

**THE ONTOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF THE CONCEPT OF IDEA IN GEORGE
BERKELEY'S EPISTEMOLOGY**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the concept of ideas in the thoughts of Berkeley. Using the critical-analytic method of data analysis, the paper found out that Berkeley's philosophical system as a whole is designed to controvert the empirical realism of Locke and the natural scientists of his day; it nevertheless derives from epistemological principles which are similar to those of Locke. Berkeley did not only espouse Locke's empiricist thesis that all knowledge is derived from experience, he also followed Locke in accepting the Cartesian view of consciousness, viz. the thesis that the immediate object of perceptual experience is itself a mental event or an item of consciousness, which Berkeley, following the prevailing fashion of the day, termed an 'idea'. For Berkeley, as for Descartes and Locke, this seemed a truth as obvious as to require no vindication. Hence, he concluded that all that we perceive are ideas and sensations. The conclusion that is reached in this paper is that, the short comings of Berkeley's mentalism notwithstanding, the world consists of nothing but minds and ideas for Berkeley and ordinary objects are collections of ideas. Again, it must be noted that in his discourse on vision, he argued that one learns to coordinate ideas of sight and touch to judge distance, magnitude, and figure, properties which are immediately perceived only by touch.

Keywords: Ideas, *esse est percipi*, perception, Knowledge, mentalism.

Introduction

Epistemology is basically concerned with the question of knowledge within the context of how we know, to what extent we know and even the possibility of knowing. Several philosophers in all epochs in the history of philosophy have been fascinated with, and as well attempts answer to the above concern. While some are of the empiricist bent, others have elected

and found the rationalist bent to be more plausible. In the same vein, the history of the response to the concern of epistemology is basically a history of influence, reactions and counter reactions. It is in this sense, that Tipton, while speaking of Berkeley epistemological thoughts argued that:

Berkeley's thought is a continuation of Locke's Empiricism, but Berkeley is much more extreme and, it must be admitted, logically consistent. For Locke, experience through sense perception not rational deduction was the only sure source of knowledge. Nevertheless, Locke assumed that, underlying our perception of them, things had an objective "substance" that carried their perceived qualities. At the same time, he was unable to further define it based on his empirical method and called it "something - I know not what". In his *Dialogues*, Berkeley offers a lively discussion (and demolition) of Locke's primary and secondary qualities as well as his notion of substance (213).

Consequently, one can argue that Berkeley espouse Locke's empiricist thesis that all knowledge is derived from experience, and argued the thesis that the immediate object of perceptual experience is itself a mental event or an item of consciousness, which he termed an "idea". And that all that we perceive are ideas and sensations, hence in his discourse on vision, he argued that one learns to coordinate ideas of sight and touch to judge distance, magnitude, and figure, properties which are immediately perceived only by touch. In fulfilling the requirement of this paper, which as one will expect is an evaluation of the concept of ideas in the thoughts of George Berkeley, this paper proceeds from a discourse on ideas in Berkeley's epistemology through a critique of the same to an evaluation before adducing the conclusion in the final third.

Berkeley on Ideas

Berkeley was an idealist who held that ordinary objects are only collections of ideas, which are mind-dependent. By asserting that there are no material substances, Berkeley was an immaterialist. For him, there are only finite mental substances and an infinite mental substance, namely, God. On these points there is general agreement. Berkeley begins his discussion as follows:

It is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind, or lastly ideas

formed by help of memory and imagination, either compounding, dividing, or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways (1).

This seems to say that ideas are the immediate objects of knowledge in a fundamental sense (acquaintance). Following Locke, there are ideas of sense, reflection, and imagination. So, ordinary objects, as known, are collections of ideas marked by a single name. If ideas are construed as objects of knowledge, then there must also be something that knows or perceives them, and exercises divers' operations, as willing, imagining, and remembering about them. This Berkeley calls this 'mind' or 'spirit'. Minds (as knowers) are distinct from ideas (as things known). For an idea, to be is to be perceived (known). Since this holds for ideas in general, it holds for "sensations or ideas imprinted on the sense" in particular (3).

