

History of Philosophy

44 George Berkeley's Idealism

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Abstract:

The provided text is an educational lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes regarding the **18th-century British philosopher George Berkeley** and his system of **metaphysical idealism**. Holmes explains that Berkeley sought to combat the rising tide of **materialism, atheism, and deism** by arguing that matter does not independently exist. By building upon and then critiquing **John Locke's epistemology**, Berkeley asserted that humans only have access to **ideas**, which are inherently mental rather than physical. He rejected the existence of **abstract ideas** and **primary qualities**, concluding instead that all reality consists solely of **minds and their perceptions**. This "mentalism" leads to a **theistic conclusion**, where God is viewed as the constant, supreme mind providing the sensory ideas that humans experience. Ultimately, the source portrays Berkeley's project as a **strategic defense of Christianity** intended to pull the philosophical rug out from under mechanistic science.

Briefing Document:

Briefing: The Metaphysical Idealism of George Berkeley

Executive Summary

George Berkeley, an 18th-century British philosopher and Anglican bishop, proposed a radical metaphysical system known as **Idealism**. His central thesis is that "matter" as an independently existing substance does not exist; rather, all reality consists of minds and their ideas. Berkeley's project was not merely a theoretical exercise but a strategic defense of theism against the rising tides of materialism, deism, and atheism fueled by Newtonian physics.

By applying a strict empiricism to John Locke's theory of ideas, Berkeley argued that we have no evidence for a material "substratum" beneath our sensations. He concluded that since our sensory ideas are mental and involuntary, they must be caused by a Supreme Mind—God—thereby necessitating a providential, imminent deity rather than the remote clockmaker of deism.

I. Philosophical Context and Objectives

The Man and the Mission

George Berkeley was a "man of affairs" and an activist, known for projects ranging from establishing schools for American Indians to investigating medical panaceas like "tar water." Philosophically, his primary concern was the erosion of religious belief.

- **Opposition to Materialism:** Berkeley viewed materialism as the foundation for atheism.
- **Critique of Deism:** He targeted the deism of his day, which relied on Newtonian physics. If nature operates via fixed, mechanical laws without divine intervention, God becomes superfluous.
- **The Strategy:** Berkeley aimed to "pull the rug out from under the materialist" by proving that the fundamental concepts of Newtonian mechanics—matter, physical force, absolute space, and absolute time—are objectively unreal.

Relationship to Phenomenalism

Berkeley's view is a subset of **phenomenalism**, the belief that we only know the appearances (phenomena) of things.

- **Berkeley's Specificity:** While he is a phenomenalist regarding physical objects, he remains a realist regarding minds (spirits) and God.
 - **Contrast with Others:** Unlike later phenomenologists like John Stuart Mill, Berkeley asserts the absolute reality of the mental realm.
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II. The Rejection of Abstract Ideas (Nominalism)

Berkeley's first major move was a critique of John Locke's "abstract general ideas." Berkeley adopted a **nominalist** position, arguing that language is often abused by assuming every general term refers to a general thing.

The Empirical Critique

Berkeley argued that it is impossible to form an abstract idea in the mind. He challenged the notion that one could conceive of "extension" or "motion" in general without specific attributes.

Concept	Locke's Conceptualism	Berkeley's Nominalism
Color	We can have an abstract idea of "color" in general.	We only perceive particular shades (e.g., a specific blue). "Color" is just a catch-all term.
Motion	We can conceive of motion distinct from a moving body.	Motion cannot be conceived without a specific body, speed, or direction.
Extension	We have an abstract idea of spatial occupancy.	We only have ideas of particular shapes and sizes. "Empty space" is an empirical "nothing."

Functions of Language

Berkeley noted that words do not always name or refer to things (referential language). Language has multiple "games" or functions, such as:

- Comforting or encouraging.
- Exhorting or blaming.
- Acting as symbols within a system (e.g., mathematics) rather than denoting devices.

III. The Case Against Materialism (Mentalism)

Berkeley's "Mentalism" asserts that only minds and their ideas exist. He utilized three primary arguments to dismantle the concept of material substance.

1. The Argument from Reference

Locke described the material substratum as "something, I know not what." Berkeley argued that if this substratum is unknown and unperceived, the word "matter" has no empirical meaning and refers to nothing.

2. The "Like Cause, Like Effect" Argument

Berkeley maintained that ideas are mental events. Following the principle that a cause must be like its effect, he argued that the cause of a mental idea must itself be mental (a mind). Physical stimuli cannot logically produce immaterial thoughts.

