

(Question 2. Can idealism be reconciled with our common sense view of ourselves as agents in a material world? Discuss with relation to either Berkeley's immaterialism, or Leibniz's theory of monads.)

Free Will and Berkeley's Immaterial World

When Samuel John kicked the stone and said 'I refute it thus' in arguing against Berkeley's subjective idealism, his brash refutation may not have been persuasive, but did prompt a certain instinctive agreement among us. Why? In examining Berkeley's idealism and how it fits in with our own sensible world and notions of free will, we must first examine some important definitions. What is the common sense view? We will also summarise Berkeley's basic arguments, examine how they may influence our decisions and how it relates to the different views of free will. We will then conclude how it coheres with such models.

We like to believe that we are ultimately in control of our own destiny. This is mirrored in the common sense ethics of Thomas Reid, whose very Christian beliefs posit that God has given us the intelligence to make decisions for ourselves. We are free to be good or evil. It is my opinion that such a view of the autonomous self, whether one believes in God or not, would represent the most instinctive view of the majority today. In discussing perception, we can also refer to the common sense view in perceiving objects – we directly perceive them. This is also referred to as naïve realism and can be compared to the idea of representative realism first posited by John Locke. In his model of representative realism, we do not perceive the object directly, but interpret its qualities indirectly after receiving its information via sense data, e.g. seeing or hearing. In Locke's arguments it is assumed that the object we are perceiving is a material object.

Berkeley disagreed and argued that if all judgements are made in the mind of the perceiver, how can we be certain of an independently existing material world outside of our own minds. Summarising his arguments:

1. Ideas depend upon spirits (minds) for their existence.
2. Sensible things are ideas.
3. Everyday items are nothing but collections of sensible things we immediately sense-perceive.
4. So, everyday items depend upon spirits for their existence.

This was meant as a refutation to Locke's theory of representative realism in the material world with its focus on primary and secondary qualities. This is argued at length in the *Three Dialogues* where Philonous firstly persuades Hylas that secondary qualities does not exist and then proceeds to refute the idea of primary qualities, and along with it the physical world. All objects are subjective ideas in this world and even physical space is reduced to the idea of extension.

If all ideas are subjective, an unperceived object cannot exist in this model of the world. Berkeley forwards God as the underlying substrate of all ideas, so at least they will be perceived by him in anyone else's absence. As a result, that tree in the back garden, which is not noticed by anyone at 3 am, will still be there when you get up in the morning, as it has continued to be perceived by the mind of God. It is worth mentioning at this point that Berkeley is arguing for the existence of God

as much as he is arguing for an immaterial world (as a bishop he feared that such empirical arguments forwarded by Locke encouraged scepticism of religion). Therefore there is no allowance made in Berkeley's arguments given to atheists. The completeness of the argument depends on the existence of God. Such a vision of reality runs counter to our own intuitive view of the world. For instance, where it is quite easy for us to understand and imagine causality in the material world, it is difficult to imagine how causality, and its influence on our own thoughts, would work in Berkeley's. Would God be in control of that also? In kicking the stone, did Johnson give himself a sore foot or did God put that idea in his mind afterwards?

This leads us to the question whether any of our actions are really results of our own decisions. We can look at the idea of free will from three different perspectives, namely determinism, libertarianism or compatibilism. The deterministic view dictates everything in the universe is pre-determined, and so our decisions are pre-determined. We are caught in a massive cycle of cause and effect and so are not free agents. Libertarianism, on the other hand, dictates we have complete free will and our choices are completely ours. Finally compatibilism recognises that determinism exists, but we still have choice, as the causal chain of events exists, but we are the ones making our own decisions.

Each view can be interpreted differently in Berkeley's immaterial world. The determinist may believe that God will influence all the ideas therein, but the libertarian would counter that God may only be facilitating the stage on which we can play out our own destiny. Once again compatibilism allows pre-determined outcomes, but holds that we still have choice and our actions are caused by our own decisions. While I would adhere to the final view, one cannot help but question the level of control God would cede to us in such a universe as Berkeley's. While Berkeley does not imply that God does will influence our thoughts directly, everything we experience in our sensible world will be under immediate divine influence. That, in itself, implies an excessive authority and power to influence our minds and decisions, albeit indirectly.

In concluding we must admire the elegance of Berkeley's argument and it is impossible to refute. One is left with an impulse to hold onto one's own instinctive, or common sense view of one's agency in a material world. This does not refute Berkeley's argument. It is just easier to live with, rather than the notion of accepting some supreme being, who has the power to run your world, but hoping he takes a more laissez faire view of your existence.

References

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