Berkeley contends that the "opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a world all sensible objects have an existence natural or real, distinct from being perceived" is inconsistent, "a manifest contradiction" (4). If one construes 'sensible objects' as ideas of sense, and ideas are objects of knowledge, then having a real existence distinct from being perceived would require that an object be known (as an idea) and unknown (as a thing distinct from being perceived), which is inconsistent. He explains the source of the error on the basis of the doctrine of abstract idea.

Ordinary objects, as known, are nothing but collections of ideas. If, like Descartes, Berkeley holds that claims of existence are justified if and only if the existent can be known, then ordinary objects must be *at least* collections of ideas. As Berkeley put it, all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind, that their being is to be perceived or known (6). The only substance that can be known is a spirit or thinking substance. But notice what has not yet been shown. It has not been shown that ordinary objects are *only* collections of ideas, nor has it be shown that thinking substances are immaterial. Berkeley's next move is to ask whether there are grounds for claiming ordinary objects are something more than ideas.

Thus, Berkeley concludes, there are no grounds for claiming that an ordinary object is more than a collection of ideas. The arguments showed that ordinary objects are at least

collections of ideas of sense. The arguments also provide grounds for claiming that ordinary objects are nothing more than ideas. So, Berkeley is justified in claiming that they are only ideas of sense. Berkeley's argument for immaterialism is complete, although he has not yet provided criteria for distinguishing ideas of sense from ideas of memory and imagination. Before turning to this, Berkeley introduces several remarks on mind.

Berkeley claims that an inspection of our ideas shows that they are causally inert. Since there is a continual succession of ideas in our minds, there must be some causes of it. Since this cause can be neither an idea nor a material substance, it must be a spiritual substance. This sets the stage for Berkeley's argument for the existence of God and the distinction between real things and imaginary things. One knows that one causes some of one's own ideas. Since the mind is passive in perception, there are ideas which one's own mind does not cause. Only a mind or spirit can be a cause. There is therefore some other will or spirit that produces them (*Principles of Human Knowledge*, 29). As such, this is *not* an argument for the existence of God, although Berkeley's further discussion assumes that at least one mind is the divine mind. He is now in a position to distinguish ideas of sense from ideas of the imagination:

The ideas of sense are more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the imagination; they have likewise a steadiness, order, and coherence, and are not excited at random, as those which are the effects of human wills often are (PHK 30). This provides the basis for both the distinction between ideas of sense and ideas of imagination and for the distinction between real things and imaginary things (PHK 33). Real things are composed solely of ideas of sense. Ideas of sense occur with predictable regularity; they form coherent wholes that themselves can be expected to behave in predictable ways. Ideas of sense follow (divinely established) laws of nature (104).

So, Berkeley has given an account of ordinary objects without matter. Ordinary objects are nothing but lawfully arranged collections of ideas of sense.

A Critique of Berkeley's Epistemology

Berkeley's theory of knowledge is built on his concept of ideas that are subjective in nature. Berkeley further declares that ideas do not have existence outside of a mind that perceives them. This tends to be quickly read to a conclusion that nothing exists unless one perceives it. The real cause of ideas "is an incorporeal active substance or Spirit". The main

source of our ideas is the Author of nature, or God. We can have ideas in our mind as we will them in dreams and the like, but most ideas come from God who sustains the creation from alternately being there and then disappearing when I sleep and awake. Nothing in creation is changed from the laws of nature because of Berkeley's views. He noted, "Ideas imprinted on the sense are real things, or do really exist; this we do not deny, but we deny that they can subsist without the minds which perceive them" (Roark 18). This quotation may give some context for understanding Berkeley's most famous quote: "To be is to be perceived". In other words, if someone (ultimately God) does not perceive it, it doesn't exist, and knowledge of them also depends on God. Based on the above conception, it is pertinent to examine the merits and demerits of his thought.

Berkeley uses the analysis of knowing to show that matter in the philosophic sense of his day did not exist. What is experienced is ideas which are spiritual in nature, produced by either my mind, your mind, or God's. Berkeley does not deny that one perceives bodies, trees, seas, or bees. But what man perceives is an idea, and an idea reflects the realm of the spirit, not matter. Berkeley used this argument based on a theory of knowledge to argue against materialism and atheism in his day. One basic merit of Berkeley's theory therefore is that, although it was very difficult, if not impossible to refute, very few philosophers have followed Berkeley in these views.