3. The Collapse of Primary and Secondary Qualities

Berkeley's most incisive critique targeted Locke's distinction between primary qualities (objective: size, shape) and secondary qualities (subjective: color, sound).

- **Inseparability:** We never perceive a primary quality (shape) without a secondary quality (color). A "colorless shape" is an empirical impossibility.
- **Relativity:** Berkeley argued that primary qualities are just as relative as secondary ones. For example, a castle keep may appear as a small round blob from a distance but a large square structure up close. If shape and size change based on the perceiver's condition, they must be subjective.

IV. The Role of God and "Common Sense"

A common misunderstanding of Berkeley is that he views the world as a "silly" illusion. Berkeley insisted his view was aligned with common sense.

The Reality of Experience

When challenged by the anecdote of Dr. Johnson kicking a rock to "refute" him, Berkeley's response was that the pain and hardness of the rock are real experiences. The question is not *if* we experience them, but *what causes* them.

God as the Perceiving Power

Berkeley distinguished between two types of ideas:

1. **Voluntary Ideas:** Images we create via imagination (e.g., a man with two heads).

2. **Involuntary Ideas:** Sensory experiences (e.g., the sun, a rock) that we cannot choose to ignore.

Because we all experience the same "involuntary" world under the same conditions, there must be a **Supreme Mind** (God) constantly perceiving the world and "giving" these ideas to us. This makes God imminently active in the world (Theism) rather than a detached creator (Deism).

V. Philosophical Legacy and Comparison

Berkeley occupies a unique position in the history of British Empiricism, situated between Locke and David Hume.

- **Comparison with Rationalism:** While Berkeley was an empiricist (relying on experience), his idealism shares traits with later 19th-century German Idealism. However, German Idealism (Romanticist) stresses the *creative* power of the human spirit, whereas Berkeley's Idealism stresses the *passivity* of the human mind as a recipient of divine stimuli.
- **Comparison with Leibniz:** Both denied Newtonian matter. However, Leibniz proposed "monads" (units of energy/force) as the ultimate reality, whereas Berkeley stayed strictly within the realm of minds and ideas.
- **Ethical Implications:** As a nominalist, Berkeley likely viewed ethics through the lens of "right reason" (consequentialism) and "divine command" (justice is what God decrees), rather than through abstract natural laws.

Study Guide:

George Berkeley's Idealism: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide provides a detailed overview of the 18th-century British philosopher George Berkeley and his system of metaphysical idealism. Based on the analysis of George Berkeley's philosophical project, this document examines his

rejection of materialism, his critique of John Locke's epistemology, and his arguments for the existence of a Supreme Mind.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following ten questions in 2–3 sentences each, focusing on the core concepts presented in the source material.

1. How does George Berkeley define "idealism" in a metaphysical sense?
 2. What was Berkeley's primary social and religious motivation for denying the existence of matter?
 3. In what way does Berkeley's "evidentialism" differ from that of John Locke?
 4. What is Berkeley's "nominalist" critique regarding the use of general terms in language?
 5. Why does Berkeley reject the possibility of "abstract general ideas," such as the idea of motion or extension?
 6. Explain Berkeley's "mentalism" and its relationship to the nature of ideas.
 7. How does Berkeley use the "like cause, like effect" principle to argue for the existence of God?
 8. What is the significance of the "castle keep" example in Berkeley's critique of primary qualities?
 9. How did Berkeley respond to the "common sense" objection that physical pain (like kicking a rock) proves the existence of matter?
 10. What is the distinction between Berkeley's idealism and the "Occasionalism" of thinkers like Malebranche?
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Part II: Answer Key

1. **Berkeley's Metaphysical Idealism:** Idealism is the view that everything that exists is of the nature of mind or immaterial spirit. In this framework,

materiality has no independent existence, and what we perceive as the physical world consists entirely of ideas and mental states.

