

Do objects exist  
independent of the  
mind?



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This essay will investigate the question of whether mind independent objects exist according to John Locke and George Berkeley. John Locke reasons that objects do exist independently of our mind but this is not without some caveat. George Berkeley on the other hand argues that no material substances exist other than ideas or perceptions in our minds. Hence there are no mind independent objects.

I will argue that John Locke's reasoning is actually stronger than Berkeley's and therefore the case for mind independent objects existing is coincidentally stronger as well. Locke's argument in support is that we can be sure of the limits of our knowledge of their existence because of the ideas we obtain from our senses. I will firstly detail how Locke's reasoning supports this contention. Secondly I will explore Berkeley's claim which denies that any form of material substance and hence mind independent objects do not exist independently. I will argue that Berkeley's claim fails because of inadequacies raised during his rejection of Locke's argument. Berkeley relies on an appeal to the supernatural (e. g. God) to counter the universal proposition that he inevitably draws himself into with the existence of other minds in external human bodies and in his contention that external objects only exist as ideas in the mind.

Locke adopts a pragmatic approach to this inquiry because he uses the senses in a practical everyday way to assess the degree of certainty of knowledge. Importantly, Locke accepts the limitations of human knowledge which then defines the inquiry question of ' what level of certainty there is for the existence of external objects' (Bennett, 2007).

Locke says that an 'idea' is; "whatever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks" (Bennett 2007 p2). This is an important definition because it suggests an 'idea' to be more than just a representation of an external object. What Locke alludes to here is that we have a cognitive ability to obtain knowledge of the external world through a relationship in our mind between simple (sensations from experience) and complex (abstracted from particular to universal principles) ideas and are thus able to pass judgement (subjective) about the certainty of that knowledge. Locke states that;

" Knowledge, then, seems to me to be nothing but the perception of the connection and agreement, or disagreement and incompatibility, of any of our ideas. That is all it is" (Bennett, 2007, p196).

So knowledge then becomes the outcome of complex ideas created in our mind from sensations. The mind has no innate ideas and starts out as a tabula rasa (or blank sheet) but with mental faculties which thus enable the creation of ideas from experiences of the external world (Bennett, 2007). This is not unproblematic though because it raises the question of exactly which faculties are then innate. However, the ideas created come into being from when a person first has sensations. Locke says that:

" Since there appear not to be any ideas in the mind before the senses have conveyed any in, I think that ideas in the understanding arise at the same time as sensation" (Bennett, 2007 p22).

These ideas fashioning our knowledge are thus derived from our experience. They are also built upon the immediate impression of external objects in our

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mind through our senses. More complex and abstract concepts result from our own introspection.

Locke then talks about three types of knowledge which are important in our understanding of the certainty of the existence mind independent objects.

He claims that these three types of knowledge are;

1. Intuitive Knowledge which is the immediate agreement or disagreement between ideas without an intervention of other ideas;
2. Demonstrative Knowledge which does not immediately perceive the agreement or disagreement of ideas. It therefore brings into itself more ideas and creating complex ideas thus calling it reasoning;
3. Sensitive Knowledge which is knowledge gained through the senses (Bennett, 2007 p22).

Sensitive knowledge is the key element of his claim that external objects exist independent of the mind.

Whilst it is readily conceded by Locke that sensitive knowledge is not as certain as intuitive knowledge or demonstrative knowledge, it nevertheless “ goes beyond probability” (Bennett, 2007, p202). It follows then that the level of certainty in establishing a case for the existence of external objects knowledge using the senses is limited. But I contend that the degree to which it is limited does not discount its use. Locke also asserts that whilst some philosophers question whether external objects exist even though they may have an idea in their mind, there is a “ degree of evidentness” which puts the question beyond doubt (Bennett, 2007, p202). So he postulates that

we can feel the sun, notice the difference at night without the sun and appreciate the contrast between a dream and an idea coming into our mind through the senses (Bennett, 2007, p202).

So for all practical purposes, I contend along with Locke that this is all we need to establish a high level of certainty about the existence of mind-independent objects. This is not to say, that his logic is not without some openings for criticism such as the probabilistic certainty of sensitive knowledge.

