

8.4 Berkeley's positive metaphysics: Idealism

8.4.1 Sensible things exist: Philonous not a skeptic

Berkeley does not deny that the *physical* world exist, just that it exist as a mind-independent being.

Berkeley's idealism: the world exist only as ideas in some mind.

- *From the idea that all that exist is but sensations it does NOT follow, either that nothing exists, or that everything is an illusion.:*
 - It does not follow that nothing exists: Berkeley does not deny that things existing, but instead he gives a new definition of existence.
 - Ordinary objects exist as clusters of sensations. This is all what their "being" consists in. Berkeley not deny the reality of the world in saying this. What he does is to re-define what it means to "exist", what it means to be "real". It does not take to have a mind-independent absolute existence in order to be "real". All it takes is to be perceived by a mind.
 - So, ordinary objects, that is, clusters of sensations, are real according to Berkeley:

A piece of sensible bread, for instance, would stay in my stomach better than ten thousand times as much of that insensible, unintelligible, real bread you speak of.

- The paradoxical consequence of this is that rather than Philonous' idealism, it is Hylas's materialism which leads to scepticism!
 - It is only because Hylas is assuming the existence of a second kind of beings, which remain unknown, unobservable and unintelligible for us, that he finds himself being a skeptic. It is because he assumes that there is something beyond our sensations that these sensations appear to be "mere appearances"
 - By contrast, Berkeley denies that there exists anything beyond our sensations which would remain unknown to us. Sensations are all there is, and we know them well. So, we actually know sensible things the

way they are directly through our sensations. Sensations are not “mere appearances”, there are the real thing!

- So: while the representationalist makes the following reasoning:

P1. all we have epistemological access to are our sensations

P2. sensations are but appearances, the effect of the true properties of the real external objects existing absolutely outside our minds

CC: we have epistemological access only to mere appearances and the true properties of real external object remain unknown to us

This obviously leads to skepticism regarding knowledge. In denying P2, Berkeley avoids the conclusion: all we have epistemological access to are our sensations but these clusters of sensations are the real things and there is nothing more to know ! Appearances are not “mere” appearances, but the reality.

- The ode to the beauty at the beginning of the second dialogue has an important signification: while the person who wants to believe in matter becomes a sceptic, the idealist admires the beauty of nature:

—→ *It is very important to understand that Berkeley does not deny either that ordinary objects exists, or that we can know them. What Berkeley denies is that anything exists independently of some mind’s perceiving it. Berkeley gives a new definition to existence or being: to be is nothing more than to be perceived. Ordinary objects do exist, as clusters of sensations, and we know them very well, directly through our senses.*

8.4.2 Minds

It is not quite exact to say that only ideas exist according to Berkeley. Sure, what we call external object really exist as clusters of sensations within some mind. But, in order for ideas to exist this way, it is necessary that *minds* exist as well.

- We are spirits (or minds). Common sense tells us that we have minds.
- Note that Berkely commits to a form of dualism, that is to say, he accepts two kinds of “stuff”, and not only one, in his ontology: minds and ideas.

- One could say that we traded an ontology of minds and matter (Descartes) to an ontology of minds and ideas.
- What is the difference then? According to Berkeley:
 1. Contrary to Descartes, he does not postulate any unnecessary entity
 2. More importantly, he does not postulate anything beyond experience – idealism is a consequence of true empiricism
 3. The connection between ideas and minds is more intelligible than the connection between matter and minds. Matter cannot influence minds, while ideas could.
- Note, however, that, the argument that matter, being passive, cannot cause anything, could apply to ideas as well. If true, then the problem of how ideas come in our minds is not completely solved in Berkeley's philosophy.

—→ *At the end of the day, the fundamental constituents of the world for Berkeley are of two kinds: minds and ideas.*

8.4.3 God

It should be no surprise that Berkeley argues for the existence of God: after all, the whole point of his philosophy was to defend religious views against the threat of materialism and atheism.

- Besides the ode to nature, Berkeley uses a very common argument for the existence of God:
 1. I am sure (by common sense) that the sensible world exists independently of my perceiving it
 2. Hence: there must be some other mind wherein it exists: "As sure therefore as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite omnipresent spirit who contains and supports it."
- SO: Does the moon exist if we do not look at it?
 - Yes, because it is common sense that stuff does disappear when you put them in the drawer.
 - Yes, because God is watching them.

This means that without God, and under the hypothesis that all sentient being be annihilated, the physical world would not exist anymore.

- God is also responsible for the order between ideas: laws of nature exist for Berkeley. This means that you can go on doing physics and biology. Only, laws are about ideas, not about mind-independent objects.

—→ *God is the last part of the picture: He is what guarantees the independent existence of things from our minds.*

8.4.4 Conclusion

- We have seen that, according the Berkeley, the fundamental constituents of the world are:
 1. Ideas
 2. Minds
 3. God

Of course, there is no material substance, and nothing which existence does not depend of perceiving minds.

- We have also seen that to deny the existence of independent matter and to commit to idealism is a way to avoid skepticism.

8.5 Conclusion: Idealism, Empiricism and common sense

Berkeley's philosophy is challenging because it puts into questions some of our cherished assumptions about how the world is like. The belief that there exists mind-independent beings, of which our sensations are the effect is deeply rooted. Berkeley shows that it is far from obvious that we can make such a belief compatible with empiricism and common sense.

- Berkeley's metaphysical view: all there exists are ideas and minds
- Berkeley's epistemological view: strict empiricism: we perceive directly sensible things as they are, that is, as cluster of sensible qualities.

8.5. CONCLUSION: IDEALISM, EMPIRICISM AND COMMON SENSE²²⁷

- Berkeley argues that his philosophy is not only the most compatible with empiricism, but also with the layman's common sense.
 - The difference between the "gardener" and the idealist is only a difference of words: both believe in the existence of what they perceive. Both believe, for example, in the existence of colors, cold or heat in physical objects. Only, the gardener does not know that these objects do not exist independently of the mind.
 - By contrast, the philosophers deny the existence of colors, flavors and so on in the ordinary objects: in this sense, they are the true sceptic....

