

“To Exist is Either to Perceive or be Perceived.” How Would You Explain Bishop Berkeley’s Idealism to Someone Who Knew Nothing About Philosophy.

To explain the concept of idealism first requires us to look at the context in which the theory exists. Philosophers and scientists have been much preoccupied with investigating what we, the world and its matter is made of. Some ancient philosophers variously suggested water (Thales) and fire (Heraclitus). Others suggested microscopic entities called “atoms” (Democritus). Scientists today have gone beyond atomic theory and suggested that sub-atomic particles such as neutrons, positrons, electrons, quarks, etc are what the world is made of. In addition to the debate on the nature of the world, we also need to note that many philosophers adopted a “monist” view, meaning that things— including animals, people and their minds— were made from a single substance. Many others, especially those who could not accept that human minds are made of the same stuff as our bodies, suggested a “dualist” interpretation of reality, whereby most objects are made of one type of material whilst such entities as minds, spirits, ghosts and Gods are made of another.

Berkeley was very concerned over what he perceived as a drift to scepticism in the philosophical debate of his age, particularly Cartesianism. Descartes held that he would attempt to doubt everything he perceived, until he had established the truth of his perceptions via other methods. Locke also doubted whether we could ever really “know” anything about the objects we perceived. For him, the knowledge we had was of perceptions, and not the object of those perceptions. As in the following diagram, the world was viewed not directly but through a “veil of perception”

For Berkeley, this led to an unacceptable scepticism about ever knowing the truth of anything. Of course, as a prominent cleric Berkeley would have a definite agenda in developing his answer to Locke and Descartes.

He opposed himself to the doctrine of materialism. “Materialism” could be the doctrine that “material things exist” but could also be interpreted more restrictively as the doctrine that only material things exist.

Berkeley’s response was to deny material objects can exist; that objects of perception are not mind-independent. That is, it is untrue that what we sense has any existence outside our minds. For him, the following diagram shows the truth;

There are no mind independent objects: our perceptions are the true reality. If we equate perceptions with ideas, then for Berkeley, all things are ideas.

Most of Berkeley’s arguments in support of his thesis come from his “Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge” (1710) and the “Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous” (1713), (Philonous speaks for Berkeley).

Berkeley explains why he believes this by showing that many qualities cannot possibly exist in mind-independent objects. One famous example relates to sensations of heat and cold, where, whatever we say about the temperature of water into which we have just dipped our hand depends upon how warm/cold our

hand was in the first place. Another example relates to taste, where perception of sweetness depends upon what we have tasted before. Berkeley concludes that since qualities like sweetness and heat cannot possibly exist independently of mind, this is evidence that no things exist outside of our minds. He concludes with what he believed to be his coup, his “master argument”. There is no way in which we can possibly conceive of an object except through our perceptions. It is impossible to know anything except through our minds. Therefore, who can be certain that anything exists outside our minds? “Esse est percipi”; to be is to be perceived.

Logically;

(1) We perceive ordinary objects

(2) We perceive only ideas.

Therefore,

(3) Ordinary objects are ideas, or “bundles” of ideas.

Berkeley also says that there are the perceived (ideas), but there are also perceivers. These are minds, or spirits, ghosts and Gods. Although Berkeley does not specifically discuss dualism, the idea that perceivers and perceived are different by nature suggests some kind of dualism. For Berkeley, the difference between ideas and minds is that the former are passive, whilst the latter are active.

Because ideas are passive, our minds are needed to organise these ideas in a meaningful way. However, what if we are not present, or no mind is otherwise comprehending an object? Does the object still exist? This has led to one waggish remark about Berkeley’s idealism, via the famous limerick;

There was a young man who said God,
must find it exceedingly odd
that the sycamore tree
continues to be
when no one's about in the Quad

If sensory ideas are not currently before my mind then they must be caused by some other spirit. Berkeley thinks that when we consider the stunning complexity and systematicity of our sensory ideas, we must conclude that the spirit in question is wise and benevolent beyond measure, that, in short, he is God. So, according to Berkeley

Dear Sir, your astonishment's odd
I'm always about in the Quad

And that's why the tree
continues to be
Since observed by, yours faithfully, God

Berkeley's version of idealism and its use to "prove" the existence of a universal spirit to organise and vindicate our perceptions has given many people difficulties with his philosophy. Apart from our willingness, or not, to believe in a God, we might find the appearance of a convenient all-perceiving spirit too glib a solution to the problem posed by making things mind dependent. Berkeley does not also offer convincing solutions to problems caused by hallucinations and dreams, where ideas are formed by the perceiver which are clearly untrue. Later work on the problem has developed a view that perception offers a representational view of nature, not a direct one. Other materialists have postulated a causal relationship between nature and our perceptions. These views allow us answer some of the problems raised by Berkeley. In conclusion, Berkeley achieved a great deal in his "Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge" and the "Three Dialogues". There may be no better place to begin a study of the relationship between ideas, perceptions and nature than in these books.