IS THERE AN ANSWER TO BERKELEY'S IDEALISM?

Zorawar Bhangoo

Berkeley's subjective idealism – the thesis that to exist is to be perceived, or to perceive (*esse est percipi, aut percipere*) such that there is no mind-independent material substance but rather bundles of ideas comprised of sensory qualities (mental content) – can be scrutinised on two fronts. First, the arguments for Berkeley's thesis: (a) the Likeness Principle; (b) the Inseparability Thesis; and (c) the Master Argument. The second front considers idealism's standing when these arguments are set aside: is idealism internally coherent (is it consistent and does it survive objections), and if it is, is there any reason to privilege it over realism,[1] when the two theories are pitted against certain pragmatic virtues? In championing the realist case, I shall show that Berkeley's arguments succeed only very narrowly, and that idealism itself struggles with coherence, and in doing so, fails to secure the anti-sceptical ground that motivated it in the first place. Thus, realism's comparative economy provides an independent reason for preference. The answer to Berkeley's idealism, then, is not a common-sense assertion or rhetorical gesture, to trace the vestiges of Johnson, Moore and Reid, who respectively misconstrue idealism, beg the question against it, and refuse argument in favour of common-sense intuition. Instead, I treat idealism as a serious thesis on its own ground and argue that even if internal coherence can be salvaged against objections, this salvaging comes at a serious cost – metaphysical bloat – all the while failing to deliver the security from scepticism that Berkeley sought.

Berkeley's idealist project is motivated by a critique of materialism, a position on which he presses two charges: materialism as the "main pillar and support of Scepticism"; a foundation, he adds, that gives rise to "all the impious schemes of Atheism".[2] I take the former charge to be the more pressing one for a contemporary reader, as its force does not hinge on any prior theological commitment. Berkeley develops idealism through a series of arguments against materialism, two of which (the Likeness Principle and the Inseparability Thesis) attack Locke's representative realism, in particular, his distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Our ideas of the former resemble qualities that exist (mind-independently) in material objects and bodies, for instance extension, motion, figure, solidity,

[1] By realism here I simply mean holding that mind-independent, material substance exists, a position labelled as materialism in Berkeley's day.
[2] Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge,* (1710), §92.

etc., whereas our ideas of secondary qualities do not – they are mind-dependent e.g. sound, smell, taste, and colour. Despite this, secondary qualities are caused by primary ones – to use Locke's own example, crushing an almond only changes the arrangement of constituent corpuscles,[3] but its perceived taste and colour change significantly, from white to dirty, from sweet to oily.[4]

The first attack that Berkeley levies is the Likeness Principle, which asserts that only an idea can be like another idea.[5] The representational realist asserts that ideas resemble mind-independent matter, and *prima facie,* it seems that resemblance (likeness) is a necessary precondition for representation. To establish that idea X resembles object Y's primary qualities, I would need to perceive and compare both; but I can never perceive Y itself, only other ideas. It follows that I have no way of showing that X and Y resemble one another – and the realist is left with no claim to representation at all. Yet the realist need not concede this conclusion for multiple reasons. Firstly, the Berkeleian line conflates an epistemic thesis with a metaphysical one,[6] concluding the latter, stronger claim when only the former is defensible. Berkeley only shows that there is an epistemic limitation placed on us – we cannot know whether our ideas resemble material reality. However, the Likeness Principle makes a stronger, metaphysical claim – that ideas cannot resemble material reality. It remains entirely possible that X does resemble Y, but I cannot establish it. The second option for the realist is to jettison the resemblance theory of perception (and in turn representation) altogether.[7] Indeed, the resemblance criterion in representative realism has, for largely independent reasons, been abandoned. The primary problem regards symmetry: if a photograph resembles a person, and in turn represents said person, it equally follows that the person resembles the photograph, and (problematically) represents it.[8] Ultimately, then,

[3] To use the lexicon on Locke's mechanistic philosophy.
[4] Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* (1689), II.viii.20.
[5] For Berkeley, the term "idea" does not merely refer to thoughts, rather, any mental content of sense-perception, passion, or imagination e.g. colour, feeling, or sound, as opposed to a "notion", which denotes the mind's active operations (Berkeley, *Principles*, §1, §27).
[6] Bartha, David 'Resemblance, Representation and Scepticism: The Metaphysical Role of Berkeley's Likeness Principle', (2022), *Journal of Modern Philosophy*. 4(1) doi: 10.25894/jmp.1998
[7] This sidesteps another objection Berkeley makes: any given object generates multiple, conflicting, apparently incompatible appearances (an orange looks spherical from one angle, elliptical from another). How then, Berkeley asks the resemblance theorist, is one to discriminate and choose the "true" appearance, allowing one to accurately represent a mind-independent object through the idea of primary qualities. Unlike the Lockean realist, those who drop resemblance (and perhaps even representation), choosing direct realism, or causal representational realism, need not respond to this objection at all.
[8] Goodman, Nelson, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Bobbs-Merrill (1968), 3-6.

