

## **Idealism**

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### **Philosophical Concept**

Idealism is now usually understood in philosophy as the view that mind is the most basic reality and that the physical world exists only as an appearance to or expression of mind, or as somehow mental in its inner essence. However, a philosophy which makes the physical world dependent upon mind is usually also called idealist even if it postulates some further hidden, more basic reality behind the mental and physical scenes (for example, Kant's things-in-themselves). There is also a certain tendency to restrict the term 'idealism' to systems for which what is basic is mind of a somewhat lofty nature, so that 'spiritual values' are the ultimate shapers of reality. (An older and broader use counts as idealist any view for which the physical world is somehow unreal compared with some more ultimate, not necessarily mental, reality conceived as the source of value, for example Platonic forms.)

The founding fathers of idealism in Western thought are Berkeley (theistic idealism), Kant (transcendental idealism) and Hegel (absolute idealism). Although the precise sense in which Hegel was an idealist is problematic, his influence on subsequent absolute or monistic idealism was enormous. In the US and the UK idealism, especially of the absolute kind, was the dominating philosophy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, receiving its most forceful expression with F.H. Bradley. It declined, without dying, under the influence of G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, and later of the logical positivists. Not a few philosophers believe, however, that it has a future.

### **1. The general case for idealism**

As the term will be used here, a philosopher is an idealist if and only if they believe that the physical world exists *either* (1) only as an object for mind, *or* (2) only as a content of mind, *or* (3) only as something itself somehow mental in its true character, a disjunction we shall sum up as the thesis that the physical is derivative from mind. Particular idealists may go further and say that everything whatever is derivative from mind except mind itself, but this would not be affirmed by, for example, Kant, who believed in things-in-themselves which may be neither mental nor mind-derivative; neither, perhaps, would it be accepted by Schopenhauer, for whom Kant's things-in-themselves become an unconscious cosmic Will. Moreover, there is no one view of the status of so-called abstract objects or universals which seems required of an idealist (see Abstract objects).

The mind-dependence of the physical has been argued for and developed in widely varying ways. For example, the idealist may be a monist or a pluralist about the mind(s) from which the physical is derivative. Very significant too is the contrast between idealisms which are more ontological and those which are more epistemological in their approach. The two great exemplars of each are George Berkeley and Immanuel Kant, the founding fathers of Western idealism and sources of most subsequent arguments in its favour.

Ontological idealism affirms that a certain view of reality, in which the physical is mind-dependent, is absolutely true, and regards such elements of common sense or science as seem to conflict with this either as wrong, or as only seemingly incompatible. Epistemological idealism is concerned, rather, to show that the most acceptable views of the physical world, which doubtless include the claim that it is not mind-dependent, are, indeed, only true-for-us, but that truth-for-us is the only kind of truth it makes sense to seek. (A more qualified epistemological idealism may allow that chinks of a more absolute truth may suggest themselves and be important, but hardly belong to the main body of what we should call knowledge.) Thus, for idealism of the second kind, the mind-dependence of the physical is not so much a claim as to what is true about it, as about the sort of truth which truth about it is.

## **2. Berkeleyian ontological idealism**

According to Berkeley, there are only two types of existent – spirits (or minds) and ideas. Physical objects, as we ordinarily conceive them, are collections of sensory ideas (sense impressions). Thus an apple is simply a collection of such sensory appearances as we are immediately aware of when we say that we are perceiving it (including the sensation of eating it). As for things, or those aspects of things, which are not perceived by any finite mind, they are there *either*: in the secondary sense that they would come into our minds if we took appropriate steps (gave ourselves appropriate impressions of moving in certain ways) to have a look at them, a sniff of them or whatever; *or* they are being perceived by an infinite mind. The second alternative brings in God immediately, the first is only explicable by saying that they are ideas which God would produce in us as a result of our taking those steps. Either way, the idealist truth that physical objects are collections of ideas, taken together with the obvious fact that everything is as though they continued their existence when unobserved by finite minds, appears to Berkeley an incontestable proof of God's existence.

Two of the main reasons why Berkeley thought that the physical world must consist of ideas were:

1. It is only if physical objects are conceived as collections of ideas which hang together in experience that we have any empirical evidence for their existence.
2. It is generally admitted that the so-called secondary qualities of physical things only exist as ideas in our minds (see Primary–secondary distinction). Moreover, it could be proved by the way in which secondary qualities vary with the state of the observer, and the way

in which they are inseparable from sensations of pleasure and pain. But the considerations which show that secondary qualities are mind-dependent show equally that the primary ones are too. (Presented shape varies with conditions of observation as much as colour.) Moreover, no one can conceive of primary qualities existing in the absence of secondary qualities, so that they can only exist tied up with the admittedly mind-dependent.

