

# Handout 20: Berkeley's Immaterialism

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy  
Professor Geoff Pynn  
Northern Illinois University

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## I IDEALISM

### 1. Dualism vs. monism

- (a) Dualism: mind  $\neq$  body
- (b) Monism: mind = body

### 2. Question for monists: which is more fundamental, mind or body? Answers distinguish varieties of monism:

- (a) Materialism: mind *reduces to* body. (E.g., all of your conscious experiences can be explained in terms of brain activity.)
- (b) Idealism: body *reduces to* mind.
- (c) "Neutral monists": neither is more fundamental than the other. Spinoza is a neutral monist.

### 3. Berkeley is an idealist. He thinks that fundamentally there are two kinds of things: minds (which he also calls "spirits") and ideas (which belong to minds). Bodies can be explained in terms of, and are reducible to, mental phenomenon.

## 2 BERKELEY'S IMMATERIALISM

### 1. Berkeley's definition of 'matter' and 'material substance':

*Principles* 9:

Things "existing without the mind or unperceived"

"[A]n unthinking substance"

"[A]n inert, senseless substance in in which extension, figure, and motion, do actually subsist"

Key: matter / material substance is *mind-independent*.

### 2. For Berkeley, materialism = the view that matter, so defined, exists. Note that this is a different use of the term 'materialism' than I've defined above, as a variety of monism. For Berkeley, monistic materialism is just one kind of materialism.

3. Immaterialism = the view that matter, so defined, does not exist. This is Berkeley's view.
4. Immaterialism  $\neq$  there are no physical objects or, in Berkeley's term, "sensible things". Berkeley affirms the existence of stones, trees, books, etc. He just thinks they are mind-dependent; i.e., they reduce to mental phenomena.
5. What *are* sensible things?

*Principles 1:*

"[A] certain color, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name *apple*. Other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and the like sensible things"

*Principles 3:*

"Their *esse* [Latin for 'to be'] is *percipi* [Latin for 'to be perceived']."

*Principles 6:*

"[A]ll those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind, their being is to be perceived or known"

Answer suggested here: sensible things are collections of ideas.

### 3 REAL THINGS

1. What's the difference between real and imaginary sensible things?
  - (a) Real things have no "dependence on my will" (*Principles 29*).
  - (b) Real things are "more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the imagination" (*Principles 30*).
  - (c) Real things "have a steadiness, order, and coherence, and are not excited at random"; the rules which they obey "are called the *Laws of Nature*" (*Principles 30*).
2. The general idea: take all the features that distinguish real from imaginary things. Berkeley will say that real things are just those collections of ideas that exhibit all those features, except for mind-independence.
3. Since real things do not depend on my will, what do they depend on? Answer: God's will:

*Principles 29:*

"There is therefore some other will or spirit that produces them."

### 4 UNPERCEIVED THINGS

1. Objection: even when I'm not in my study, doesn't the table in my study continue to exist? If so, then the table can exist without being perceived.
2. Berkeley gives two responses to this objection:

- (a) Just because *you're* not perceiving it doesn't mean that *no one* is.
- (b) What do you mean by "continue to exist"?

*Principles 3:*

"The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it."

3. Problems with these responses.

- (a) Couldn't there be rocks and trees even if there were *no one* around to perceive them?
  - i. Berkeley's response: *God* would perceive them.
  - ii. Virtue of this response: even if the rocks and trees could exist without finite minds, they couldn't exist without God.
  - iii. See limericks.
- (b) Suppose that God destroys my table whenever I leave the study, and then re-creates it whenever I'm about to return. Then the table would not continue to exist when I was out of my study, and yet it would be true that "if I was in my study I might perceive it". The apparent possibility of such situations suggests that the continued existence of objects while unperceived is not equivalent to facts about what we would perceive in various situations.

APPENDIX: LIMERICKS

There was a young man who said, "God  
must think it exceedingly odd  
when he finds that the tree  
continues to be  
when no one's about in the quad."

Dear Sir: Your astonishment's odd.  
*I* am always about in the quad.  
And *that's* why the tree  
continues to be:  
since observed by  
Yours faithfully,  
God.

(From Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy*, pp. 647-648; attributed to Ronald Knox)