

George Berkeley's Empiricist Idealism



From Descartes to Berkeley

- Descartes put the focus on our individual experience of the world.
 - What we know foundational is just what our experience is.
 - "Experience" is what we have even if we are duped by an evil genius or are asleep.
- John Locke (1632-1704) called our sensory experience, "ideas of sense."
 - The ideas of sense are what you know for sure; beliefs about the external world are derived from them.
- Empiricism: all our knowledge and ideas come from experience.
 - Experience = what we get from the senses and introspection.
 - Locke and Berkeley were empiricists.

Hylas's Direct Realism

- Hylas begins with a very common-sense view: we immediately perceive sensible objects.
 - This is in opposition to the Representative Realist who claims that we perceive physical objects only indirectly.
 - We perceive only our ideas directly
- Hylas agrees with Philonous that the senses “make no inferences”:
 - So, what we sense must be immediately perceived (because otherwise the senses would make inferences).

Hylas's Direct Realism

Continued

Here are the tenets of Direct Realism:

- 1. There exist mind-independent physical (“sensible”) objects.
- We perceive these objects directly.
- The qualities we perceive the objects to have are mind independent.

Problems for Direct Realism

- Perceptual Relativity: what we directly experience alters with our perceptual position. (We'll see an example on the next slide).
- Perceptual Illusions: what we directly experience is not what the object is like. (Oar in water example.)

Philonous' Argument Against Direct Realism

- Bucket of lukewarm water example.
- Philonous goes on to run the same kind of argument for the various qualities: taste, smells, sounds, etc., thought of as what we most directly experience, are the products of our perceptual systems and so are not in the objects themselves.
- Hylas then makes a distinction: real v. perceived qualities.
 - Take sound: *real* sound is the waves that strike our ear; *perceived* sound is what we hear after our auditory system processes the impact of the waves.
 - Similarly with color, taste, smell, and even touch: perceived qualities are what we directly experience; real qualities are what exists in the object apart from our perception.

Philonous' Response to Hylas's Rebuttal

- Philonous: So, on Hylas' current view
 - Real sound is never heard—since real sound is motion (disturbance in the atmosphere) and the way to determine motion is through sight and touch.
 - And real color has no hue because it is only waves of light and not what we experience when we see colors. And so it goes for the other secondary qualities.
- Hylas finally caves and agrees secondary qualities are wholly in the mind; only primary qualities (and material substance) is mind independent in sensible objects.

Extending the Argument to Primary Qualities

- The main argument for the mind-dependence of secondary qualities: the secondary qualities of objects are variable and perceiver dependent.
- But Philonous argues that the same is true of primary qualities.
 - Size, solidity, weight, shape, etc. are all perceiver dependent as well.
 - Take shape: as I move, the apparent shape moves; there is no such thing as *the* true perceptual perspective; so there is no mind-independent shape.
 - Size, solidity, weight are similarly perceiver relative (so Philonous says).

Philonous' Argument for the Incoherence of the Representative Realist View of Sensible Objects

- Recall the representative realist view of a sensible objects: they are mind-independent material substances (substratum) in which qualities inhere.
- But given Philonous' arguments, primary and secondary qualities are both mind dependent.
 - That is, they can exist only in a mind.
- Mind dependent qualities are nothing other than ideas. So, primary and secondary qualities are ideas.
- So, Philonous says, the concept of a sensible object that the realist has is a mind-independent, non-thinking substance in which ideas inhere.
- But this is incoherent: ideas necessarily reside in thinking substances.

So, skepticism then, right?

- **Phil:** Well, then, are you finally satisfied that no sensible things have a real existence, and that you are in truth a complete sceptic?
- **Hyl:** It is too plain to be denied.
- **Phil:** Look! aren't the fields covered with a delightful green? Isn't there something in the woods and groves, in the rivers and clear springs, that soothes, delights, *transports* the soul? At the view of the wide and deep ocean, or some huge mountain whose top is lost in the clouds, or of an old gloomy forest, aren't our minds filled with a pleasing horror? Even in rocks and deserts, isn't there an agreeable wildness? It is such a sincere pleasure to see earth's natural beauties! ...The motion and situation of the planets—aren't they admirably orderly? Have those globes ever been known to *stray* in their repeated journeys through pathless space? ...Isn't the whole system immense, beautiful, more glorious than we can say or think? Then how should we treat those philosophers who want to deprive these noble and delightful scenes of all reality? How should we think of principles implying that all the visible beauty of the creation is a false imaginary glare? To put it bluntly, can you expect this scepticism of yours not to be thought extravagantly absurd by all reasonable people?" (pp.28-29)