Berkeley's attack succeeds only narrowly, and realism remains on the table, largely untouched.

Yet Berkeley presses another, more pervasive attack. His Inseparability Thesis seeks to establish that there is no principled difference between primary and secondary qualities. If successful, then primary qualities are mind-dependent just like secondary qualities, rendering representational realism's bulwark against idealism defunct, leaving the latter as the only option. His strategy to establish this inseparability is to appeal to our imagination. He poses a challenge: are we capable of imagining something possessing primary qualities without secondary qualities?

Berkeley's challenge is not easily overcome – try to picture a shape without colour, or an extension stripped of all sensible qualities. It does seem impossible. They are inseparable – to quote Berkeley "it is impossible even for the mind to disunite the ideas of extension and motion from all other sensible qualities".[9] It would follow then, that primary qualities such as solidity, extension, and figure are not a different metaphysical category to secondary qualities such as colour, taste, sound and smell, which, in turn, means that there is no mind-independent material, only mind-dependent things that require our own perceptive resources.

The realist, however, can quite easily dismiss this challenge (as J. L. Mackie observes) – by denying that imagination is tracking what is metaphysically possible.[10] In fact, Berkeley's observation should not come as a surprise but should be exactly what we expect. If our imagination is bounded by our perceptual experience – which it undeniably is – then it is unsurprising that imagination will not be capable of separating primary qualities from secondary ones, as our perceptual experience has never done so.[11] For Berkeley's thesis to be correct, it would require something remarkable – that our contingent imagination is somehow tracking metaphysical possibility, and he has provided no justification for why this is the case.

The final argument we shall consider, that is putatively of considerable force, is "the Master Argument". I offer a reconstruction below.[12]

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[9] Berkeley, George, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, (1713), First Dialogue
[10] Mackie, J. L., *Problems from Locke* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976, 24)
[11] The claim that imagination is bounded by our perceptual experience may seem undermined by the existence of a counterexample like Hume's missing shade of blue. Yet this is a marginal case, not an entirely new category of experience, and Berkeley would almost certainly be sympathetic to my claim, considering his empirical inclinations.
[12] Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge,* (1710), §22-24.

(1) To be mind-independent is to be capable of existing unconceived.
(2) As material substance is mind-independent, it must be capable of existing unconceived.
(3) It is impossible to conceive of something that exists unconceived, as the act of conception renders the thing conceived, not unconceived.

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(4) We cannot conceive of mind-independent substance.

If the conclusion (4) follows, then the subjective idealist supposedly wins out against the realist, as something we cannot conceive of is unintelligible and meaningless, so can be discarded. However, a major flaw can be found in (3), while (1) and (2) are unproblematic. In (3), Berkeley conflates two separate notions – conceiving of an unconceived thing and conceiving of something as existing unconceived. The former is rendered *de re* (of the thing), and does indeed entail a contradiction, as it requires that there be some particular object that I conceive of which is unconceived. The latter, on the other hand, is not contradictory, as it is rendered *de dicto* (of what is said), and only requires that I conceive of some object as existing unconceived, which is comparatively unproblematic and is achieved when I conceive of some tree that stands alone in a forest, shielded from any onlookers (existing as unconceived). It is worth formalising the distinction to illustrate this:[13]

Let C = "x is conceived (by me)"

Let Con(φ) = I conceive that φ

(i) $\text{Con}(\exists x \neg \text{C}x)$ *(de dicto; **not** contradictory)*
(ii) $\exists x(\text{C}x \wedge \neg \text{C}x)$ *(de re; contradictory)*
(iii) $\text{Con}(\exists x \neg \text{C}x) \not\models \exists x(\text{C}x \wedge \neg \text{C}x)$

Berkeley needs (i) to be a contradiction for the Master Argument to be successful but can only show a contradiction in (ii); it is a fallacy of quantifier scope.

Overall, then, Berkeley's arguments do not succeed in dispatching of realism. The Likeness Principle, even if sound, only forces the realist to discard resemblance-based representational

[13] A.N. Prior also formalises Berkeley's argument (though differently) and identifies a fallacy of scope, but his route is different. He shows that the negation of the *de re* claim is a tautology, then demonstrates that said tautology says nothing about whether one can conceive *de dicto* of something unconceived. Prior, A.N. (1955), 'Berkeley in logical form.' *Theoria*, 21: 117-122. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1755-2567.1955.tb00252.x

realism – hardly a retreat, considering this has become the mainstream view in the contemporary discourse. The Inseparability Thesis is explained better by the limits of experience without jumping to metaphysical conclusions, and the Master Argument equivocates between *de dicto* and *de re* claims, rendering it invalid. We turn to the second front then, having acknowledged that the arguments against realism and for idealism succeed only very narrowly. The second front consists of examining the internal coherence of Berkeley's thesis – is it consistent, does it hold up to objections in its own right, and ought we privilege it over realism?

