Berkeley & Hume

From Subjective Idealism to Skepticism
George Berkeley

(pronounced /ˈbɑːrkli/) (12 March 1685 – 14 January 1753), also known as Bishop Berkeley (Bishop of Cloyne), was an Irish philosopher whose primary achievement was the advancement of a theory he called "immaterialism" (later referred to as "subjective idealism" by others). Berkeley lived in Ireland, worked for a short time in Bermuda and in Rhode Island then returned to England. He was concerned about a number of issues of his time which included literacy among native populations and the welfare of abandoned children. Interestingly, though his philosophical contributions are what he is most remembered for today, during his lifetime, his best selling work was on the medicinal qualities of pine tar!
Berkeley Rejects Materialism:

- Berkeley rejected Locke’s distinction between primary and secondary qualities of perception: For Berkeley, all perception is secondary. “But it is evident..., that extension, figure, and motion are only ideas existing in the mind and that an idea can be like nothing but another idea....” (p.189)

- Having rejected Locke’s distinction, Berkeley further argued we cannot claim to know a thing as an independently existing material object - this is the bizarre invention of philosophers – as far as we can know, things are only the ideas we have of them. For Berkeley - there were only minds and ideas in the mind. “...it is possible we might be affected with all the ideas we have now, though there were no bodies existing without, resembling them.”(p. 191)
Berkeley’s Subjective Idealism:

- **P1)** Our objects of knowledge are limited to 3 kinds of ideas
  - ideas from senses
  - ideas from passions
  - ideas from memory

- **P2)** There must be something distinct from these ideas & perceptions which is the perceiver’s mind (like Descartes’ “Cogito ergo sum”)

- **P3)** There is no proof for ideas existing outside of the mind

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- **C)** Therefore a thing can exist only in the mind. – “Esse est percipi” - To be is to be perceived (p.188)
Berkeley’s Subjective Idealism

- “Esse est percipi” implies that existence is entirely composed of immaterial ideas.
- We do have some knowledge which is not derived from sense data – Berkeley calls these things *Notions* - such as the notion of our own existence and the existence of God.
- Berkeley is faced with the same problem Locke pointed out: that we can’t just wish things into or out of existence. If existence is just the universe of the ideas and notions in our minds, then why wouldn’t we control this universe through thought?
- Berkeley’s answer is because there is a greater mind which controls this universe of ideas. His "proof" for the existence of God is as follows:
Berkeley’s Argument for the Existence of God:

P1) Ideas that we are aware of do not depend on our wishes
P2) if they P1 is true these ideas must have some kind of existence apart from our minds
P3) if we are not responsible for the ideas we perceive and cannot control all our ideas at will there must be some other mind that possesses, controls and maintains the ideas
P4) this other mind must be independent from and greater than ours - "a universal mind" or God
P5) these ideas exist

C) God must exist
God as the Universal Mind:

- The introduction of the existence of God - or the Universal Mind is crucial for Berkeley's thesis - It is God which orders our perceptions and grants us some sense of continuity - God allows for the things we perceive to exist distinct from us.

- Through his use of God, Berkeley avoids the problem of our just being able to "think" things into existence and the problem of the world disappearing if no human is perceiving it at any given time.

- We do not choose what to perceive - there is some other "will or spirit" which produces these sensations (p.192)

- This will or spirit is constantly perceiving the world so it is constant outside of human perception - it doesn't just go away if no one looks at it.
Berkeley’s Reality:

- God’s universe – the real universe of all existing ideas is represented by set A.

- Our universe is the subset intersection between our mind and God’s mind (A & B) “The ideas imprinted on the senses by the author of nature are called real things….” (p. 193)

- Nothing outside of God’s universe can be known to exist (B) except as ideas we have formed through our imagination and fantasy.
Ronald Knox’s Limerick:

There was a young man who said, "God
Must think it exceedingly odd,
If he finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there's no one about in the Quad."

Reply.

"Dear Sir:
Your astonishment's odd,
I am always about in the Quad.
And that's why the tree
Will continue to be
Since observed by
Yours faithfully,
God."
What would Berkeley say about *The Matrix*?

- [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UM5yepZ21pI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UM5yepZ21pI)
A Quick Comparison:

- Berkeley = Locke – the independently existing material object + God
- Berkeley agrees with Locke about empirical data being the foundation of knowledge but rejects the material world as the cause of our sensations and perceptions.

