

'to be is to be
perceived'



To be is to be perceived, esse est percipi. This empirical statement was made by the 17th century Irish philosopher Bishop Berkley. He was a foundationalist that aimed to restore the role of religion in philosophy and consequently eradicate scepticism. He was the first philosopher to coherently refute the Cartesian revolution.

One generally assumes that empiricism and modern science go hand in hand. That anyone who aims to study the ways of our “ material” world would empirically be studying it, and would thus be an empiricist. However, as we later will discuss, appearances are sometimes not as they seem.

In order to critically assess Berkley’s statement and his notion that reality is an infinite “ mind”, we must first cover the influential material put forward by Locke and Descartes. These two philosophers from an epistemological point of view were in disagreement, however, from a metaphysical point of view both believed that matter furnished our world. Their only metaphysical difference was how each of them got to their metaphysics. They had opposed epistemological views due to their different opinions regarding the ways in which humans acquire knowledge. Locke was an empiricist, “ the view that the source and test of contingent knowledge is experience” (pg 486 yellow book) Descartes on the other hand was a rationalist, believing that the “ chief route to knowledge is intellectual rather than sensory”. (pg 486 yellow book)

In a hypothetical conversation between Locke and Descartes, Descartes would for example ask Locke how he believes to have acquired the notion of infinity. The term “ Infinity” being an idea that can’t be experienced would

thus leave Locke response less. However, Locke would probably claim that he could empirically sense that numbers for instance will exponentially continue forever, and “ forever” presumes the idea of infinity.

When analysing both their epistemological doctrines, it is inevitable that these fall into the area of metaphysics as well. One cannot discuss the ways of acquiring knowledge without mentioning the mind/body problem. This being the main focus of the rest of this essay.

Locke’s philosophy had a big impact on the world and to a certain extent on Berkley’s philosophy, simply because his doctrines transcend empirical methodology. He attempts to prove in his “ Essay Concerning Human Understanding” the relationship between knowledge and ideas. Ideas to Locke came about through sensation and reflection, thus there being no such thing as innate ideas. Sensation and reflection take into account various categories of “ material intuition” for example: extension, solidity and duration. Resulting in simple ideas, which our mind later combines with two or many other simple ideas, creating as Locke calls it: complex ideas. He then makes the important distinction that later is re-interpreted by Berkley and opens the door to his theory of idealism. Locke points out that properties that make up an object are divided into primary and secondary qualities. “ Primary qualities belong not only to observable substances, but also to the minute corpuscles which make them up. Secondary qualities such as colour and taste belong to the substance but not to its corpuscles” (Woolhouse, 1998, p. 870) This reference of corpuscles in Locke’s philosophy is remarkable, simply because of the prematurity of Newtonian physics at the time. Primary qualities are therefore the properties that Newtonian physicists

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analysed in objects. Whilst secondary qualities are for example those of colour, because its unreliability ceases to be a fixed quality of the actual object being perceived. When the lights go out the object ceases to have a colour.

All of this experience then amounts to knowledge through intuition, logical entailment and sensation. However, the knowledge that one empirically deduces from experience, Locke claimed that due to our sensory limitations there are complex objects in the world whose essence will remain unperceivable. It is probable that they exist however empirically impossible to prove. He takes this concept of an objects unperceivable essence from Aristotle's concept of substance. Berkley picks up on this notion and cunningly points out that declaring the existence of the unperceivable, strictly conflicts empirical rules.

We now move the focus of the essay to Berkley and how from Locke's doctrines he develops his own. What Berkley counters in Locke's theory is: to what extent do objects or matter in general have the ability to cause these proclaimed ideas; and if these objects actually have independent qualities that can excite our perception of them. " How can it be known, that the things that are perceived, are conformable to those that are not perceived, or exist without the mind?" (A. C. Grayling...p. 509)

Berkley uses Locke's and Descartes theories and rules concerning dualism and is able to demonstrate its flaws. For dualism to function it has to abide to three rules: 1. Material events have to cause neural brain events. 2. In order to have knowledge, ideas in the mind have to be represented by these

material events that caused them. 3. Ideas in the mind consequently have to cause neural changes.

Berkley's idealism is an outcome of proving that these three dualistic rules are in fact incoherent. It is bizarre, Berkley claimed, how there is a relationship between immaterial ideas that do not abide to physical laws and material objects in space. How can my immaterial idea of a beer take after its material conception of a beer. I cannot drink my idea of a beer. There is a flaw in dualism that isn't able to account for the transition between space and non-space. We are unable to think of any mind-independent properties; all properties that we are aware of exist in our minds. Therefore, since the only thing we can, with certainty, claim that we experience is our perceptions. It is thus irresponsible to claim that there is anything else but our own perceptions. Thus there are no primary qualities of objects/matter, everything is secondary, and everything is in the mind.

Berkley has therefore destroyed Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities and due to his "failed" definition of primary qualities, Locke was judged as a contradicting empiricist. Now that dualism has been scratched out, either Berkley adopts a purely material view of the world or a purely immaterial one. Descartes proved, and Berkley agrees, that there has to be a mind "I think therefore I am" (R. Descartes, 1644, part 1, article 7) Berkley's dogmatic idealism was thus born. What we experience is in fact experience itself and in order to exist one has to be perceived. Having no matter means that in order for something or someone to exist, there has to be a mind to conceive of its existence.

It is at this point that Berkley's doctrine becomes a theological one. He attempted to disprove matter because he viewed it as an atheistic doctrine. If matter exists, it is to say that it has a nature of its own, independent of God. His doctrine entails that we communicate with God through our experiences and that experience is Gods language and science and mathematics its grammar. God is the infinite mind that coordinates all of our finite minds.

From a macro point of view and as far as research indicates: Berkley's immaterialism is a doctrine that was constructed on top of the building blocks that Descartes created. " If we reject the Cartesian super-premise on which his project is grounded...his views are not so resilient" (A. C. Grayling, p. 516) Berkley's foundationalism was to disprove matter in order to remove scepticism and atheism, thus glorifying theology. The loophole in dualism and Descartes super-premise allowed him (in a very intellectual manner) to succeed in his aimed philosophical foundation. However, what if there is no such thing as an immaterial mind?

The two main jointly agreed facts that the three philosophers agree on were: we posses an immaterial mind, independent of space; and that God is responsible for this immaterial mind. What if the super-premise to whom three philosophers dedicated their entire life's work is false? If we reject the idea of an immaterial mind and substitute it with the idea of a mechanical intelligent body, the simple notion of matter is reborn. Locke's epistemology is once again viewed as valid, however not from the perspective of the mind but from the perspective of a material complex brain. Materialism does not

rule out the existence of a God, it doesn't have to be viewed as atheistic. It however makes us finite beings whose laws of reality are Newtonian.

For Descartes an infinite substance requires nothing but itself in order to exist. This brings us to my favourite and final philosopher: Spinoza. Spinoza like Descartes was a rationalist. However, unlike Descartes, he combined God with metaphysics and was able to supply a material solution to the mind/body problem. He claimed that " Whatsoever is, is God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived."(Ethics pt. 1, prop15) In other words if God is infinite, there isn't anything that isn't God. For Spinoza a dependent substance can't exist, there is only one substance that can in fact be independent and that is the whole. God and Nature therefore are the same substance, and this substance is both material and spiritual. His theory on the surface might seem too poetic and similar to eastern philosophies; it however is a plausible and analytical metaphysical doctrine. He believed that mental and physical effects didn't cause each other, they happened in parallel; and God linked these parallel chains of events.

To conclude,