

Berkeley's idealism: three objections¹

In his *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, George Berkeley rejects our usual understanding of physical objects as mind-independent. He claims that reality is dependent on minds. The ordinary objects of perception - tables, chairs, trees and other physical objects - must be perceived in order to exist at all. The only things that exist are minds (that perceive) and what minds perceive. The claim that nothing exists that is independent of mind is idealism. However, we are passive in perception, and so what we perceive is caused by something other than ourselves. Berkeley argues that this cause is God. For more on Berkeley's theory and his arguments for it, see the handout 'Berkeley's idealism'.

In this handout, we discuss three objections to Berkeley's theory and his responses. The objections relate to illusions, solipsism and the role of God. The handout 'Berkeley's idealism: further objections' discusses two more objections, concerning the objective reality of physical objects and scientific investigation.

PROBLEMS WITH THE ROLE PLAYED BY GOD IN BERKELEY'S IDEALISM

However persuasive one finds Berkeley's arguments regarding perception, one may object to his appeal to God. It is important to note, however, that Berkeley does not assume that God exists, and then wheel him in to resolve philosophical difficulties in his theory. Rather, the existence of God is an inference, supported by the arguments. The cause of our perceptions is a mind, because we can only conceive of minds being active: 'I have no notion of any action other than volition, and I can't conceive of volition as being anywhere but in a spirit'. The 'variety, order, and manner' of what I perceive shows that the mind that produces these ideas is 'wise, powerful, and good, beyond anything I can comprehend'. I derive the idea of God from my knowledge of my own mind, 'heightening its powers and removing its imperfections'.

But the exact relationship between (the mind of) God and what we perceive is puzzling. Berkeley infers that our perceptions are caused by God. Physical objects don't depend on my mind; but as ideas, they depend on some other mind. So, Berkeley says that they exist in the mind of God. But does this make sense? There are three reasons to think that ideas we are caused to have, whether perceptions or sensations, can't be part of God's mind:

- P1. My perceptions and sensations are part of my mind. What I perceive and feel is in my mind, not God's mind.
- P2. God can't have the sorts of perceptual experiences I have - God doesn't perceive as I do, and does not undergo sensations, such as pain.

¹ This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 108-12

- P3. The ordinary objects of my perception change and go out of existence, but God's mind is said to be unchanging and eternal.
- C1. Therefore, what I perceive and feel can't be part of God's mind.

Berkeley clarifies his theory by responding:

1. What I perceive is a copy of the idea in God's mind.
2. The ideas of physical objects exist in God's mind not as perceptions, but as part of God's understanding. The same is true of sensations. So while God doesn't perceive the colour red or feel pain, he knows what it is for us to undergo these experiences.
3. What I perceive, which changes, is what God wills me to perceive. The whole of creation exists in God's understanding, eternally; 'things . . . may properly be said to begin their existence . . . when God decreed they should become perceptible to intelligent creatures'.

We will see that understanding the role of God in Berkeley's idealism enables us to understand his responses to the other objections that can be raised.

ARGUMENTS FROM ILLUSION AND HALLUCINATION

In the *Three Dialogues*, Hylas asks how idealism can explain illusions. Since we perceive ideas, there must be an idea that corresponds to the illusion. But we don't want to say that the physical object is as it looks in the illusion. If we see an oar half-submerged in water, it looks crooked, but it isn't. But the oar is just what we see; and what we see is crooked, not straight.

Berkeley's response is that we aren't misperceiving - what we perceive in the case of the half-submerged oar is crooked. However, this is misleading if we infer that the oar would feel crooked if we touched it or would look crooked when pulled out of the water. So illusions mislead us regarding the ideas we might associate with what we perceive.

This entails that the oar is crooked when half-submerged. Because Berkeley argues that reality is the ideas we perceive; there is no appearance-reality distinction. But to say the oar is crooked is very odd indeed - it just sounds false!

In *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley doesn't consider or respond to this objection. Elsewhere in his writings, however, he replies that the problem here is with language. He agrees that we shouldn't say 'The oar is crooked', since what we understand that to mean is that it would look crooked under normal conditions. And this is false. So to avoid this implication, we should say 'The oar looks crooked' - and this is correct.

What about hallucinations? Berkeley discusses these, in the form of dreams. Hallucinations are products of imagination. Normally, imagination is voluntary and perception is not. But hallucinations are involuntary, like perceptions, so Berkeley provides two other criteria that mark off hallucinations from perception. First, they are 'dim, irregular, and confused'. Second, even if they were as 'vivid and

clear' as perceptions, they are not coherently connected with the rest of our perceptual experience.

To this, we might object that these criteria mark a difference of degree - perceptual experiences can be more or less clear or dim, more or less coherently connected with other experiences. But surely the difference between hallucination and perception is a difference in kind. In perception, you experience something that exists outside your mind, in hallucination, you don't. In response, perhaps Berkeley could agree - the ideas you perceive originate in God, but in hallucination they don't. His criteria are only supposed to indicate how we can tell.

IDEALISM LEADS TO SOLIPSISM

Solipsism is the view that only oneself, one's mind, exists. There are no mind-independent physical objects and there are no other minds either. We can object that Berkeley's idealism leads to the conclusion that all that exists is my own experience. Or at least, experience gives me no reason to believe that anything apart from my experience exists (or can exist). If all I perceive are ideas, what reason do I have to think that other minds exist? For that matter, what reason do I have to think that minds (including God) exist? After all, I do not perceive minds. Berkeley doesn't discuss this objection from solipsism explicitly, though Hylas expresses a version of it, and Berkeley makes a number of remarks we can draw upon. He accepts that 'strictly speaking', I have no idea of a mind. But because I am a mind - a 'thinking substance' - I know I exist.

- P1. The mind is that which (actively) perceives, thinks and wills, while ideas are passive.
- P2. I am aware of myself as capable of this activity.
- C1. Therefore, I am not my ideas, but a mind.
- P3. Being a mind myself, I have a 'notion' of what a mind is.
- C2. Therefore, it is possible that other minds exist.
- P4. My perceptions don't originate in my mind.
- C3. Therefore, they are caused by some other mind.
- C4. The complexity, regularity, etc., of my experience indicates that this mind is God.

As for other finite minds - other people - Berkeley doesn't spend much time on the matter, but indicates that there is evidence in my experience that they exist. Their existence is a matter of inference.