- Hume = Berkeley – God
- Hume agrees with Locke about perception as the foundation of our ideas, and with Berkeley that we cannot justifiably make a distinction between primary and secondary qualities of perception but disagrees with Berkeley about God as the universal mind controlling those perceptions.
Biographical Notes: Hume is known both as "The Congenial Skeptic" as well as "The Scottish Heretic" - He earned his living as a writer and an under-secretary to the British Embassy in Paris during the mid- to late-1700's. Because of his "heretical" views he was refused a professorship in the major universities. (7 May 1711 – 25 August 1776)
Hume’s Skepticism

- Hume accepted Locke's Empirical Method but he rejected any knowledge claims outside of clear experiential basis. Hume argued that the realm of human knowledge was limited to **impressions** and **ideas** - all other was in the realm of those things unknowable - and, for us, as far as we can know, they simply don't exist.

- This implies that Berkeley’s “universal mind” or God could also be a subjective idea that we hold. Instead of our ideas depending on God, Hume argues that we cannot claim to know that it is impossible for God’s existence to depend on our minds!
Hume's Fork

- (All objects of human reason or enquiry)

  Matters of Fact
    (Moral)
    e.g. “I prefer people to be kind”
    & perceptions/ sensations/sentiments

  Relations of Ideas
    (Demonstrative)
    e.g. math, algebra, geometry
    operations of thought

- For Hume, all "knowledge" is limited to:
  simple impressions <-> simple ideas
  These are always correspondent - ideas in first instance always derived from perception
Hume on “Common Sense” Knowledge Claims

• Hume argues that conventional "common sense" fails - as does all other "knowledge" claims because they are based on the following **three unjustifiable beliefs**. Hume referred to these beliefs as “comfortable habits of the mind.” That is, these ideas which are **without** justification yet we hold them basic to our understanding of the world:
  • The Principle of Universal Causation
  • The Principle of Induction
  • The Belief in the External World
The Principle of Universal Causation:

- Causation is held to be the "cement of the universe" (i.e. "every event has its cause"). Both Newton and La Place argued that understanding the universe required a thorough understanding of causal forces.
Hume’s Rejection of the Principle of Universal Causation:

- For Hume, all we ever see is contiguity and succession of impressions and ideas - "cause" is neither perceived nor is it something we can demonstrate - causation is not simply a process of comparing two ideas for similarity - like math - rather it stipulates a special relationship which we have no justification for believing.

- **Causality <=> Constant Conjunction of Impressions**

- All we have is 1) the present impression
  2) the idea of the impression
  3) the connection or inference

- Necessity is only something which exists in the human mind.
The Principle of Induction:

- Inductive reasoning, also known as induction or inductive logic, is a kind of reasoning that constructs or evaluates inductive arguments. It is commonly construed as a form of reasoning that makes generalizations based on individual instances. In this sense it is often contrasted with deductive reasoning.

- However, philosophically the definition is much more nuanced than simple progression from particular / individual instances to wider generalizations. Rather, the premises of an inductive logical argument indicate some degree of support (inductive probability) for the conclusion but do not entail it; that is, they suggest truth but do not ensure it. In this manner, there is the possibility of moving from generalizations to individual instances.
  1. 90% of humans are right-handed.
  2. Joe is a human
     Therefore, Joe is right-handed.

- Inductive reasoning allows for the possibility that the conclusion is false, even where all of the premises are true. For example:
  1. All of the swans we have seen are white.
     Therefore, All swans are white.
Hume’s Rejection of the Principle of Induction:

- We assume that the future will remain like the past - if something worked in a certain way in the past it should continue to work in a similar manner in the future.

- We assume that the laws of nature will hold constant - a law of physics is not affected by time – it is assumed to be a truth about the way the universe works.

- **But there is no reason to believe this** - belief in induction is a psychological custom or habit - we cannot demonstrate that the future will remain like the past through experimentation - all we would be proving is that the past is like the past!
Hume’s Rejection of our Belief in the External World

- Our experience is only a sequence of impressions unrelated to each other - not necessarily attached to the external world - we can never know of a world outside of our perceptions of that world - all we have is our perceptions - we can't get outside of ourselves - e.g. see without seeing.
Hume on God & the Material World

- It is important to note that Hume is not proposing a metaphysical claim about the nature of the external material world – his is an epistemological claim about our justification for knowledge of that world and knowledge of God’s existence.

- God & Substance - since they cannot be derived from impressions (perception) and since they cannot be demonstrated by mathematical proofs - cannot be known to exist! (p. 208)
What keeps Hume from going mad?

“What most fortunately it happens, that since reason is incapable of dispelling these clouds, nature herself suffices to that purpose, and cures me of this philosophical melancholy and delirium, either by relaxing this bent of mind, or by some avocation, and lively impression of my senses, which obliterate all these chimeras. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends; and when after three or four hours’ amusement, I would return to these speculations, they appear so cold, and strained, and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.” (p.210)