There is an important point of view concluded from Berkeley's view of perception. The universe undoubtedly appears to be anthropocentric (Roak 23). Berkeley lived in a time when important scientific revolutions were taking place in the new astronomy of Copernicus and the works of Newton. The revolution meant that man was no longer the centre of the universe, but now a mere spectator in a world whose centre had shifted far away from him. The new views have continued to the modern era in which man is a child of nature and is intermeshed within nature. Man's arrival is just a fortuitous event in the history of the planet. But Berkeley did not accept a fortuitous explanation for man's existence. Common sense and common observation still keep man oriented in the direction of anthropocentricity, or the idea that man is the centre of the universe (24).

Berkeley's theory also stressed the importance of human freedom. For instance, in his work, *Alciphron*, Berkeley stresses like many other philosophers before him, declares that freedom is the foundation of morality and religion. Without freedom man is not accountable for his actions. With freedom responsibility becomes a meaningful term. Guilt in any sense of the word is only useful with the term of freedom of man.

God is very important to the system of Berkeley. The nature of God is not so much expounded on as the relation of God to his system of immaterialism. Berkeley speaks of God as 'A being' who's spirituality, omnipresence, providence, omniscience, infinite power, and goodness, are as conspicuous as the existence of sensible things. God is important for He is the explanation of how we know. Since matter does not exist to cause perceiving, the perceiving must come from a spiritual being who is active and powerful. As the source of ideas that we perceive, God is known as certainly and immediately as any other mind or spirit whatsoever distinct from ourselves. Berkeley proceeds to argue that God's existence is much more readily seen than man's existence. The reason is that man is limited and small in comparison to the great number of ideas that man perceives other than man. Each idea that he perceives is another bit of evidence that God exists. Remember ideas come from God. Berkeley used an analogy to speak about seeing God.

When we say we see a man we do not see a being who perceives and thinks. What we see is a creature who has a body like us and we conclude that it thinks and perceives. In a similar manner we analogize for God because "we do at all times and in all places perceive manifest tokens of Divinity; everything we see, hear, feel, or anywise perceive by sense being a sign or effect of the power of God; as in our perception of those very motions which are produced by man (Erwing 120).

Ideas are creations of God. Ideas existed before I was born or even the whole human race. It necessarily follows that there is an omnipresent, eternal mind, which knows and comprehends all things, and exhibits them to our view in such a manner, and according to such rules as he himself hath ordained, and are by us termed the laws of nature.

The demerits of Berkeley's theory of knowledge consist of the lapses in his thought system. First and foremost, Berkeley claimed that all knowledge consists of ideas but abstract ideas are the source of all philosophical perplexity and illusion. In his introduction to the *Principles of Human Knowledge* he argued that, as Locke described abstract ideas (Berkeley considered Locke's the best account of abstraction), (1) abstract ideas cannot, in fact, be formed, (2) they are not needed for communication or knowledge, and (3) they are inconsistent and therefore inconceivable. And yet, in the *Principles* and the *Three Dialogues* Berkeley defends two metaphysical theses: idealism that is, the claim that everything that exists either is a mind or depends on a mind for its existence) and immaterialism (the claim that matter does not exist). His contention that all physical objects are composed of ideas is encapsulated in his motto *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived). Berkeley is in fact committed to saying that there is no common world of objects; rather there are as many distinct, self-enclosed, private worlds as there are perceivers. In the first instance, the above view amounts to contradiction, thus, denying abstract ideas and affirming it in the first instance.

Berkeley held that ordinary objects are only collections of ideas, which are mind-dependent. Berkeley was an immaterialist and yet an empiricist. He held that there are no material substances. There are only finite mental substances and an infinite mental substance, namely, God. On these points there is general agreement. There is less agreement on Berkeley's argumentative approach to idealism and immaterialism and on the role of some of his specific arguments. His central arguments are often deemed weak. Accordingly, Berkeley states his idealism by establishing that 'actual' physical objects are in fact repeated patterns of sensory information. As such, it is not just the nature of an immediate experience which identifies whether it is a hallucination, a dream, or a real-life experience, but also its relation to other experiences: the general context of the experience.