It is usual to say that Berkeley's line of thought works only if one already accepts doctrines which he adopted uncritically from Locke (as he understood him), namely that all we ever perceive are ideas, and that secondary qualities are mind-dependent. It is, therefore, worth emphasizing that arguments of an essentially Berkeleian sort can be presented, and have been influential, which do not depend upon this Lockean inheritance.

The core of these arguments will be: physical objects, as they present themselves to our senses, do so with qualities which we cannot suppose to exist except for a perceiving mind. Indeed, we cannot even conceive them lacking all such qualities. These qualities, with which things present themselves to the senses, include what we may call all their perspectival qualities (the thing is given with features which reflect the position from which it is seen or the way in which it is felt and so on), also hedonic and aesthetic qualities, and finally an organization of the perceptual field into foreground and background, and into certain *Gestalten*. However much you try to imagine a thing as it is in itself, apart from any observer, you will find yourself imagining it as having features which represent the rough position of an observer of it, how they feel about it, and how they organize their perceptual field. In short you can only imagine it with features which it could only have as a presence to some observer. Such reasoning continues to persuade those of a Berkeleian cast of mind that one cannot form any genuine conception of a physical world existing except as an object for an observer.

All this is likely to invite two objections. First, it may be said that you should distinguish between the representation (such as an image in your mind) and what that representation represents for you. Only certain features of the image serve a representative function. Now the fact that the image may have some of the features which an actual sense impression of it would have only if the thing were perceived in a certain way, does not mean that these features must be regarded as belonging to what is represented. To this it may be replied by the idealist that they do not deny that, by ignoring certain features of the image, you can regard only the others as playing a role in picturing the object; and that these need not include those which obviously imply presence to a subject. What they deny, in contrast, is that one can form any sort of representation which will, so-to-speak, positively depict the thing as existing without subject-implying features. And unless one can do this one has no real sense of what an unperceived thing could be like. The second objection is that one can conceive what one cannot imagine. Surely you can *conceive* a physical thing without these subject-implying features even if you

cannot *imagine* it. To this the idealist may reply that you do not really understand what you are thinking if you only think about it in words (and doubtless this is what the objector means by conceiving it). Really to bring before your mind the character of the situation you believe in requires that, using the expression broadly, you must *imagine* it, and this you cannot do except by imagining it as it would present itself to a certain observer.

Such a line of thought, though not precisely Berkeley's in detail, is Berkeleian in spirit and inspiration and it is likely to be a main plank of an ontological idealism which claims that unperceived physical reality is an impossibility. What positive view of the world can be based upon such reflections? For Berkeley it showed that there must be a God who is responsible for those ideas which (after acting in a certain way) we have no choice but to experience and who keeps the whole system of ideas available to each individual spirit in conformity with a universal system of laws determining the appearances available to each.

However, there have been philosophers who put forward a phenomenalism supposed not to imply the existence of God. According to them, one can speak meaningfully of physical things as existing unperceived. However, these only exist in a secondary sense as compared with those which are actually perceived, and their existence in this secondary sense is only the fact that they are available for perception. That is, there are definite facts for each of us (according to what we would ordinarily call our position in space) which determine what perceptions are available or compulsory for us in response to what we do or suffer (what sensations of movement we give ourselves or are given). There is no need to suppose that there is some explanation for this; it must just be accepted as a brute fact.

This phenomenalism is often not classed as idealist because its reductive account of the physical is divorced not only from theism, but from any other conception of the world as shaped by Reason or other higher forms of Mind. It is a puzzle of intellectual history that some of those most influenced by Berkeley's views of physical reality have been among the most atheistic and, in the popular sense, most 'materialist' of thinkers (for example, T.H. Huxley, A.J. Ayer and, with qualifications, J.S. Mill).

### **3. Kantian transcendental idealism**

A simple version of Kant might present him as a phenomenalist who supplemented his phenomenalism with the admission that there must be some explanation of why the sense experiences available to us are what they are, yet who regarded this explanation as unavailable to us except as the thesis that they result from unconscious operations which we (as we really are rather than as we appear to ourselves) conduct upon things-in-themselves of whose real character we can know nothing (except that it cannot be that of anything properly called physical). However, Kant's reasoning for his transcendental idealism is largely different from those deriving from, or inspired by, Berkeley (see Kant, I. §5).

