, then to call an idea “true” would be to say that it matches material reality. But if reality includes immateriality, whether in part or in whole, then to call an idea “true” would be to say that it matches that immaterialistic reality. The answer to the question of whether reality is materialistic or immaterialistic will provide us with the basic idea of what truth is and thus give us the standard by which to test all other ideas. It is difficult to imagine any question more fundamental and important than that!

So, how can we know the answer? Finding out whether matter exists wouldn't give us the answer since some forms of immaterialism say that both matter and non-matter are real. Determining whether immateriality exists, on the other hand, would give us the answer since if it does exist, that would mean that some form of immaterialism is true, and if it doesn't exist, then materialism must be true.

In order to know that a thing exists, we first have to have at least a basic idea of what that thing is; otherwise, what are we even talking about? So, what is immateriality? Well, the word “immaterial” literally means “not material.” But that just tells us what it isn't, not what it is. Other common terms for “immaterial” are “non-physical,” “incorporeal,” and “supernatural.” But these terms just mean “not physical,” “not corporeal” (which is to say “not bodily”), and “beyond nature.” But again, all of these expressions are only saying what it is not, not what it is. The word “spiritual” doesn't help either since people define “spiritual stuff” only by reference to these other terms like “non-physical” and so on. So, what is immateriality?! Well, it's hard to say based on the labels people use to talk about it since those labels don't actually tell us anything about it.

The other way people try to describe immateriality is by using analogies. For example, some may say that immateriality is like electricity. As with all analogies, this is supposed to be saying that immateriality is in some way *like* electricity. But in what way? Electricity is all about currents of charged particles passing through a conductor, but with immateriality there are no particles, no currents, and no conductors. To say that immateriality is like electricity other than it has no particles, currents, or conductors is to say that immateriality is like electricity except for everything that makes electricity electricity! In other words, it isn't like electricity at all! And if there are no similarities, the analogy isn't even really an analogy.

Some use air as an analogy for immateriality, but air is a layer of gas (one of the fundamental states of *matter*) composed of oxygen, nitrogen, and other elements. Immateriality is supposed to be “not material,” so it can't have a material state, like gas, nor can it be composed of elements or have physical motion like air does. Once again, it isn't like air at all! For one thing to be used as an analogy for another thing, it doesn't have to be the same – in fact, it needs to be different (otherwise it would be identical, not analogous), but it can't be different in literally every way – it has to be similar in *some* way in order for the analogy to mean anything. Since every analogy for immateriality compares it to something material, but then says it is like it in none of its attributes, they are all false analogies and get us nowhere in terms of understanding what immateriality is.

When all is said and done, all anyone can ever say about immateriality is that it is “not \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank).” Again, that is “not physical,” “not material,” “not solid,” “not liquid,” “not made of particles,” “not composed of elements,” and “not \_\_\_\_\_ [literally anything and everything].” Indeed, this blank is filled by literally anything and everything that anyone could ever think of. What this means is that no one actually has any idea as to what immateriality actually is; we just think of what it isn't ... and it isn't ... everything.

There is literally no difference in the content of the idea people think of when speaking of “immateriality” and the content of the idea people think of when speaking of “nonexistence.” Both terms evoke the negation of all things we can possibly imagine. And since there is literally no difference between these ideas, they are, in fact, the same idea merely expressed in different terms. And since they are the same idea, saying “immateriality exists” is the same as saying “nonexistence exists,” which is a contradiction of terms – meaning basic logic prohibits such a statement from being true. Therefore, the word “immateriality” is nothing more than a mask, a charade, granting its unwitting users a false sense of understanding – the illusion of talking about “something” all the while concealing the inherent contradiction of its purported existence; a contradiction all too visible when using the other term denoting the negation of all: nonexistence.

Let’s not miss the point here. What we have found is that the idea conveyed through the word “immateriality” is actually the same idea conveyed through the word “nonexistence;” thus, immateriality cannot exist. And, as we pointed out earlier, immaterialism and materialism are direct opposites, thus forming a genuine dichotomy. If immateriality (non-matter) does not exist, that means that all that does exist is material (made of matter). We can express this in simple and concise terms in the form of a deductive argument:

Premise 1: Either immateriality exists, or materialism is true.

Premise 2: Immateriality does not exist.

Conclusion: Therefore, materialism is true.

The nature of a deductive argument like this is that so long as the premises are true and the argument follows a logical structure (one in which the conclusion can be deduced from the premises), the conclusion is guaranteed to be true. In these few pages, we have demonstrated quite conclusively that both premises are true. If you need to be sure, reread this article from the beginning.

As for the structure of the argument, it is very straightforward. Here it is, with each idea replaced by a letter just so you can focus on the structure:

Premise 1: Either A is true, or B is true.

Premise 2: A is not true.

Conclusion: Therefore, B is true.

We now have our first principle: Materialism. The fundamental nature of reality is that it is made of material substance. As I mentioned earlier, knowing the answer to this question has downstream effects on a great number of other things. But for now, we can celebrate the fact that we now have a clear understanding of what makes something true. When you hear someone claim that such and such a thing is true and you find yourself asking, “Is that true?” you can now have a more concrete understanding of what it even means to ask that question. You are asking, “Does what they are saying match material reality?”

Before moving on, it is worth it to take a moment to appreciate the hopefulness that comes with materialism. If some form of immaterialism could be shown to be true, logic and honesty would compel one to admit it. At the same time, our prospects of gaining more knowledge by an immaterialistic definition of truth would be somewhat grim. The reason why is that even if immateriality were to exist (which is a pseudo-idea even as a hypothetical), it is evidently beyond our reach. Even those who believe in immateriality have no means of accessing it and certainly no way of showing that what they say about it is true. This is why people who believe different things

about the so-called immaterial world can seldom persuade each other of their views, and when they do, it is for non-empirical reasons. They can't compare their views with the immaterial reality to see which view better matches it. With materialism, on the other hand, we actually have a means of accessing reality. We have sensory organs and experimental methods by which we can test our understanding of the material world. We can put forward a hypothesis and then test it, and all come to the same answer. This is why science (the experimental investigation of the material world) tends to bring people to united agreement regardless of their prior beliefs and cultures. A materialistic reality – our reality – is one in which we have access to truth and we have at least a good shot at finding answers to our questions.