Idealism

- ❑ Idealism: all that exists are minds and ideas. Nothing is mind independent.
- ❑ We can see that, if we tie together Berkeley's criticisms of Locke, idealism naturally falls out.
- ❑ All qualities are mind dependent; that is, all qualities are just ideas.
- ❑ Think of it this way: whereas the Realist thinks that sensible objects are substances with qualities, Berkeley has argued that (i) there are no material substances and (ii) all qualities are ideas. So it isn't much of a stretch to conclude that sensible objects are simply nothing over and above a collection of ideas.

Berkeley's Argument for Idealism

Here's how Berkeley sums up the argument at the end of the dialogues):

“Phil: I don't claim to be a setter-up of new notions. All I'm trying to do is bring together and place in a clearer light a truth that used to be shared between •the common people and •the philosophers: the former being of the opinion that the things they immediately perceive are the real things. and the latter that •the things they immediately perceive are ideas which exist only in the mind. These two notions, when put together, constitute the substance of what I advance.” (p. 64)

Berkeley's Argument for Idealism continued

- The argument is this:
 - P1: *Those things we immediately perceive are the real things.*
 - P2: *The things immediately perceived are ideas, which exist only in the mind.*
 - C. *Therefore, real things [i.e., sensible objects] are ideas, which exist only in the mind.*
- Sensible objects, then, are only ideas—or more accurately, collections of ideas.
- So, an apple, say, is nothing over and above the qualities of redness, sweetness, crispness, juiciness, etc.
- There is no underlying, un-experienced substance; there are only the qualities we experience.

Why Berkeley Isn't a Skeptic

- It's natural to think that Berkeley must be a skeptic if he thinks we have no reason to believe in material substance.
- But he denies this and for two reasons:
 - To be a skeptic is to think we lack a certain kind of knowledge. But Berkeley isn't skeptical about material substance—he positively denies it!
 - Berkeley insists that we know the kinds of things ordinary people take themselves to know.

Berkeley's Claim that he is a Common Sense Philosopher

- It might seem crazy to think of an idealist as a commonsense philosopher.
- But Berkeley claims that he is one because, unlike Locke, he claims:
 - We perceive sensible (i.e., “physical”) objects directly.
 - All of the qualities of sensible objects are actually had by them.
- So Berkeley is a very intriguing philosopher: he can claim both that objects are nothing but ideas but also that they really do exist, that we experience them directly, and that they possess the qualities they appear to possess.

Two Implications of Berkeley's Idealism

- 1. If sensible objects are collections of ideas, then they exist only when they are perceived; their essence is to be perceived.
 - So, there are no unperceived sensible objects.
- Consider the tree that falls in the forest when no one is around.
 - Locke: it doesn't make a sound.
 - Berkeley: it doesn't exist?
- Berkeley: it's crazy to think that sensible objects exist only when *we* perceive them, but their essence is to be perceived.
 - Therefore, there must be a mind that always perceives all sensible objects.
 - But that would be an omniscient mind.
 - Therefore, God exists and always perceives all sensible objects.

Two Implications of Berkeley's Idealism

- 2. Suppose we were all in the same room and are looking at my travel mug. Are we seeing the same mug?
- Berkeley's theory apparently implies that we are not.
 - Each of us has our own ideas of sense of the mug – that will be true even if we each not only see it, but touch it, smell it, taste the coffee in it, etc.
 - But this goes against Berkeley's claim to be a commonsense philosopher.
- Berkeley's response: "same" is ambiguous.
 - In one sense, it means the same individual thing ("token").
 - "Is that the same dress your sister was wearing last week?"
 - In the other sense, it means the same kind of thing ("type").
 - "I have that same dress!"
- So, while we don't see the same token travel mug, we see the same type mug.
 - But our ideas of sense of the mug will be similar but not the same even in the type sense.

