Idealism

This handout follows the handouts on ‘Representative realism’ and ‘Primary and secondary qualities’. You should read those handouts first.

**ARE PHYSICAL OBJECTS COLLECTIONS OF IDEAS?**

We will concentrate on the idealism of Bishop Berkeley. He rejects the existence of physical objects, as they are usually thought of. Whatever we think they are, our idea is that a physical object is something that is mind-independent. All forms of idealism claim that reality is, in some important sense, dependent on minds. Berkeley claims that the ordinary objects of perception – tables, chairs, trees and so on – are dependent on minds. They must be perceived in order to exist (*esse est percipi (aut percipere) – to be is to be perceived (or to perceive)*). The only things that exist, then, are minds (that perceive) and what minds perceive. Therefore, nothing exists that is independent of mind.

So idealism claims that what we think of as physical objects are bundles of ideas that we have come to associate with each other because they ‘are observed to accompany each other’. Does this make sense, and why does Berkeley argue for this conclusion? A central reason is that we can’t make proper sense of the idea of a physical object, he claims.

Berkeley objected to representative realism that primary qualities don’t resemble objects any more than secondary qualities do. They can be just as subjective, e.g. the apparent shape of something changes from different angles. So you and I could be looking at a penny, and you see something circular and I see something oval.

This suggests that what we perceive (at least directly) are sense-data. And, of course, sense-data can’t exist without being perceived. Could there be an experience of colour that was no one’s experience? No; colours, sounds, smells, and shapes and sizes, says Berkeley, all depend on being perceived to exist at all. What we perceive when we perceive ‘physical objects’ are all ideas; and ideas can’t exist without minds.

This doesn’t yet show that physical objects themselves are ideas, only that we can only perceive them via ideas. But, Berkeley says, when we perceive physical objects, everything we perceive is either a primary or a secondary quality. We don’t perceive anything in addition to its primary and secondary qualities. But if both primary and secondary qualities are mind-dependent, then nothing that we perceive is left to exist independently of the mind. Berkeley argues we always perceive the qualities of physical objects, and as a result, we can’t even make sense of what a physical object independently of its qualities is. Since its qualities are all mind-dependent, there is nothing left of a physical object to be mind-independent.

If we say, as realists do, that there is the physical object ‘itself’, its ‘substance’ – well, what do we mean by this? How do we gain knowledge of its existence? We certainly don’t perceive it – as just argued. In fact, can we even form a coherent idea of what we mean by the physical object ‘itself’ independently of all the qualities we perceive? Berkeley
argues that we can’t. So all that is left – what we must mean by ‘physical object’ – is that bundle of ideas which we perceive.

THREE GOOD REASONS FOR IDEALISM

Berkeley’s idealism is very counter-intuitive. Berkeley realized this, and many of his arguments, some of which we have already discussed, are objections to representative and direct realism. If realism doesn’t work, perhaps idealism is the answer. Berkeley’s claim that there is nothing to physical objects apart from ideas is certainly odd, but, he says, it should be welcome upon reflection. Here are two good reasons for thinking that idealism solves the problems that realism throws up.

The linking problem

As well as not making sense, realism also leads to scepticism. How is that we can connect up our experiences to something ‘beyond’ them – which, following the objection just made, we can’t even describe or understand? How can we know that ideas really do represent (and represent accurately) something that exists completely independently of them? Idealism solves the problem of scepticism, because there is no need to ‘link’ the ideas we perceive to something else (physical objects). Ideas don’t represent physical objects, they are physical objects. The possibility of a world quite different from what we experience just doesn’t arise. In experiencing ideas, we are experiencing the world.

Empiricism

Berkeley also argues that idealism is more consistent than realism with a commitment to empiricism. The hypothesis that there is a physical world, quite independent of our experience of it, is not something we can verify through experience. We have no experience of substance, only of primary and secondary qualities. Worse still, the hypothesis of physical ‘substance’ is not one that is even suggested by experience. If we pay close attention to experience, we are led to the claim that all there is (all we can say there is) is what we can experience, and what we experience are ideas.

Substance

We need the idea of substance to argue that physical objects are independent of minds. Locke argued that primary and secondary properties belonged to the physical object; the properties are ‘held together’ or ‘united’ by its substance – matter. We need the concept to account for properties being held together to make ‘one’ thing (a chair, a dog, etc.). And we need it to claim that physical objects can exist unperceived – a substance is, by definition, something that does not depend on something else to exist. It is because physical objects have substance that they can exist unperceived.