The Idealist may also have to deal with the criticism that it leads directly to solipsism. The view that 'I myself alone' exist, as a mind, since everything else is only an entity in my awareness. The Idealist might respond that the logic of Idealism allows for the existence of more than one mind. Many of the things in my mind may be there through the influence of other

minds. That makes more sense than saying that the things in my mind are somehow caused by things of an entirely different nature, extra-mental things.

A further worry about Berkeley's system arises from the idea-bundle account of objects. If according to Berkeley's theory in which "to exist is to be perceived" there is no mind-independent object against which to measure my ideas, but rather my ideas help to constitute the object, then how can my ideas ever fail how is error possible? Summarily therefore, Berkeley's theory of knowledge has no room for error. The question of knowledge as justified truth belief depends on the subject. The whole question of epistemology (that is, the nature, limits, extent, certainty and objectivity of human knowledge) has been subjected to an individual perceiver. This implies that, knowledge is determined by an individual mind that perceives. This view thus amounts to a major drawback.

Evaluation of Berkeley's Theory of Knowledge

Epistemologists have long debated the limits, or scope, of knowledge. The more limited man takes the scope of knowledge to be, the more sceptical man becomes. The strongest form of knowledge-scepticism states that it is impossible for anyone to know anything. A weaker form denies the actuality of our having knowledge, but leaves open its possibility. Many sceptics have restricted their scepticism to a particular domain of supposed knowledge: for example, knowledge of the external world, knowledge of other minds, knowledge of the past or the future, or knowledge of unperceived items. Berkeley's solution to scepticism was not just to show that knowledge is possible but also to identify the source of all knowledge.

Like Plato in the classical world, he found the concept of inanimate material objects functioning as causal agents incomprehensible, anthropomorphic, and self-contradictory. For Berkeley, as for Plato, only a 'spirit' or soul could function as a causal agent in the literal sense, and he believed that the ultimate cause of all phenomena, in terms of which alone they can be explicated, is the cosmic spirit or mind of God. This naturally coloured his interpretation of, and reaction to, scientific mechanism: for Berkeley, as again for Plato, the only genuine form of explanation was teleological explanation in terms of final causes, and he viewed with disdain the

contention of the 'corpuscularian' scientists that phenomena could be both described *and* explained in terms of the mechanical interaction of material objects and particles. It was against this attempt, as he saw it; to supplant God with inert matter that Berkeley reacted, arguing (not entirely without reason) that it constituted the first step towards atheism (McMullin 243).

According to Ayers, M.R, Berkeley's philosophical system as a whole can be seen as designed to controvert the materialism of Locke and the natural scientists of his day, it nevertheless derives from epistemological principles which are remarkably similar to those of Locke. For not alone did Berkeley espouse Locke's empiricist thesis that all knowledge is derived from experience, he also followed Locke in accepting the Cartesian view of consciousness, viz. the thesis that the immediate object of perceptual experience is itself a mental event or an item of consciousness, which Berkeley, following the prevailing fashion of the day, termed an 'idea'. For Berkeley, as for Descartes and Locke, this seemed a truth as obvious as to require no vindication. (Thus in the *Principles*, he asks 'what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations?', and assumes that it is self-evidently true that the only possible answer to this question is 'nothing') (45).

As a result, the destructive effect which the acceptance of this precept had wrought upon other philosophical systems was, unfortunately, to be repeated in Berkeley's, although it was to take a significantly different direction. For while Locke (who influenced Berkeley) had tried to break through the so-called 'veil of ideas' which this precept erects between consciousness and the objective, extra-mental world by means of a causal or 'representationalist' theory of perception (i.e. the theory that the ideas or data of which we are aware in consciousness are 'caused by', and so represent, physical objects existing outside of the mind), Berkeley saw that this account of perception leads inevitably to scepticism about the nature and existence of the objective world, and so rejected it out of hand.

Representation duplicates the world of perceptual experience with an unperceivable real world, and those such as Locke who subscribe to it have inevitably to admit that our knowledge of the real world is, at best, indirect and inferential in nature. In direct opposition to this Berkeley adopted the anti-sceptical position that the real world is directly or immediately encountered in perception, and that our knowledge of this world is direct and non-inferential. But if what we

perceive immediately is the real, objective world, and we immediately perceive only our own ideas, then it follows analytically that our ideas are constitutive of reality, and are not, as Locke had argued, merely representative of reality.