For Kant there are two striking facts about our knowledge of the world which only his transcendental idealism can explain ('transcendental' means 'having to do with our cognitive powers'). First, we have a great deal of 'synthetic a priori' knowledge about it (see A priori; Analyticity). Thus we know that arithmetic and the axioms of Euclid apply to the physical world as a whole, that every physical or mental process occurs in conformity with universal causal laws, and that change requires a permanent substratum of matter which remains quantitatively the same. Second, neither a priori nor empirical knowledge can answer the great questions of human destiny, such as whether God exists and whether we are immortal. The only possible explanation of our synthetic a priori knowledge about the physical and, indeed, mental worlds is that it is really our knowledge of our own cognitive nature. Space and time are the forms of our perceptual intuition and the categories of causation, substance and accident and so on are the categories by which we construct the unitary world of our actual and possible experience out of unconscious stimuli which reach the hidden self from things-in-themselves (or 'noumena'), of whose character we must remain ignorant. And it is because we are ignorant of things-in-themselves that we cannot *know* the answers to the questions about God and immortality, for these concern absolute truth rather than that truth-for-us which is all that is available for knowledge. On the other hand, just because we cannot *know* the answers to these questions, we may have *faith* that they would suit our moral natures and show that, in spite of the causal determinism holding in the phenomenal world, we are responsible at some 'noumenal' level for our own adherence or otherwise to the categorical imperatives of morality.

Some of the details of Kant's theory are outmoded by the fact that science seems no longer committed to some of his supposedly synthetic a priori truths such as the axioms of Euclid and the universality of causation. However, the idea that the world as we know it owes, to an incalculable extent, its general character to our particular modes of perception and thought still has great force. In Berkeley there was no suggestion that what we know is created by our knowledge of it. The ideas which constitute the physical world are simply the ones which God has chosen to give himself and us and to organize in a certain way. Our knowledge of those we perceive is a fully accurate knowledge by direct acquaintance and the existence and character of others, as actualities or possibilities, is known by induction. In Kant, knowledge itself to a great extent creates its objects by unconscious operations upon unconscious stimuli reaching us from things-in-themselves whose real nature it leaves in darkness.

The distinction is somewhat subtle, since both the Berkeleian and Kantian, in effect, regard facts about the physical world as facts about the perceptions we may obtain through sensations of movement in certain directions. However, the Berkeleian inheritance has mainly been to insist on the way in which the physical world cannot be conceived without sensory qualities which can only occur as contents of experience, while the Kantian inheritance has mainly been to insist on

the way in which our cognition of the physical world interprets it by concepts which it *brings to experience* rather than *abstracts from* it.

In fact, Kant's position is nearer to Berkeley's than he himself allowed. According to Kant his idealism is transcendental, whereas Berkeley's is empirical. What this comes to is that Berkeley's idealism professes to give the absolute truth about the physical world, as a corrective to a realism which regarded it as existing independently of mind, while Kant accepted such realism, but claimed that it was only true for us, and that, as for the absolute truth about things which underlie it, we know nothing beyond the mere fact that there must be such an absolute truth (in the moral and theistic significance of which we may have faith).

#### **4. German absolute idealism**

The great figures in German absolute idealism were J.G. Fichte, G.W.F. Hegel and F.W.J. von Schelling (see Absolute, the). (The character of their considerable political influence cannot be considered here.) In effect, each agreed with Kant that ordinary common sense and 'scientific' (in our usual sense, not theirs, in which it referred to their own philosophic conclusions) truth about the physical world is only truth for us. But they went beyond Kant in holding that philosophy can put this in the context of an absolute and rationally demonstrated truth about an essentially spiritual world. In fact, Kant's attempt to close the door on attempts to know the ultimate truth of things opened it to some of the most robust claims ever made to have probed the mysteries of the universe.

