

BERKELEY'S IDEALISM

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Intro Philosophy

Maybe it would be easier to build our knowledge of the external world from Descartes's foundations if we "downsize" the external world.

1. Ideas

Ideas are the "objects of human knowledge" (p. 282): light and colors, smells, sounds, hard and soft, heat and cold, etc.

2. "Their *esse is percipi*"

Objects are just collections of ideas:

And as several of these [ideas] are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing. Thus, for example, a certain colour, taste, smell, figure, and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name *apple*. (p. 282)

And existence means being perceived:

The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it... (p. 283)

But wouldn't the table exist if I weren't seeing it and feeling it?

...and if I were out of my study I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it... (p. 283)

Thus it doesn't even make sense to speak of objects like a table existing apart from being perceived.

For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse is percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them. (p. 283)

3. Idealism

Mental objects: things that could not exist without minds. These include both ideas and minds themselves.

Some views about the metaphysics of the mental and physical:

Idealism All objects are mental. What we usually think of as material objects (like tables and chairs) are composed of ideas, and could not exist unperceived

Dualism There are two kinds of objects. Some objects are mental, but others (like material objects) are nonmental: they could exist unperceived

Materialism All objects are composed of nonmental things

4. Nonmental things “unintelligible”

Berkeley thinks that nonmental things are *unintelligible*, basically because if you take our idea of a material thing and subtract its look, smell, etc., then nothing remains. He considers an objection to this:

But say you, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them whereof they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind, in an unthinking substance. I answer, an idea can be like nothing but an idea, a colour or figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure... I ask whether these supposed originals or external things, of which our ideas are the pictures or representations, be themselves perceivable or no? If they are, then they are ideas, and we have gained our point; but if you say they are not, I appeal to anyone whether it be sense, to assert a colour is like something which is invisible, hard or soft, like something which is intangible; and so of the rest. (p. 284)

5. Isn't idealism *crazy*?

Given idealism, couldn't we just decide to arrange the world any way we like? And what would be the difference between dreams and reality?

The ideas of sense are more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the imagination; they have likewise a steadiness, order, and coherence, and are not excited at random, as those which are the effects of human wills often are, but in a regular train or series, the admirable connexion whereof sufficiently testifies the wisdom and benevolence of its Author. (p. 288)

6. Berkeley's argument for idealism

Berkeley has an argument for his idealism:

It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding... yet whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question, may, if I mistake not, perceive it to involve a manifest contradiction. For what are the forementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense, and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations; and is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these or any combination of them should exist unperceived? (p. 283)

1. Each material object is capable of being perceived
2. Only ideas and sensations are capable of being perceived
3. No idea or sensation could exist unperceived
4. Therefore, no material object could exist unperceived

7. Objection: external material objects are inferred

Descartes would reject premise 1, and claim that we *infer* material objects rather than perceiving them:

...if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves... Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgment which is in my mind. (p. 248)

Berkeley's reply:

- We obviously can't infer them with *with certainty*.
- And as for whether we can infer them with *probability*:

But though we might possibly have all our sensations without them, yet perhaps it may be thought easier to conceive and explain the manner of their production, by supposing external bodies in their likeness rather than otherwise; and so it might be at least probable there are such things as bodies that excite their ideas in our minds. But neither can this be said; for though we give the materialists their external bodies, they by their own confession are never the nearer knowing how our ideas are produced; since they own themselves unable to comprehend in what manner body can act upon spirit, or how it is possible it should imprint any idea in the mind. (p. 286)

8. Solution to Descartes's problem?

Does Berkeley's downsizing make the external world easier to know?

- Problem of other minds
- Problem of our minds (Hume)
- How can we know anything other than our current ideas?