

J. A. Cora
The Ontology of George Berkeley

This essay will be covering topics concerning the ontology of George Berkeley. He lived from 1685 to 1753 and was one of the three most famous British Empiricists.¹ Berkeley's detailed Ontology entails his elaborate explanation of idealism and the pursuit thereof, which he holds as his core argument throughout his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*;² his immaterialist arguments dictate:

- (1) We perceive ordinary objects (houses, mountains, etc.).
- (2) We perceive only ideas.

Therefore,

- (3) Ordinary objects are ideas.³

Berkeley holds this as his basic thought of Ontology: everything is constructed from characteristics that is perceived within our minds. Therefore, nothing consists outside of a mind's comprehensive perception of objects; through which Berkeley established his motto, *esse is percipi*: to be is to be perceived. Anyone can get a glimpse of his idealistic stance within even the first section of *Principles of Human Knowledge*: clarifying on the specific Objects of Human Knowledge Berkeley states:

It is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses; or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind; or lastly, ideas formed by help of memory and imagination- either compounding, dividing, or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways. By sight I have the ideas of light and colors, with their several degrees and variations. By touch I perceive hard and soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance, and of all these more and less either as to quantity or degree.⁴

Furthermore, the essence of objects to Berkeley are manifestations of the mind, solely bound to a perceptive constraint. He believes perceptions of objects lead to facts of knowledge about said objects, which constitutes the recollection of sensory processes, which defines everything we know about said objects. Simply stated, the ability to comprehend an object depends on being able to use perceptions to grasp its reality.

Clear emphasis is made on the necessity of perception for an idea to exist, if someone is not perceiving something; having a clear recollection of a perception within their mind, it is not realized. Another striking topic is that of a constant being of perception, which he calls mind, spirit, and soul; which displays a dilemma: if nobody is perceiving said object, why does it remain in existence?

Subsequently, Berkeley therefore begins to make his argument for the necessary existence of a God within his world of pure perception, Berkeley remarks:

Some truths there are so near and obvious to the mind that a man need only open his eyes to see them. Such I take this important one to be, viz., that all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not

¹ Daniel E. Flage, 'George Berkeley (1685-1753) ([n.d.])', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <<https://iep.utm.edu/george-berkeley-british-empiricist/#H4>> [accessed 20 October 2022]. para. 1.

² George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1982) (Project Gutenberg, 2003) <<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4723>> [accessed 20 October 2022].

³ Kenneth P. Winkler, *Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 138.

⁴ Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, under 'OF THE PRINCIPLES OF HUMANS KNOWLEDGE'.

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any subsistence without a mind, that their being is to be perceived or known; that consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some Eternal Spirit- it being perfectly unintelligible, and involving all the absurdity of abstraction, to attribute to any single part of them an existence independent of a spirit.⁵

It is evident that Berkeley's ontology requires a God, himself a spirit, but an infinite one,⁶ one that has a mind that continually perceives all things. Therefore, when one is no longer thinking about a computer, it does not just cease to exist; Berkeley's God is thinking about it, therefore it remains.

Concludingly to Berkeley, the world consists of nothing but what is within the mind,⁷ simply an array of combined ideas all held in congruity, from the infinite mind of God that is his insurmountable active perceptiveness.

Berkeley's impacts on the metaphysical world were immense, he influenced both Hume and Kant⁸, and his defense of idealistic arguments holds true to this day. George Berkeley set forward a new age of idealistic philosophy for ages to come.

⁵ Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, under 'OF THE PRINCIPLES OF HUMANS KNOWLEDGE', sect. 6.

⁶ Lisa Downing, 'George Berkeley' (2021), ed. Edward N. Zalta, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/berkeley/>> [accessed 20 October 2022] sect. 3.1.3.

⁷ Flage, 'George Berkeley (1685-1753)', under. 'Concluding Remarks'.

⁸ Downing, 'George Berkeley', para. 1.

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