The first objection concerns demarcation: if *esse est percipi* holds, and things are merely bundles of ideas, then it would seem we cannot distinguish between imaginary things and real ones. Berkeley offers three criteria for demarcation: (a) real perception is involuntary, unlike imagination; (b) real perception has more vivacity than imagination; and (c) real ideas exhibit steadiness, order, and regularity, unlike imaginary ones. [14] However, none of Berkeley's criteria survive fully intact. (a) is simply false – we are involuntarily forced to dream when asleep or hallucinate when awake. (b) fares little better – dreams are often incredibly vivid, and hallucinations may seem entirely veridical to the agent experiencing them. Even (c) is problematic – although it is the case that real experience follows certain laws, the question that the Berkeleian must face is why. While the realist explains such astounding regularity with material objects that adhere to our scientific understanding of the world, the idealist cannot appeal to such material objects. Berkeley's solution is to reduce the criterion to God's causal activity – it is the mind of God that chooses for ideas to follow such regularities.[15]

The next major objection is what of unperceived objects – does my chair disappear when I look away, as the bundle of ideas surrounding said chair vanishes? The problem is expressed well by this infamous limerick from Ronald Knox:[16]

> There was a young man who said God,
> must think it exceedingly odd
> if he finds that the tree
> continues to be
> when no one's about in the Quad.

[14] Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge,* (1710), §29-36.
[15] Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge,* (1710), §32.
[16] Knox, Ronald, limerick (1913), quoted in Russell, Bertrand, *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945), Bk. 3, Pt. 2, Ch, 16

Berkeley offers two responses. The first is an appeal to indifference; why should intermittent existence matter if experience is unaffected? The second response is to state that everything is perceived by the mind of God, as he is omnipresent at all times, so everything continues to exist. Yet this response is empirically empty. The claim that God is perceiving my unperceived chair is unfalsifiable, reintroducing the sceptical gap that Berkeley's idealism was intended to close.

The third objection concerns causation. On Berkeley's view, ideas are causally inert, and since all things are bundles of ideas, when I throw a ball, my hand cannot be the cause of its flight. Unsurprisingly, the intervention is theistic: it is God who causes the ball's motion, and my actions were merely in succession. Yet this generates problems that fundamentally threaten the theological underpinnings of Berkeley's entire enterprise – if God is the cause of physical events, is he the cause of my volitions as well? Berkeley resists this, but it seems difficult for him to escape Malebranche-style occasionalism.[17]

Ultimately, Berkeley is unsuccessful on both fronts. His arguments for subjective idealism either fail or too narrowly succeed, and objections land, or are absorbed by a God that does *ad hoc*, unfalsifiable explanatory labour – labour that, in solving one problem, creates "several more". [18] Even if substantive revisions and reconstructions to Berkeley's thesis – as has been carried out by John Foster –[19] allow for internal coherence, this only opens up another question; why we ought to favour idealism over realism. Judged against the pragmatic criteria of conservatism, modesty, simplicity, generality, and refutability,[20] idealism loses to realism on every measure bar the fourth.[21] A superficial overview sees idealism as the winner by virtue of qualitative parsimony – it does not posit material things at all – but when we account for the extra conceptual machinery that Berkeley and his followers

[17] Lee, Sujkae, 'Berkeley on the Activity of Spirits', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, (2012),
[18] Downing, Lisa, 'George Berkeley', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/berkeley/>.
[19] Foster, John, *A World for Us: The Case for Phenomenalistic Idealism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199297139.001.0001
[20] Quine, W.V.O. and Ullian, J. S., *The Web of Belief*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1978), ch. 6
[21] The discussion of falsifiability and theoretical economy are ostensibly tools reserved for the philosophy of science, but their application here is licensed by virtue of the fact that idealism and realism are empirically equivalent explanations of the same body of experiential data (assuming idealism is capable of achieving internal coherence), and it is this underdetermination that makes such tools relevant. I am meeting Berkeley on his own ground here – a firmly empirical one. When I compare both theories, I adopt Quine's criterion of ontological commitment – whatever falls under the existential quantifier when we regiment each theory, and realism unites disparate experiences into a far more economical conceptual scheme (see Quine, W.V.O., 'On What There Is' *Review of Metaphysics* 2, no. 5 (1948): 21-38)

need to draft into their idealist account of reality, this gain is erased. Unlike Johnson's stone-kick or Moore's question-begging appeal to hands, this is not a refusal to engage with Berkeley's metaphysics, but a reasoned preference for realism, earned on Berkeley's own argumentative grounds.

Word Count: 1997 (excluding title, name, and footnotes)