

# History of Philosophy

## 45 Berkeley Replies to Objections

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#### Abstract:

In this lecture, Dr. Arthur Holmes examines **George Berkeley's** philosophy of **subjective idealism**, which famously denies the existence of independent **material matter**. Berkeley argues that all we perceive are **primary and secondary qualities**, which are essentially **ideas within the mind** rather than reflections of an objective physical world. To account for the stability and uniformity of our perceptions, he posits that a **supreme mind, or God**, continuously sustains the existence of things by perceiving them and imprinting these ideas upon us. The source also addresses how Berkeley handles potential **objections**, such as the problem of **natural evil**, by employing a **greater good argument** and maintaining that a predictable natural order is necessary for human agency. Finally, the text introduces **David Hume**, contrasting his thoroughgoing **skepticism and phenomenalism** with the metaphysical stances of Berkeley and John Locke.

#### Briefing Document:

A Comprehensive Analysis of Berkeley's Immaterialism and the Transition to Humean Skepticism

Executive Summary

This document synthesizes the philosophical arguments of George Berkeley as presented by Dr. Arthur Holmes, specifically focusing on Berkeley's defense of "mentalism" (or immaterialism) against various objections. Berkeley's central thesis is the denial of "matter"—defined as a substratum existing independently of a mind. Instead, he maintains that reality consists solely of minds and their ideas.

Key takeaways include:

- **The Rejection of Abstract Ideas:** As a nominalist, Berkeley argues that "matter" is an abstract idea without an empirical reference.
- **Voluntary vs. Involuntary Ideas:** Berkeley distinguishes between ideas we create (active/voluntary) and sense impressions we receive (passive/involuntary). The latter require an external mental cause, which Berkeley identifies as God.
- **The Divine Language of Nature:** Nature is not a physical machine but an ordered system of ideas provided by God to inform finite minds, acting as a "divine language."
- **The Greater Good Argument:** Berkeley addresses the problem of evil by asserting that a fixed, predictable order of nature—even one involving "particular inconveniences" like pain—is necessary for human planning and moral development.
- **The Shift to Hume:** The document concludes by contrasting Berkeley with David Hume, who moves from Berkeley's mentalism toward a thoroughgoing skepticism (phenomenalism), questioning the possibility of knowing any reality beyond immediate appearances.

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## I. The Philosophical Foundation of Berkeley's Immaterialism

Berkeley's position, often termed "mentalism," rests on the premise that what we perceive as material objects are actually compounds of ideas. He builds this position through a rejection of traditional Lockean dualism.

### The Nominalist Critique of Matter

Berkeley employs nominalism to argue that the word "matter" has no reference. He contends that we do not have an empirical notion of matter, only of specific qualities like redness, squareness, or smoothness. Because matter is treated as an "abstract idea" separate from these qualities, it becomes an empty term. Locke had previously described matter as "something I know not what"; Berkeley concludes that if we cannot know what it is, we have no reason to assert its existence.

### Subjectivity of Qualities

Berkeley argues that primary qualities (such as extension and motion) and secondary qualities (such as color and sound) are inseparable:

- We never experience a primary quality independent of a secondary quality.
- Both sets of qualities are relative to observation conditions.
- **Conclusion:** Both primary and secondary qualities are subjective qualities of our ideas, rather than objective qualities inhering in a material substratum.

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## II. The Role of God and the Order of Nature

A primary objection to Berkeley's denial of matter is the question of how nature remains uniform and predictable without physical laws.

### Active vs. Passive Ideas

Berkeley distinguishes between two types of mental contents:

1. **Voluntary (Active) Ideas:** These are ideas the individual mind creates or chooses, such as imagining a "fairy giraffe."
2. **Involuntary (Passive) Ideas:** These are sense impressions that register on the consciousness uninvited and often unwanted (e.g., the sensation of pain).

Berkeley argues that since passive ideas are mental, they must have a mental cause. Because the individual does not cause them, they must be caused by another mind—specifically, a "supreme intelligence" or "infinite spirit": God.

### Nature as Divine Language

In Berkeley's system, God is the "sufficient cause" of all passive ideas. This leads to several conclusions regarding the natural world:

- **Predictability:** The uniformity of nature exists because God provides an ordered world of experience.
- **Divine Language:** Sensations serve as a "divine language" by which God informs finite minds of the order to which they must adjust.

- **Continuous Existence:** Objects do not "pop in and out of existence" when not observed by humans; they continue to exist because they are perpetually observed by God.

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Berkeley's Definition</b>
<b>World of Nature</b>	An ordered world of ideas given to us by God.
<b>Creation</b>	The act of God bringing finite minds into being and providing them with ordered experiences.
<b>The Human Logos</b>	The human mind participating in the "divine logos" through shared ideas.

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### III. Responses to Common Objections

Berkeley addresses various theological and practical challenges to his immaterialist framework.