For Kant the physical world only exists for us, and our knowledge of it is only truth for us. However, we can recognize that there must be two hidden determinants of it, modes of cognition which take place in our own hidden depths, and the unconscious non-physical stimuli from mysterious things-in-themselves out of which they make the familiar physical world. Fichte thought the postulation of such things-in-themselves quite unnecessary. If the knowable physical world is something whose form we construct unconsciously why should not the matter be something we determine unconsciously too? Thereby we avoid the nebulous hypothesis of things-in-themselves, and are left simply with our own indubitable existence and hidden depths thereof, of which we dimly sense the presence. Of course there is an external world or non-ego, but it exists only as something which the ego posits and does so for reasons the general character of which can be deciphered. For the ego wants to live a life of moral worth and this it can only do if it has obstacles to overcome; thus the external world it posits consists precisely in those obstacles whose over-coming is most morally valuable at its current stage of development.

But how is it that each ego shares a non-ego, as it evidently does, with other egos? Fichte has two related answers. One is that moral development is something which can only occur in a community, so that the different egos need to posit a shared non-ego giving them a common environment in which to work out their moral destiny. Second, as his thought developed, Fichte

became clearer that the ego which is working out its moral destiny in each of us is really a single world-spirit living out an apparent multiplicity of lives. Fichte developed this account by way of a dialectical method which became the hallmark of German idealism (inspired by Kant for whom, however, it was rather a source of illusion than a means to truth) in which apparently opposed truths are successively reconciled in higher syntheses until absolute truth is reached. Thus was born absolute idealism, in which the reality behind both nature and finite mind is a single absolute mind or self in process of self-discovery or development. However, Fichte's brand of absolute idealism is sometimes also called 'subjective idealism', because it regards the natural world as existing only for the subjective experience of finite individuals, expressions of a single world self though they may be.

Schelling was originally a follower of Fichte, but his continually shifting versions of idealism tended to become more 'objective' or at least more positively concerned with nature for its own sake. The Absolute or universal self does not simply dream the physical world as the scene of moral endeavour but rather expresses itself in a parallel dialectic, both 'really' in the nature from which the mind arises and 'ideally' in the mind for which nature exists. The two come together eventually in philosophical understanding and, more concretely, in art.

Absolute idealism, and the dialectical method and ontology, reached its historically most important form in the philosophy of Hegel. For Hegel, the world consists in a series of terms each surpassing its (only sometimes temporal) predecessors by incorporating what was satisfactory in them, in a manner which reconciles in a higher synthesis that in which they contradicted each other. The series begins with pure concepts, leading on to actual natural and then humanly historical processes and terminates in a community in the free service of which each individual can find themselves fulfilled and in the consciousness, in the minds of philosophers, of its total nature. Thus, everything exists as path to, and as fodder for, a rich communal spiritual life, but how far this means that nothing really exists except as a component within or object for consciousness or spirit, is controversial. Therefore, it is unclear how far Hegel was an idealist in our sense (as opposed to the broader sense mentioned parenthetically above).

Hegel and Schelling had originally seen themselves as partners in developing a new philosophy, but Hegel soon surpassed his at first better known associate in fame and influence. However, Schelling had his turn again on Hegel's death, developing a new so-called positive philosophy in which he rejected the high a priori road to the nature of existence which both thinkers had taken previously. Absolute idealism must appeal partly to empirical features of the world rather than merely cite them sometimes as illustrations of what reason can independently prove must be so. This more traditionally Christian philosophy sought to give God and man a freedom effectively denied them by Hegelianism. Its somewhat bizarre ontology also seemed to many to show German idealism in its death throes.

In different ways Fichte, Schelling and Hegel each held that the world could only be understood through realizing that it is the concrete actualization of concepts whose proper home is in the mind. This binds them to Kant, but they sought to go beyond him in explaining why the relevant categories are just as they are and why there is a real unity of experience common to apparently different minds: namely that, in the end, the world is the construction of one universal Mind or Reason. Each saw himself as drawing on Spinoza as well as Kant, but as substituting an ultimate self or subject for Spinoza's substance.

Standing quite apart from these absolute idealists is the lonely but immensely influential figure of Arthur Schopenhauer. Arguably the closest metaphysically, if not in mood, to Kant, and accepting in the main his transcendental idealism, he claimed to have discovered the true nature of the realm of things-in-themselves, regarding them as aspects of a single universal Will, manifesting itself as object for a subject (which was its own self fallen into a state of wretched self-assertion), from which it can escape only by a culmination of that denial of the will to live, characteristic, as he saw it, of sainthood.

