

# Berkeley's Idealism: A Gentle Introduction and Its Contrasts

*“Esse est percipi”* – To be is to be perceived. (George Berkeley)

## What Is Idealism?

Idealism is the philosophical view that reality is fundamentally mental. That is, everything that exists depends on being perceived **by a mind**. For Berkeley, there are no material substances behind our sensations—no 'stuff' out there beyond what we perceive. When you see a red apple, you're not seeing a physical object existing independently of you—you're experiencing an idea in your mind. The apple is real, but its reality is made up of perceptions, not matter.

## Berkeley's Version of Idealism – The Argument:

1. All knowledge comes through experience. We can only know what we perceive.
2. We never experience 'matter' directly—only sights, sounds, smells, etc.
3. Therefore, we have no good reason to believe matter exists.
4. What we do experience are ideas, and these ideas exist in minds.
5. To explain the continuity of the world when no one is looking, Berkeley posits that God perceives everything at all times.

So for Berkeley:

- The table exists because you perceive it.
- When you leave the room, the table continues to exist because God perceives it.

## Idealism vs Materialism

Features	Idealism (Berkeley)	Materialism (e.g., Descartes, Locke)
What is real?	Ideas in minds	Physical matter + minds
Source of knowledge	Experience (ideas)	Experience of the material world
Role of God	God is essential – perceives all	Not necessarily required
View of objects	Collections of perceptions	Independent substances

## Why Did Berkeley Reject Materialism?

Berkeley thought materialism led to scepticism:

- If matter exists beyond our perceptions, how can we ever truly know it?
- Why posit a 'material substance' we never perceive?

He also believed materialism made atheism more likely. By contrast, his idealism made God central to holding the world together.

## Critiques of Berkeley's Idealism

- **Samuel Johnson**, kicking a stone, said: "*I refute it thus!*"—suggesting that matter is obvious to our senses.
- Common sense seems to say that things exist even when no one sees them.
- Scientific models often assume a material world that obeys laws whether or not anyone is watching.

Some philosophers argue that idealism collapses the distinction between illusion and reality—how can we tell what's really there?

Others defend idealism as a way to highlight the importance of perception and consciousness in shaping what we call 'real.'

## A Final Thought

Berkeley's idealism invites us to question the very ground beneath our feet. What if the world isn't made of bricks and atoms, but of experience and awareness? What if to exist is simply... to be perceived?

Whether or not we accept his view, it asks us to think deeply about what it means to know, what it means to exist, and what role the mind plays in making the world.

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