

Mind-Dependence

Lecture 4: Idealism

1. Two Misconceptions

There are two persistent misconceptions about ontological idealism. (I will ignore epistemological idealism in this lecture.)

1. Idealism is opposed to realism
2. Idealism claims that reality is mind-dependent

But this cannot be right. The former would imply that idealism is a form of anti-realism, denying existence to *reality*, which would amount to ontological nihilism—a very different view. The latter, at least when it means that reality cannot exist independently of a mind that perceives it, is incoherent, for it requires a mind beyond reality (assuming dependence is an irreflexive relation).

A better characterisation of idealism: the mind is ontologically fundamental.

2. Esse est Percipii

Berkeley's famous doctrine is that *esse* (to be) is *percipi* (to be perceived). He means by this that the existence of the objects we encounter depends on the experience of individual people. This makes his brand of idealism 'subjectivist'. (Note, Berkeley does not seem entirely consistent.)

Berkeley's motivations for idealism are mainly polemical: he rejects the existence of matter, which he considers an entirely spurious theoretical posit. This makes Berkeley's position a bold empirical realism: the real world is just the world of sense experience.

I am of vulgar cast, simple enough to believe my senses, and leave things as I find them. To be plain, it is my opinion that the real things are those very things I see, and feel, and perceive by my senses.
(*Three Dialogues*, Second Dialogue)

Is Berkeleian idealism a phenomenalist position? Phenomenalism has been defended both as a semantic and as an ontological doctrine. As an ontological thesis it reduces material objects to bundles of experiences or sensations.

3. Non-subjective Idealism

Not all possible forms of idealism are Berkeleian. If idealism is the thesis that the mind is ontologically fundamental, not only can it accept that there is a

physical world, it can also accept that this physical world exists independently of the experience of individual people.

We can compare idealism and physicalism. Physicalism: the physical facts are the fundamental facts. Any mental facts depend on the physical facts, either because the former can be reduced to the latter, or because the mental facts ‘emerge’ from the physical facts. Idealism: the mental facts are the fundamental facts. Any physical facts depend on the mental facts, either because the former can be reduced to the latter, or because the physical facts ‘emerge’ from the mental facts. Note, we need not spell this out in terms of facts.

This reveals that, just as physicalism or materialism, idealism is first and foremost a rejection of mind-body dualism.

4. F.H. Bradley

F.H. Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality* is an instance of a non-subjective idealism: The mind is ontologically fundamental, yet the existence of objects does not depend on the experience of individual people. This is because these particular experiences are ultimately unreal. Bradley’s idealism flows from (a) a monism about reality, and (b) the observation that denying sentience to reality is self-contradictory.

Find any piece of existence, take up anything that any one could possibly call a fact, or could in any sense assert to have being, and then judge if it does not consist in sentient experience. [...] When the experiment is made strictly, I can myself conceive of nothing else than the experienced. (*AR* 127-8)

How does Bradley’s argument compare to Berkeley’s master argument?

5. Moore’s Refutation of Idealism

Moore offers at least three distinct (and inaccurate) characterisations of idealism:

1. the universe is different from what it seems, and has a large number of properties which it does not seem to have
2. the universe has what we recognise in ourselves as the higher forms of consciousness (intelligence, purposiveness)
3. wherever you can truly predicate *esse* you can truly predicate *percipi*

He takes idealism to be refuted if (3) is false. It is false if perception (consciousness) and the object of perception are independent. Moore takes this to be obvious, on reflection.

Does Moore’s argument apply to all forms of idealism? And for the forms to which it applies, is it successful?

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