Two Implications of Berkeley's Idealism

- But it's worse than just that you and I don't see the same mug.
- **Phil:** Strictly speaking, Hylas, we don't see the same object that we feel; and the object perceived through the microscope isn't the same one that was perceived by the naked eye. But if every variation were thought sufficient to constitute a new kind or new individual, language would be made useless by the sheer number of names or by confusions amongst them. Therefore, to avoid this and other inconveniences (you'll easily see what they are if you think about it), men in their thought and language treat as *one thing* a number of ideas that are observed to have some connection in nature (either occurring together or in sequence), although the ideas are certainly distinct from one another, because they are perceived through different senses, or through one sense at different times or in different circumstances. So when I see a thing and then proceed to examine it by my other senses, I'm not trying to understand better the same object that I had seen. That can't be what I am doing, because the object of one sense can't be perceived by the other senses

Those Dang Substances Again!

- Again, Berkeleyan idealism says that all that exist are minds and ideas (that's Berkeley's metaphysics).
- Berkeley's empiricism insists that (i) all ideas come from experience and (ii) we only experience qualities.
- Minds = mental substances.
- But whence comes our idea of mind (whether our finite minds or the infinite mind of God)?
- If you are going to reject the idea of material/nonthinking substance because it is not a quality and we only experience qualities, then shouldn't he reject the idea of immaterial/thinking substance because it is not a quality and we only experience qualities?

Berkeley's Answer...

▮ **Phil:** ·My answer falls into three parts·. **(1)** I don't deny the existence of material substance merely because I have no notion of it, but because the notion of it is inconsistent—to have a notion of it would involve a self-contradiction. For all I know to the contrary, there may exist many things of which none of us has or can have any idea or notion whatsoever. But such things must be possible, i.e. nothing inconsistent must be included in their definition. **(2)** Although we believe in the existence of some things that we don't perceive, we oughtn't to believe that any particular thing exists without some reason for thinking so; but I have no reason for believing in the existence of matter. I have no immediate intuition of it; and I can't infer it—rigorously or even by probable inference—from my sensations, ideas, notions, actions or passions. In contrast with this, I undeniably know by reflection the existence of myself, that is, my own soul, mind, or source of thought. You will forgive me if I repeat the same things in answer to the same objections. The notion or definition of material substance includes an obvious inconsistency, and that is not so for the notion of spirit....

Berkeley's Answer...

Phil: (3) Although I don't have an idea of spirit, if 'idea' is used strictly, I do have a notion of it. I don't perceive it as an idea, or by means of an idea, but I know it by reflection on myself.

Hyl: Despite all that you have said, it seems to me that according to your own way of thinking, and by your own principles, you should conclude that you are only a system of floating ideas without any substance to support them. Words shouldn't be used without a meaning; and as there is no more meaning in 'spiritual substance' than in 'material substance', the former is to be exploded as well as the latter." (p. 44)

Phil: How often must I repeat it? I know or am conscious of my own existence; and I know that I myself am not my ideas but something else—a thinking, active principle ['force or source of energy'] which perceives, knows, wills and operates on ideas. I know that I, one and the same self, perceive both colours and sounds; that a colour cannot perceive a sound, nor a sound a colour; and therefore that I am one individual thing, distinct from colour and sound and (for the same reason) distinct from all other sensible things and inert ideas." (p. 44)

20th Century Phenomenalism

- In the early 1900s, Rudolf Carnap, A.J. Ayer and others reasoned as follows.
- Empiricism is true.
- Our words have meaning only inasmuch as they are grounded in our experiences.
- So, what our words *mean* must have to do with our experience; our words must refer to our experiences.
- So, our standard physical object terms (“desk,” “tree,” “shoe,” “foot,” etc.) refer only to collections of our actual and possible experiences.
 - What it means to say, “There is a tree in front of me” is..
 - If I look straight ahead I’ll have a visual experience of a certain combination of shapes and colors that we associate with the word “tree.”
 - If my visual experience of those shapes/colors takes up most of my visual field, and I “reach out my hand,” then I have have standard tactile experiences associated with the word “tree.”
 - Etc.

Three Major Objections and Berkeley's Response

□ Objections to Berkeley's View:

- Ideas exist only when associated with a mind; so when no one is observing sensible objects, do they just pop out of existence?
 - Berkeley's two replies:
 - No, because this remains true: if we were to look, we'd see the object.
 - No, because they are always perceived: God is always perceiving everything.
- Do we perceive the same thing?
 - Berkeley's reply: The word "same" is ambiguous. In one sense "yes," and in another sense "no."
- Where do we get the idea of "immaterial substance," since we only experience ideas?
 - Berkeley's reply: We don't have an idea proper, but we do have a "notion."