2. **Motivations for Denying Matter:** Berkeley sought to combat the rise of materialism, which he associated with atheism, and the deism built upon Newtonian physics. He believed that by proving matter does not exist, he could pull the "rug" out from under these systems and demonstrate the necessity of a God who is immanent and active in nature.
3. **Berkeley vs. Locke on Evidence:** While both are empiricists who believe knowledge should be proportioned to evidence, Berkeley argues that there is no sufficient evidence for the existence of matter, physical force, or absolute space and time. He contends that we only have evidence for ideas and the minds that perceive them, making Locke's belief in a material "substratum" unempirical.
4. **Nominalism and Language:** Berkeley argues for a nominalist position, asserting that language is often abused by the assumption that every word must name a specific object or abstract idea. He emphasizes that words have many functions beyond reference, such as comforting, encouraging, or exhorting, and do not require a one-to-one correlation with abstract entities.
5. **Rejection of Abstract Ideas:** Berkeley claims that it is psychologically impossible to frame an abstract idea of a quality like "extension" or "motion" apart from particular instances. For example, one can imagine a specific shape or color, but one cannot conceive of "color in general" that is neither any specific hue nor any particular shade.
6. **Mentalism:** Mentalism is the view that only minds and their ideas exist. Because ideas are mental events, Berkeley argues they must have mental causes; therefore, the reality we experience is composed of our own mental states and the ideas produced in us by a superior mind.
7. **Argument for God:** Berkeley asserts that because ideas of sensation are involuntary and mental in nature, they must be caused by a mind other than our own. Since all people experience a consistent, shared reality, there must be a Supreme Mind (God) constantly providing these ideas to all perceivers.

8. **The Castle Keep Example:** Berkeley uses the example of a square castle appearing as a small round blob from a distance to show that primary qualities (like shape and size) are relative to the perceiver. Since primary qualities are relative and subjective in the same way Locke admitted secondary qualities (like color) are, Berkeley concludes that neither has an objective material basis.
 9. **Response to Dr. Johnson:** Berkeley did not view the pain of kicking a rock as an illusion, but rather as an involuntary mental idea. He argued that the reality of the pain does not prove the existence of a material substrate, but only that the sensation was not produced by the kicker's own volition, pointing instead to a divine cause.
 10. **Idealism vs. Occasionalism:** While Occasionalism suggests that God uses physical events as "occasions" to produce mental states, Berkeley's idealism denies the physical event entirely. For Berkeley, there is no "body" involved; God is the direct and constant cause of all sensory ideas in the mind, making the material world superfluous.
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Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the provided source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts. (Answers not provided).

1. **The Critique of Newtonian Physics:** Analyze Berkeley's strategy for dismantling the foundations of 18th-century materialism. How does his denial of matter, force, absolute space, and absolute time specifically target the "mechanistic" worldview of Isaac Newton?
2. **Locke and Berkeley: The Empiricist Divide:** Compare and contrast the epistemological frameworks of John Locke and George Berkeley. Specifically, discuss how Berkeley uses Locke's own "representative theory of knowledge" to reach the conclusion of anti-realism regarding matter.
3. **The Subjectivity of Qualities:** Detail Berkeley's argument that primary qualities are no more "objective" than secondary qualities. How does this

collapse of the primary/secondary distinction serve his broader metaphysical project of idealism?

4. **The Role of the Divine in Idealism:** Explain why Berkeley's philosophy necessitates a "theistic" rather than a "deistic" view of God. Discuss how he uses the passivity of the human mind and the involuntary nature of sensation to bridge the gap between human perception and the existence of a Supreme Mind.
5. **Language and Nominalism:** Examine Berkeley's view of language as a "system of symbols" rather than a mere "denoting device." How does his critique of abstract ideas anticipate later developments in philosophy, such as the work of Wittgenstein?

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Abstract Ideas	General notions (like "extension" or "color in general") that Locke claimed the mind forms by separating qualities from particular objects; Berkeley denied their existence.
Anti-realism	In Berkeley's context, the denial of the independent, objective reality of matter outside of the mind.
Conceptualism	The view (held by Locke) that universals exist as abstract ideas within the mind.
Deism	A religious belief that God created the world and its mechanical laws but is no longer immanently involved; Berkeley opposed this in favor of Theism.
Epistemology	The study of the nature, grounds, and limits of knowledge.
Idealism	The metaphysical position that the ultimate nature of reality is mind, spirit, or mental representation.

Materialism	The belief that physical matter is the only or fundamental reality; Berkeley sought to refute this to protect religious belief.
Mentalism	The philosophical theory that only minds and mental states (ideas) exist.
Nominalism	The view that general terms or universals are merely names and do not refer to any real abstract entities or general ideas.
Occasionalism	The theory that created substances (like bodies) cannot be efficient causes of events; instead, God is the only true cause, using physical events as "occasions" for mental ones.
Phenomenalism	The view that we only have knowledge of appearances (phenomena) rather than "things-in-themselves" or material substrates.
Primary Qualities	Properties thought by Locke to be objective and inseparable from matter, such as size, shape, motion, and solidity.
Secondary Qualities	Properties that produce sensations in the perceiver (like color, sound, or taste) but do not exist in the objects themselves.
Substratum	The "something know not what" that Locke hypothesized exists beneath qualities to support them; Berkeley rejected this as an empty, unempirical concept.