

Idealism

“Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous”

Bishop Berkeley

Bishop Berkeley (1685 – 1753)

- A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, later wrote Three Dialogues
- A defender of religious orthodoxy from his philosophical views
- Berkeley is an Empiricist, but wants to criticize Locke's realism





Locke on Matter

- **Atomic theory:** things are composed of atoms; properties of things depend on nature and motion of atoms
- **Materialism:** the view that the world is composed of physical things
 - Materialism is an atomistic theory
 - View supported by many philosophers including Locke
 - Not held by Berkeley

Primary and Secondary

- **Primary qualities:** assigned to atoms by physical theory — e.g., size, shape, mass, motion
- **Secondary qualities (Ideas):** effects of primary qualities on us— e.g., color, smooth or rough texture, pleasant or foul smell, loud sound, etc.
 - These qualities are mind-Dependent
 - Representations of reality
 - Example: Red is not a quality of things in the world, i.e. of atomic matter, it is an idea in our minds; it is to *look* red to a standard perceiver in standard conditions

Appearance and Reality

- Objects cause perceptions and are represented in perceptions [Locke]
- Presumably, objects of perception are very different from our perceptions
 - We don't see atoms but their effects
 - What we see doesn't exist in reality
- Problem: How can we distinguish the appearance of an object from the object as it is in reality?

- Epistemic Issue: How do you know that the fact that you have an idea i.e a representation of a “tree in your back yard” that there really is in reality a tree in your back yard - you could be mistaken, or deceived by an evil demon, you could be on drugs or dreaming
 - This is the problem skeptics raise: how do you know your representations are accurate?
- Metaphysical Issue: What are the real things? Note that this is a different question.

Realism vs. Anti-Realism

- Main metaphysical issue
 - What are real things?
 - Are real things dependent on the mind or independent of us entirely?
- **Realism:** Things and their properties exist independently of the mind
 - E.g. Locke's Representational Realism
- **Idealism:** Things and their properties existence depends on the mind
 - E.g. Berkeley

Negative Claim (Berkeley): Against Primary Qualities

- Try thinking about objects and their properties. It doesn't look like we have any access to primary qualities, for whatever quality we have, we seem to have an image of it in our own mind – but what does that image have to do with what the object is like in reality?
- We cannot judge resemblance to reality
- Perceptions of width, height, etc., vary while objects remain unchanged

Positive Claim: Esse est Percipi

- Essence is Perception: To be is to be perceived
- A thing is (can exist) only if it is perceived

Objection against Berkeley

- An idealist is committed to the claim that when a thing is not perceived, it does not exist
- Do things go out of existence when we aren't looking at them?
- Did things exist before humans were around to perceive them?
- Berkeley has a response:
 - Things do not go in and out of existence when we are not looking at them, because God perceives everything all the time
 - Even when we were not around, God perceives all objects even when humans don't exist

Argument for Idealism

1. Something exists only if we can know it
2. We can know an object only by making it an object of consciousness (i.e. of our mind)
3. Any object of consciousness is conditioned by the faculty of consciousness
4. Anything conditioned by consciousness is mind-dependent
5. So, all things that exists are mind-dependent