

# Idealism: Berkeley's 'master' argument and criticisms of idealism

## Berkeley's master argument

- Berkeley's 'master' argument tries to show that the very idea of a mind-independent material object is impossible. This is because, when we think about an object we automatically get an image in our head of the object.

P1: Try to conceive of a tree which exists independently of any mind.

P2: In doing so, the tree is being conceived by you.

C: Therefore the tree is in your mind and not independent of any mind after all.

## Criticism of Berkeley's 'master' argument.

Russell argues that Berkeley's error is to confuse the mental act of conceiving a thing with the thing being conceived. So it is true that my idea of a tree must be in my mind, but it doesn't follow that what my idea is about, the tree itself, must be in my mind.

Berkeley's argument if true, would show that I cannot make sense of an idea existing outside of my mind. It would mean that only my mind could exist and so would lead to solipsism (see key word list). Berkeley's appeal to God's existence as an eternal perceiver would be undermined and his whole system would collapse.

Berkeley does not fully explain why an idea can only be like another idea. Without being able to compare our ideas with reality we have no way of establishing such resemblance.

If we accept the existence of the external world then it seems reasonable to suppose that there will be a systematic correlation between reality and our perceptions of it.

## Issue: Idealism leads to solipsism

If ideas of qualities of objects exist in the mind, then I cannot know of the existence of any reality beyond it. The 'master' argument says it is impossible to have an idea of a mind-independent object. This implies that the world first appeared to me when I was born and will disappear when I die and comes in and out of existence when I shut my eyes and open them.

But, this objection ignores Berkeley's role of God, as objects exist in God's mind as a permanent perceiver of the universe when no finite human or animal mind is perceiving it. So objects retain some kind of permanence that common sense would demand.

But can we make sense of the idea of God as Berkeley argues minds can only be aware of their ideas. Since a mind is the possessor of ideas, it is not itself and idea, so we cannot have an idea of a mind, therefore, we cannot have an idea of God's mind or of any other minds, so we are back into solipsism.

## Berkeley's response to solipsism



"YOU'RE A SOLIPSIST? NONSENSE,  
MAN--IT'S ALL IN YOUR MIND!"

He admits that I cannot have an idea of God's mind. God's mind is not something that has sensible qualities and so it is something I cannot frame in my mind. But I can form a 'notion' of it by 'intuition' or 'reflection' on myself. As Descartes argued, Berkeley claims that I am aware of a self which possesses my ideas. This self is something unextended and indivisible.

Berkeley thinks he has satisfactorily proved the existence of God as the cause of my ideas and what sustains the universe in existence. So I can extend this 'notion' of myself by enlarging my own power and subtracting the my imperfections to produce a notion of the mind of God.