However I argue that the strength of Locke's reasoning for the existence of mind independent objects lies in its pragmatic simplicity. If we have the idea that something exists independently of our mind and we confirm this with our senses, then it is highly probable that it does exist independently of our mind. If we have the idea that the ground we walk upon is solid, then the idea comes from our experience of solid ground through our walking upon it. Using Locke's reasoning then, the idea of solid ground (as a mind independent object) can be held to be certain; to the limit that sensitive knowledge allows.

In contrast to Locke, one can postulate as does George Berkeley, that material substances (and hence mind independent objects) do not exist. In his inquiry, scepticism surfaces amidst the proposition that we think only about the idea and not the actual external object. This scepticism charges the materialism of Locke for example, with implying that it leads to disavowing God (Downing, 2011). This aspect of Berkeley's rejection of

Locke's materialist conceptions of the existence of external objects is also a key element of my rejection of Berkeley's Idealism.

Berkeley's main argument for the mind independent objects not existing is structured thus;

“ That we perceive ordinary objects and I wouldn't have known them if I hadn't perceived them by my senses;

Things perceived by the senses are immediately perceived; and

Things that are immediately perceived are ideas; and

Ideas can't exist outside the mind.

So it follows that;

The existence of things I perceive by my senses consists in being perceived.

When they are actually perceived [the existence of things], therefore, there can be no doubt about their existence” (Berkeley P41).

Unfolding what Berkeley means by this hinges upon his use of the word perceive. If the definition of perceiving is to become aware of something through the senses, then it seems that what Berkeley is saying is that we can have knowledge of the existence of external objects. But in fact that is not what he is saying. In #1, #2, #3 ? he is arguing that our perception or awareness of ordinary objects (external) is based upon the use of our senses creating ideas which can then only exist in our minds. Premise #5 makes his argument look remarkably circular but I will grant that it isn't for this

purpose. What he is saying is that external objects only exist because we are able to be aware of them. His conclusion at #6 reiterates the thrust of his claim that when we are made aware of external objects by our senses, then we cannot doubt their existence. He does not mean the external object. He means the idea of the external object.

So, if the external object is not a representation and it is not anything other than an idea brought about by a perception or awareness through the senses, how is it that we come by the idea of knowledge of the external world? And more so, how is it that when we are not present or are denied our senses for any reason, that other people continue to experience the external world. Berkeley answers this by saying that “ When I say that sensible things [external objects] can’t exist out of the mind, I don’t mean my mind in particular, but all minds. Now, they clearly have an existence exterior to my mind, since I find by experience that they are independent of it” (Berkeley p42).

I argue here that this sentence inherently disrupts Berkeley’s claim that there are no mind independent objects. How is it that there can be other independent minds (assuming them to be within external human bodies) which have an existence exterior to his and which perceive external objects whilst Berkeley is say, asleep? How is it that they are not considered to be external mind independent objects? There must be some other explanation.

So Berkeley finds himself having to refer to the supernatural deity for relief; God. “

There is therefore some other mind in which they [external objects] exist during the intervals between the times when I perceive them; ..... it necessarily follows that there is an omnipresent, eternal Mind which knows and comprehends all things and lets us experience them in a certain manner "(Berkeley p42).

In my assessment this appeal to the omnipotence of God diminishes Berkeley's argument dramatically. It is not a question of having or not having a belief in God. It is about establishing a level of certainty that the external world exists independently of our mind. In contrast to Locke's argument which allows for a probabilistic consideration about the certainty of knowledge; Berkeley simply refutes the external mind independent world and fills the void he creates with that of a supernatural deity. It is contextually understandable but I argue that it severely reduces the plausibility and explanatory power of his claim that mind independent objects do not exist.

This essay has argued that Locke's assertions about the existence of mind independent objects are stronger than Berkeley's claim that no mind independent objects exist and to this I offer my support. Locke's probabilistic approach to sensitive knowledge assists him to overcome the vicarious connections between the mind and the external world. This is not without its problems though as I have discussed in the paper. Locke struggles with innateness of ideas and faculties along with proving the level of certainty against a measure of probability.



In contrast, Berkeley simply rejects mind independent objects outright, which leaves him with the problem of how to then deal with the issue of other minds and human bodies. To this he simply defers to a supernatural deity in God. This I contend creates a most significant weakness in his argument and causes me to reject it.