George Berkeley

The Principles of Human Knowledge

Review
To be is to be perceived
“Obvious to the Mind...”

• “… all those bodies which compose the earth ... have no... subsistence without a mind, ... their being is to be perceived or to be known” [Principle 6]
  – “their esse is percipi” [Principle 3]—their “being” is in “being perceived.”
    • Trees, tables, human bodies, etc., exist only in being perceived; exist only in someone’s conscious experience of them!

• “… it follows, there is not any substance other than spirit, or that which perceives.” [Principle 7]
Berkeley’s Idealism:

• There is no such thing as “material substance.”
• *Real things* like tables, mountains, etc., exist only in being perceived. Their *esse* (“being”) is *percepi* (“being perceived”).
• The only real substance is mental, i.e., the only things that exist in the universe are mind/souls (and the ideas that exist “in” them).
• “Things,” like tables and chairs, mountains and bodies, exist only in our perceptions of them.
  – They exist only in our minds.
Berkeley Rejects (Metaphysical) Realism

• **Realists**, like both Descartes and Locke, believe that there is a world (the *material world*) that exists independently of whether or not any conscious mind experiences it.
  – Berkeley *rejects* this.
    • “*there is not any substance other than spirit*”

• Berkeley’s position is known as (metaphysical) **idealism**.
Causal Theory of Perception:

Berkeley REJECTS this part of Locke’s picture.
Locke and Berkeley Agree:

- The only immediate objects of thoughts, sensations, perceptions, etc. (of any conscious experience) are *ideas* or *sensations*, i.e., things that exist only in our minds.
Where they disagree: Is there any world beyond (independent of) our ideas?

- Locke: Yes.
- Berkeley: No.
Berkeley’s Idealism
Berkeley’s Idealism:

- “Real objects” (real tables, chairs, bodies, etc.) are not material substances that exist apart from our experiences of them, but are simply “collections of ideas” that exist *only in being perceived* by some mind.
“Real Things”

• So, Berkeley, in his own view, doesn’t deny the exist of real things
  – This is what Locke would say, but then Locke has a different position—

• Rather, he redefines what is means to be a “real thing.”
  – Real things, for Berkeley, are not material substances (as for Locke and Descartes), but (certain) collections of ideas.
Defending Idealism by Rejecting Materialism
**Berkeley’s Idealism:** There is only one fundamental kind of thing, mental things, i.e., minds or souls (and the ideas that are ‘in’ them).

(What Berkeley calls) **Materialism:** The view that there are material things (that there is a “material substance”) in addition to mental things. This is what we called “dualism.” Later philosophers will use the term “materialism” for those who accept matter but deny mental substance.
Berkeley’s Claim: Materialism leads to skepticism

- Even if it is “possible that solid, figured, moveable substances ... exist without the mind, – yet how is it possible for us to know this?”

- If all that we directly know or experience are ideas in the mind (mental entities), we have no evidence for the existence of anything distinct from these ideas.
• We are directly aware *only* of ideas.
• Locke: We *infer* material objects as the causes of these ideas.
• Berkeley challenges this inference.
Even if we grant that we don’t directly perceive material substances, can’t we infer them as the best explanation of the ideas and sensations that we do perceive?

• Berkeley: But “by their own confession ... they own themselves unable to comprehend in what manner body can act upon spirit.”

--i.e., positing the existence of matter doesn’t really explain anything, since you can’t actually explain how matter causally influences mind.
“they [are] unable to … [explain how] body can act upon spirit.”

• For Dualists (like Locke and Descartes), mind and matter are two distinct kinds of substances—they have nothing in common.

• But if they have nothing in common, how can they causally interact with one another?
  – How can mind (“spirit”) make matter move?
  – How can matter (“body”) cause ideas in a (non-material) mind?
Berkeley: How could mind causally interact with matter?
The “Master Argument”
“I am content to put the whole upon this issue…” [P 22]

• “If you can but conceive it possible for ... anything ... to exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it, I will readily give up the cause.”

• I.e., Berkeley is saying that if you can conceive of an object existing outside a mind, he will grant that there are such things.

• This seems too easy!
“Surely there is nothing easier than to imagine trees, for instance, in a park,… and nobody to perceive them.”

• “This … is nothing to the purpose!” (i.e., it is irrelevant)

• “What is this … more than framing ideas in your mind which you call … trees and omitting to frame the idea of anyone that may perceive them.”

• “But do you not yourself perceive them or think of them all the while?”
If all we can be “directly aware of” are ideas, this means that all we can *think about* (all that we can *conceive of*) are ideas. So, on this view, we can’t even *conceive of* material substance!
“A Manifest Repugnancy”

• On Locke’s view, says Berkeley, material substance is impossible because the very concept of it is contradictory.
  – Material substance, by definition, is something other than a mere idea.
    • But, on Locke’s own view, we can only think about ideas.
  – So, if we can think of material substance at all, it must be an idea.
  – So, material substance is an idea that is not an idea!
Real vs. Imaginary Things
“Real things and chimeras”

• Berkeley distinguishes perceptions ("real things") from hallucinations ("chimeras") internally.
  – i.e., not in terms of their relations to something “external,” but rather in terms of their relations to one another.

• Perceptions (of real things) are
  a) independent of our will,
  b) are “more strong, lively, and distinct than those of imagination,” and
  c) cohere together “in a regular train or series.”

  --Eg., You know you were just dreaming because your experiences don’t “fit” with those you had before waking up.
Real things are ideas that cohere together properly.
“I do not argue against the existence of any one thing that we can apprehend ... by sense or reflection.”

• Berkeley can agree (with a materialist) about which experiences are true perceptions and which are mere illusions.

• The only disagreement is about what this means.

  – The realist sees lack of internal coherence among ideas as evidence that they don’t correspond to anything external.

  – For the idealist, there is nothing “external” to correspond to. Real things just are those collections of ideas that cohere together internally. Chimeras just are those collects of ideas that don’t–cohere as we have learned to expect them to.
Truth/Reality

• (Locke’s) Realism:
  – Experiences are “true” when they correspond to a mind independent reality.
  – But, Berkeley notes, the only evidence for this purported correspondence is the fact that certain experiences cohere together in the ways we have learned to expect.
    • Since we can’t see anything but ideas, we can’t see if they correspond to anything external to the mind.

• (Berkeley’s) Idealism:
  – Experiences are “true” when they cohere together in the proper way.
  – “Reality” is simply that collection of experiences that internally cohere together appropriately.
    • This appeals to the same empirical evidence to distinguish “real things” from “chimera” as realism, but explains what the difference is differently.