George Berkeley

The Principles of Human Knowledge
Berkeley:

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 our minds!

- “... 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 *percipi* ("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 perception of them.
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.
Berkeley Rejects Mind/Body Dualism

• “Dualists,” like both Descartes and Locke, believe that the world contains two fundamentally different kinds of “stuff”—mind and matter.

• Berkeley disagrees:
  • He believes in the existence of mind;
    – “that which perceives”
  • He does not believe in the existence of matter.
    – things that exist independently of mind.
Berkeley

• Believes that, in the end, **minds** (souls, spirits, immaterial substances) are the only sorts of things that exist.

• Believes that “bodies” (all the things we can perceive with our senses) exist *only* in our consciousness of them—they are but “collections of ideas.”
From Locke to Berkeley
Causal Theory of Perception:

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

• “Whatsoever the mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of perception, thought, or understanding, that I call idea…”

• That is, Locke believes that in “perception, thought, [and] understanding,”—in all forms of conscious awareness—what we are “immediately aware” of are always/only ideas in our minds.
• “It is evident ... [that] the objects of human knowledge ... are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as are perceived by attending to the ... operations of the mind ... [such as] memory and imagination ....”

• Berkeley agrees that in all forms of conscious awareness, what we are “immediately aware” of are always/only ideas in our minds.
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 View:

- Objects (tables, chairs, bodies, etc) are simply “collections of ideas” that exist only in being perceived.
  - This is Berkeley’s *Idealism*.
Defending Idealism by Rejecting Materialism
Berkeley’s Terminology

• **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 (bodies) in addition to mental things (minds).
  
  – 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. We infer material objects as the causes of these ideas.
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?

Locke’s Casual Theory of Perception

- Mind’s Eye
- Directly Aware of
- Idea
- Causes
- Object
- Qualities are "in" objects
- External World
- Mind

?
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 conceive of material substance!

Berkeley: On Locke’s own view, we can’t even conceive of this part of his picture!
“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
An Objection:

• “By your principles everything real and substantial in nature is banished out of the world, and replaced by a chimerical system of ideas. All things that exist do so only in the mind .... Are all these mere illusions, [mere chimera]?”

  – By “chimera” Berkeley just means “imaginary being.”
Real vs. Unreal

• If all real things are just collections of ideas, doesn’t that mean that all collections of ideas are real things?

• How can Berkeley distinguish real things from unreal things (“chimeras”), given that they are both just collections of ideas?
Locke’s View:

These are mere ideas.

These are real things.

Mind’s Eye

Object

Qualities are "in" objects

Causes
Berkeley’s Answer:

• “The ideas imprinted on the senses by the author of nature [or by what we might call “laws of nature”] are called ‘real things’;

• and those ... caused by the imagination [i.e., chimeras, are] less regular, vivid, and constant ....”
“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.
Continued:

• “[My] principles ... don’t deprive us of any one thing in nature. Whatever we see, feel, [or] perceive ... remains as secure as ever, and is as real as ever. .... I don’t argue against the existence of any one thing that we can take in, either by sense or reflection. The only thing whose existence I deny is what philosophers call ‘matter’ or ‘corporeal substance’.”
“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.
Berkeley and Locke

• Berkeley does not disagree with Locke about what we immediately perceive.
  – Both say, “ideas.”

• Berkeley does not disagree with Locke about which experiences are “true” and which are “false.”
  – Both agree upon the criteria for distinguishing these experiences.
Berkeley and Locke

• Berkeley disagrees with Locke only about what it means to say that something is “real.”
  – Locke says that a “real” thing is an unperceived material substances that causes certain sets of (internal cohering) ideas.
  – Berkeley says that a “real” thing simply is this same set of (internally cohering) ideas.
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.