But what is substance (what is matter?) apart from its properties? Once you list all the properties of a table, what is left which is the ‘substance’ of the table? Locke saw the point, and accepted that substance was unknowable. So a realist view of physical objects involves a mystery.

Berkeley’s idealism solves the need for talking about the substance of physical objects: they are nothing more than the ideas we perceive, existing together as a bundle. He objected that we didn’t really know what we were talking about, or even if we were talking sense, in talking about substance. He has argued that what we experience when we experience qualities – primary or secondary – are ideas; and ideas only exist in the mind. It doesn’t make sense to say a pain exists unless someone feels, or that a colour
exists unless someone sees it. Nor does it make sense to say a shape exists unless someone sees or feels it. What is the shape ‘square’ except what we see or feel? We can only make sense of it as our experience of square.

Locke and other realists can respond that primary qualities are not dependent upon being perceived, and in this way, we can make sense of physical objects existing unperceived. The table is still 5-foot long, even when no one is looking. (If direct realists are right, then it is also brown when no one is looking; Locke might be more inclined to say that they still reflect wavelengths of light when no one is looking.)

But this, to Berkeley, makes no sense. Locke argues that the squareness of a physical object (unlike what makes it look red) physical objects resembles what we see. But nothing resembles an idea, says Berkeley, except another idea. What do we mean when we say that the shape of the table ‘resembles’ the shape we see? How can squareness resemble the idea of squareness? The only idea of shape we have is the one we see (or feel). So, he concludes, it makes no sense to say that primary qualities – any more than pain or colour – exist in physical objects when they are not being perceived.

If this is right, then when substance exists unperceived, it exists without any qualities at all. And this, Berkeley says, is quite literally inconceivable. While realism is tied to saying that substance exists, idealism gets rid of it.

**DO MINDS EXIST?**

Berkeley has argued against physical substances. But why think there are mental substances, minds? We can no more form an idea of the mind than we can of a physical object, because we can never experience mind directly – we only experience ideas. And ideas can’t resemble minds, since ideas are passive and minds are (said to be) active. Shouldn’t empiricism dictate that we believe only ideas exist? Berkeley first considered the possibility of rejecting minds as well, to adopt the view that Hume later defended, that minds are nothing more than bundles of ideas. But he later argued that we do have a notion of mind, through our own case – the meaning of the term derives from the ‘I’, we are immediately aware of ourselves as thinking things. Furthermore, it doesn’t make sense, as he argues repeatedly, to think of ideas existing without minds.

**UNPERCEIVED OBJECTS**

If ‘to be is to be perceived’ for ordinary objects, that entails that when they are not being perceived, they do not exist. So if I leave a room, and no one else is in it, then everything ceases to exist! This is very counter-intuitive. The objection was put in the form of a limerick:

There was a young man who said God
must find it exceedingly odd
when He finds that the tree
continues to be
when no one’s about in the Quad.

Berkeley provides two different answers in different books. His first reply is this: what the word ‘exists’ means when applied to an ordinary object of perception is that it is or can be perceived. ‘The table exists’ means the table is being perceived, or would be perceived if in the presence of some mind.
However, this reply conflicts with ‘to be is to be perceived’, which entails not that the table does exist if it were perceived, but rather that it would exist if it were perceived. So tables do pop in and out of existence. But should we worry about this, as long as they do so with complete regularity? We might reply that we shouldn’t worry but this hardly seems as plausible as the idea that physical objects exist independently of our minds.

Berkeley’s second, and more consistent, reply is summarized in the second part of the limerick:

\[
\begin{aligned}
&\text{Dear Sir, your astonishment’s odd.} \\
&\text{I’m always about in the Quad,} \\
&\text{And that’s why the tree} \\
&\text{continues to be} \\
&\text{Since observed by, yours faithfully, God.}
\end{aligned}
\]

According to this response, God does not only cause our ideas of perception. What we perceive exists in the mind of God. But this is also problematic: our ideas of perception couldn’t be part of a divine mind, which can’t have the sorts of sensations we have. Second, ordinary objects change and go out of existence, but God’s mind is said to be unchanging and eternal. But Berkeley may respond that God’s ideas which correspond to ordinary objects are not ones God thinks, but what God wills us to experience:

\[
\begin{aligned}
\text{things…may properly be said to begin their existence…when God decreed they should become perceptible to intelligent creatures.}
\end{aligned}
\]