

Classical Idealism, Handout

- The Problem
 - Things are not always as they appear--e.g., sometimes we misperceive things, have perceptual disagreements, recognize distinctions between how things appear to the naked eye and with the 'aided' eye (e.g., microscopes).
- Idealism and realism
 - Strong (or 'ontological') Idealism contends something mental or mind-dependent (ideas, mind, appearances) is the ultimate foundation of all reality, or even exhaustive of reality.
 - The book is not something 'out there', but merely the various appearances (colors, shapes) that we apprehend.
 - Idealism might sound crazy, but the agreement between two philosophers (Berkeley and Vasubandhu), despite vast temporal and cultural distances, suggests that it should be taken seriously.
 - Realism contends that there are (at least) some things that are not mental or mind-dependent: "To exist is one thing, and to be perceived is another."
 - The book is something out there, which causes us to perceive appearances.
 - A weaker idealism ('epistemological' idealism) contends that while such mind independent objects might exist, we have no power to perceive or know them.
 - There might be a book out there, but all we interact with are appearances.
- Argument from Variation
 - Things look different from different perspectives
 - What is hot to one hand may be cold to the other; r; the book may look gray from afar, but purple when up close. The world appears radically different to whales, humans, and Balaustium mites (the smallest creatures with complex eyes).
 - We usually respond to such situations by privileging one perception of a given object as correct.
 - Only one of the incompatible qualities is truly a quality of the object and that the other apparent qualities result from misperception. The former accurately represents the object as it actually is, while the latter does not.
 - Berkeley's response is to question such moves, by suggesting that we ultimately have no coherent way to distinguish the former from the latter.
 - To avoid unwarranted favoritism or anthropocentrism, we should deny that the book has any particular color.
- Argument from Science
 - Primary and Secondary Qualities
 - Primary qualities are thought to be properties of objects that are independent of any observer, such as solidity, extension, motion, number and figure.

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- Early enlightenment philosophers often thought that these should be the only concepts invoked in science
- Secondary qualities are thought to be properties that are, in their essence, perceived, such as color, taste, smell, and sound. They can be described as the effect things have on certain people.
- Secondary qualities and external objects
 - If we ask why the book looks purple or smells old, we likely refer to the way it affects light or skin in terms of its primary qualities (e.g., shape).
 - Hence, we don't need to appeal to any external properties (the book's being purple or old) to understand secondary qualities. In the first instance, we appeal just to primary qualities.
 - Hence, primary qualities are the only set of mind-independent features. The book itself doesn't have any secondary properties; these exist only as effects of the primary qualities on us.
 - Secondary qualities and external objects
 - As physics has progressed, however, we have come to the gradual realization that the microscopic world is *radically* different from the world of mid-sized objects. This applies even to primary qualities.
 - Electrons are strange objects, in comparison to books or baseballs. They are a bit like particles and a bit like waves; they do not even have definite spatial positions in space before measurement.
 - The shapes we encounter in ordinary life don't appear in the mathematical formulations of modern fundamental physics any more than colors do.
 - If we think that, in some sense, the microscopic is 'more real' than the everyday, then we have reason to think that even primary qualities are not really 'out there'.
- Argument from Dreams
 - In dreams, we 'perceive' things, at least in some sense of perception (e.g., I saw my childhood dog in a dream the other night).
 - But to explain that perception, I don't appeal to objects of perception (my dog has long been dead, unfortunately). Therefore, there is no need to refer to external objects to explain our experience of the world.
 - This is central as well to Vasubandhu's argument against the objection that appearances couldn't show up at different times and places, or that appearances couldn't be causes.
 - Mere appearances have different places in dreams (my dog appeared to be laying in front of me). So appearances can seem to have distinct temporal and spatial locations

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- Likewise, the effects of dreams on our bodies (e.g., sweating in fear, ‘nocturnal emissions’) shows as well that appearances can be ‘causally efficacious’.
- Argument from Mind-Inseparability (the ‘Master’ argument)
 - A Challenge to the Realist: show me or point to a thing that is genuinely mind-independent (objects existing unperceived and unthought of) or external to our minds.
 - Berkeley argues that we cannot actually conceive of mind-independent objects. Every time we point to features of objects around us, they are *perceived* features; to conceive of mind-independent things (e.g., a tree alone in the forest), we must ourselves be conceiving of them.
 - Alternatively put, Berkeley everything that we will ever come into direct, unmediated contact with will be things that are conceived or perceived by us, as those are our seemingly only ways of coming into contact with the world.
- The Conclusion to Idealism
 - Berkeley and Vasubandhu deny that the book is a physical object capable of existing without the mind.
 - As Berkeley puts it, reality consists of “minds or spirits” and their “ideas.” As Vasubandhu puts it, “Everything in the three realms is only appearance.”
 - Instead of maintaining that there are colorless shapeless external objects, the more straightforward conclusion is that external objects don’t exist.
 - Vasubandhu’s idealism is even more radical than Berkeley’s.
 - Berkeley holds that although supposed ‘external objects’ are just ideas, *we* are real in some more substantial sense, who perceive these objects.
 - Berkeley, instead, thinks of his idealism as a kind of vindication both of common sense and of religious orthodoxy: “My endeavors tend only to unite...that truth which was before shared between the vulgar and the philosophers”
 - What about objects that no mortal creature is perceiving at a given time? For Berkeley, this shows that there must be some mind that perceives all of these objects. This is the mind of (Berkeley’s conception of) God.
 - Vasubandhu holds the view that we--that is, our minds--also simply are collections of ideas: we are just as much “appearance” as supposed external objects.