#### The Problem of Evil

If God causes all passive ideas, God would seemingly be the direct cause of physical pain and natural disasters. Berkeley counters this with the **Greater Good Argument:**

- **Necessity of Order:** A fixed, predictable environment is essential for science, human purposes, and planning.
- **Particular Inconveniences:** Evils are "particular inconveniences" that are permitted because the advantages of a stable environment outweigh them.
- **Pedagogical Pain:** Pain and pleasure serve as "God's pedagogue," teaching humans how to behave and providing a built-in discipline for learning right and wrong.

#### The Incarnation and Resurrection

- **The Incarnation:** Berkeley maintains that Christ was "God in the flesh," where "flesh" is understood as certain ideas and experiences passively received. This preserves Christ's full humanity within an immaterialist framework.
- **The Resurrection:** If one were resurrected, they would experience the sensations associated with a body. Since Berkeley denies the underlying "matter" of the body anyway, the experience of resurrection remains the same whether matter exists or not.

### Knowledge of Other Minds

Berkeley (and Descartes before him) relies on an **argument by analogy** to explain how we know other persons:

1. We have ideas of another's "body" (provided by God).
2. We notice that this "body" produces signs (language) or behaviors analogous to our own.
3. We infer that there is a mind associated with those behaviors, similar to our own mind.

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### IV. The Critique of Newtonian Science

Berkeley's philosophy challenges the empirical foundations of 18th-century physics. He questions the validity of four key Newtonian concepts: **Matter, Force, Space, and Time.**

- **The Dematerialization of Matter:** Berkeley identifies a shift from seeing matter as a "solid pellet" (Newton) to a more passive, bare substratum. He argues that if these concepts lack an empirical basis, then Newton's claim to be doing purely empirical science is undermined.
- **Passive vs. Active Matter:** In Berkeley's view, the scientific revolution stripped nature of its "teleology" (inherent purpose), leaving a mechanistic view of "passive" matter that he finds philosophically unsustainable.

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### V. Transition to David Hume: From Mentalism to Skepticism

The document identifies a progression through the three great British Empiricists, moving from dualism to skepticism.

### Comparison of Metaphysical Positions

- **John Locke:** A metaphysical dualist (mind and body both exist).
- **George Berkeley:** A mentalist (only minds and their ideas exist).
- **David Hume:** A skeptic (maintains we know no "matters of fact" beyond present experience).

### Hume's Phenomenalism

Hume adopts Berkeley's arguments against matter but extends them to the mind itself. He concludes that:

- **External Reality:** We cannot know external things.
- **The Self:** We cannot know the mind as a reality beyond experience.
- **Phenomenalism:** We only know "phenomena" (appearances), not reality as it is.

### Ethical Subjectivism

Because Hume denies knowledge of human nature (a metaphysical concept), he rejects Locke's natural law ethics. Instead, he moves toward **ethical subjectivism**, where moral judgments are based on "moral sentiments" or feelings. For Hume, saying something is "unjust" is not a statement of metaphysical fact but an expression of a feeling—essentially, a psychological reaction to perceived pain or pleasure.

### The Psychology of Belief

Hume suggests that while we lack logical proof for things like the existence of matter, "human nature" prevents us from living without belief. He shifts the focus of philosophy from the **logic of evidence** to the **psychology of belief**.

## Study Guide:

### Study Guide: Berkeley's Philosophy and Replies to Objections

This study guide examines George Berkeley's mentalist philosophy, his arguments against the existence of material matter, and his responses to common philosophical and theological objections. It further explores the transition from Berkeley's idealism to the skepticism of David Hume.

#### Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

**1. How does Berkeley use his position as a nominalist to deny the existence of matter?** Berkeley argues that the word "matter" has no empirical reference because it is an abstract idea rather than a specific sensory notion. Since nominalists maintain that humans do not possess abstract ideas, the concept of a material "substratum" is an empty term that refers to nothing within human experience.

**2. What is the fundamental difference between "active" and "passive" ideas?** Active or voluntary ideas are those that a mind chooses to create or imagine, such as a "fairy giraffe." Passive or involuntary ideas are sense impressions—like the feeling of pain or the sight of a tree—that register on the consciousness uninvited and often unwanted, indicating they must be caused by a source external to the individual mind.

**3. Why does Berkeley conclude that God must be the cause of our passive ideas?** Berkeley posits that because ideas are mental things, they must have a mental cause. Since passive ideas are not caused by the individual's own mind, they must be caused by another, greater mind—specifically an infinite spirit or God—who provides the ordered uniformity of human experience.

**4. How does Berkeley account for the continued existence of objects when no human is observing them?** Objects do not "pop in and out of existence" when humans leave the room because they exist permanently in the mind of God. As the infinite spirit who is always present, God continually observes all things, ensuring their continuity and stability in the world of nature.

**5. What is the "Greater Good" argument regarding natural evil in Berkeley's system?** Berkeley suggests that natural evils, or "particular inconveniences," are

necessary for a predictable and ordered environment. This fixed order allows humans to plan, conduct science, and learn through pleasure and pain, which acts as a "divine pedagogue" to teach proper behavior and well-being.