This was the line of reasoning which led Berkeley to formulate his famous 'immaterial hypothesis', that an idea exists only insofar as it is perceived, and that a spirit or mind exists only insofar as it perceives or is conscious. Thus, at the end of the *Third Dialogue*, Philonous, who speaks for Berkeley argues that:

My endeavours tend only to unite and place in a clearer light that truth, which was before shared between the vulgar and the philosophers: the former being of the opinion, that those things they immediately perceive are the real things; and the latter, the things immediately perceived, are ideas which exist only in the mind. Which two notions put together, do in effect constitute the substance of what I advance (262).

For Berkeley, therefore, there are two and only two kinds of entity which possess real existence: minds or spirits and ideas. The *esse* or being of an idea or collection of ideas (i.e. a physical object) is to be perceived, for even if we try to conceive of some object existing unperceived, we of necessity bring that object to mind, and it cannot logically, as Berkeley puts it, exist 'out of all minds whatsoever. Similarly, the *esse* of a spirit or mind is to perceive and to act; it is the fundamental reality, the only kind of substance, which thinks and wills and apprehends ideas. Berkeley held that it is impossible to conceptually represent or to have an idea of spirit or mind, because, as he remarks in the *Principles*, 'All ideas whatever, being passive and inert, cannot represent unto us, by way of image or likeness, that which acts.' (27). Spirit, therefore, is for Berkeley the only substance which really exists, and he held that it fulfils all the functions which Locke had accorded to the material substratum. Berkeley's ideas have a dependent and relative status, in that they cannot exist autonomously, without substantial 'support', but while in the case of ideas this latter metaphor is made intelligible by being equated with perception (*First Dialogue*, 199).

Furthermore, Thorton contends that Berkeley is guilty of the charge of having intellectual double standards, and of permitting his theological commitments to intrude into what purports to be a pure philosophical analysis of the nature of the physical world. For instance, both Locke and

Berkeley were empiricists, and as such were strong advocates of the view that there is no *a priori* knowledge - all knowledge has its origins in experience (9). Despite the fact that Locke is commonly regarded as the 'father' of modern empiricism, he nevertheless persisted in his belief that a material substratum, unperceivable and unknowable, exists and functions as the 'support' for physical qualities, and Berkeley was perfectly justified in his denunciation of this view as inconsistent and incoherent (10). However, Berkeley was at all times inclined to be less critical of issues which seemed to support his uniquely theistic world-view than he was of those to which it stood opposed, and consequently the charge of theoretical inconsistency can be as justifiably levelled at him.

Berkeley's works indicates that he was initially far from sure how the problem of our knowledge of mind or spirit should be approached. To begin with, his instinct seems to have been to opt for a realistic stance on this issue. Thus, he writes, "We think we know not the Soul, because we have no imaginable or sensible Idea annexed to that sound. This is the effect of prejudice" (*Philosophical Commentaries*, 576). But in the very next entry, recognising, presumably, that the theory of meaning to which he subscribed rendered any term to which an idea could not be 'annexed' meaningless, he flatly contradicts himself: 'Certainly we do not know it. This will be plain if we examine what we mean by the word knowledge (576).

Again, it can be said that the central thrust of Berkeley's philosophical work was determined by his desire to impede the development of philosophical positivism and scepticism, the seeds of which he had discerned in the materialism of Locke. Yet in the final analysis his immaterialist ontology, resting as it does upon his skilful (selective) employment of Ockham's razor in the field of epistemology, was to constitute a major step in the development of the positivism which he so abhorred.

Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs, attempts have been made to account for Berkeley's epistemology. What should be noted is that, in Berkeley's view, the world consists of nothing but minds and ideas. Ordinary objects are collections of ideas. In his discourse on vision, he argued that one learns to coordinate ideas of sight and touch to judge distance, magnitude, and figure, properties which are immediately perceived only by touch. The ideas of one sense become signs

of ideas of the other senses. In his philosophical writings, this coordination of regularly occurring ideas becomes the way the world is known and the way humans construct real things.

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