**6. How does Berkeley reconcile his philosophy with the theological doctrine of the Incarnation?** In "Berkeley-ese," the flesh of Christ is understood as a set of ideas and experiences passively received by minds. Berkeley maintains that Christ was fully human because he experienced the same sensations and passive ideas as any other person, and his philosophy merely clarifies the ultimate reality underlying those experiences.

**7. By what process does Berkeley suggest we can know the existence of other minds?** Knowledge of other minds is achieved through an argument by analogy. One observes bodily behaviors or hears sounds (language) in another that are analogous to one's own; because the individual knows their own mental states correlate with their bodily actions, they infer that the other person possesses a similar mind.

**8. How does Berkeley's view of "primary" and "secondary" qualities differ from that of John Locke?** While Locke suggested primary qualities were objective and secondary qualities were subjective, Berkeley argues both are relative to observation conditions and are therefore subjective. He maintains that we never experience primary qualities (like extension) independently of secondary qualities (like color), meaning both exist only as qualities of our ideas.

**9. What is the "dematerialization of matter" in the context of scientific history?** This concept refers to the shift from the 18th-century view of matter as solid, indivisible Newtonian "pellets" to modern physics, where matter is understood through energy and sub-molecular particles. Berkeley anticipated this by questioning whether Newtonian concepts like force, space, and time had any actual empirical basis.

**10. How does David Hume's skepticism fundamentally change the focus of philosophy?** Hume moves away from the logic of evidence and toward the psychology of belief. He argues that since we cannot know anything about reality beyond experience—neither the external world nor the mind itself—we must study why human nature compels us to believe in things that lack logical or empirical proof.

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Part II: Answer Key

1. **Nominalism and Matter:** Matter is an abstract idea with no reference; Locke called it "something I know not what."
2. **Active vs. Passive:** Active are voluntary/chosen; passive are involuntary sense impressions (e.g., pain).
3. **God as Cause:** Mental things need mental causes; the uniformity of nature suggests a supreme intelligence causing shared experiences.
4. **Continued Existence:** Objects exist endlessly in God's mind, even when no human is present (as illustrated by the poem about the tree on the quad).
5. **Greater Good:** Predictability is essential for human planning and science; the benefits of a fixed order outweigh "particular inconveniences."
6. **Incarnation:** Christ's "flesh" consisted of passively received ideas; he shared the human experience of receiving sensations from God.
7. **Other Minds:** Analogy; we correlate our own mental states to our bodies and assume others have the same correlation.
8. **Primary/Secondary Qualities:** Berkeley views both as subjective ideas; they are inseparable and relative to the observer.
9. **Dematerialization:** The transition from Newtonian solid atoms to energy-based physics; Berkeley challenged the empirical basis of matter.
10. **Hume's Skepticism:** Hume focuses on the "psychology of belief" because matters of fact beyond experience cannot be demonstrated.

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Part III: Essay Questions

1. Analyze George Berkeley's assertion that nature is a "divine language." How does this concept bridge the gap between human sensory experience and the existence of a supreme intelligence?

2. Compare the metaphysical roles of "God" in the systems of Descartes and Berkeley. How does Berkeley's reliance on God to sustain the existence of objects differ from Descartes' use of God to guarantee the reliability of clear and distinct ideas?
3. Discuss the implications of Berkeley's denial of material substratum for the scientific community of his time. If space, time, and matter are not empirically grounded, what remains of Newtonian physics in a mentalist framework?
4. Evaluate Berkeley's handling of the problem of evil. Does the "Greater Good" argument sufficiently address the direct causation of pain by God in an idealist system where physical causes do not exist?
5. Contrast the "Phenomenalism" of David Hume with the "Mentalism" of George Berkeley. Focus on their differing views regarding the existence of the self (mind) and the external world.

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#### Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Active Ideas</b>	Voluntary ideas that a mind initiates or constructs through imagination and will.
<b>Ethical Subjectivism</b>	The view (associated with Hume) that moral judgments are based on feelings and sentiments rather than metaphysical knowledge or natural law.
<b>Mentalism</b>	The philosophical position that all that exists are minds and their ideas; a denial of the existence of material substance.
<b>Nominalism</b>	The doctrine that abstract concepts or general terms (like "matter") do not have a real, independent existence and are merely names.
<b>Occasionalism</b>	The theory that one's will is merely the "occasion" for God to cause an effect in another's mind or experience.

<b>Passive Ideas</b>	Involuntary sense impressions that register on the consciousness without being invited, which Berkeley attributes to God.
<b>Phenomenalism</b>	The view that humans only have knowledge of "phenomena" or appearances, rather than reality as it is in itself.
<b>Skepticism</b>	A philosophical stance (exemplified by Hume) that claims we cannot know matters of fact beyond present experience and lacks logical proof for metaphysical realities.
<b>Substratum</b>	The traditional philosophical concept of an underlying material "stuff" that supports qualities; Berkeley denies this exists.
<b>Will</b>	A functional faculty of the mind involved in acting voluntarily and initiating active ideas.