### **5. Anglo-American absolute idealism**

As German philosophers moved away from idealism in the later part of the nineteenth century, idealism of an essentially absolute kind became the dominant mode of philosophy in the UK and the USA (where, however, there were more serious rivals to it). This was motivated partly by the search for a form of religious belief which would be less vulnerable to Lyell and Darwin than traditional Christianity had been, and by an ethical viewpoint which would be rather nobler in its conception of the possibilities of human life than Benthamite utilitarianism. Some of these philosophers (for example John and Edward Caird, and William Wallace), were doctrinal Hegelians, utilizing Hegelianism to save Christianity.

More importantly original philosophers of an idealist persuasion during this period were T.H. Green and F.H. Bradley in the UK (also the very like-minded, though more Hegelian, Bernard Bosanquet), and Josiah Royce in the USA. We can only mention in passing the very distinctive idealism already advanced by J.F. Ferrier in Scotland, which draws both on Berkeley and on German idealism. These thinkers were to various extents influenced by Kant and Hegel and the other German idealists, but in the case of Bradley, at least, something of the Berkeleian tradition is, perhaps unconsciously, present.

Green was anxious above all to show that the development of human life from animal origins could not be explained purely by way of natural selection, or indeed in any naturalistic way. Rather, must it be recognized as the gradual unfolding of the life of a universal spirit aspiring to fulfilment in an eventually virtuous form of human life. For empiricism and naturalism cannot explain the connectedness of the world, and the ability of the human mind to synthesize events of



different times into a unitary history. This is only possible if the world is the expression of a single universal spirit of which each of us is an actualization in which it becomes aware of itself. The general upshot is quite Hegelian, but there is little use of Hegelian dialectic.

Bradley's metaphysics derives from two main reflections: first, that nothing is genuinely conceivable except experience with its various modes and contents; second, that what we describe as distinct things in relation to each other can only be adequately conceived as abstractions from a higher unity. In the end all things must, therefore, be abstractions from one single Cosmic Experience. With his denial of time's reality and his claim that Reality is really a single cosmic *Nunc Stans* whose ingredients only seem to be passing away in time, Bradley strikes a note which is perhaps more Platonic than Hegelian. Royce's absolute idealism has a good deal in common with Bradley, but whereas for Bradley God was only a rather superior 'appearance' along with the ordinary things of daily life, for Royce the Absolute was God, being personal in a way that Bradley's Absolute was not.

## **6. Panpsychism**

One of the main charges against idealism is that of 'cosmic impiety' (Santayana). Its tendency is to make the vast realm of nature simply a representation in a mind observing or thinking of it. This can hardly do justice either to its obstinacy (surely not primarily of our own making, whatever Fichte may have thought) or to its wonderfulness. Such reflections have led some of those who are persuaded of the basic idealist claim that unexperienced reality is impossible, to hold the panpsychist position that nature is composed of units which feel their own existence and relation to other things, just as truly, if less articulately, as we do (see Panpsychism). This was the view of Royce, and Bradley thought it might be true. It was a main plank, somewhat eccentrically developed, of the German idealist Gustav Fechner (and is perhaps adumbrated in Schelling); also of Leibniz, who in this respect can be called an idealist.

Panpsychism of this sort has been most fully developed in recent times in the work of A.N. Whitehead and of Charles HARTSHORNE. It is sometimes regarded as a synthesis of realism and idealism; realist because it gives the ultimate units of nature (whatever they are) a reality in themselves (as what they are for themselves); idealist because it denies unexperienced reality. When the inner sentient life of (the rest of) nature is thought of as unified with the subjective life of humans and animals (as it must be for a Bradley or a Royce) in one absolute consciousness, we have a form of absolute or objective idealism which quite avoids the anthropocentric character it had in the work of thinkers such as Fichte.

## **7. Personal idealism**

Many thinkers of an idealist persuasion in the English-speaking world bridled somewhat at the downplaying of individual persons by absolute idealism, especially Bradley and to a lesser extent Royce. This led to the development, as the nineteenth century closed, of some forms of personal

idealism for which reality is a community of independently real spirits (with or without a God as a *primus inter pares*) and the physical world their common object or construction. There is no great figure here, with the possible exception of J.M.E. McTaggart who espoused a highly individual form of pluralistic idealism. Otherwise the main proponent of personal idealism was the US philosopher, G.H. Howison, although eight Oxford philosophers published a manifesto under this label in 1902 (see Personalism).

Anglo-American idealism was, for a time, widely thought to have been refuted by the work of G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell in the UK and such pragmatists as James and Dewey in the USA (though there were certainly idealist features to the thought of these two Americans), but a contrary judgement is now not uncommon. Edmund Husserl's phenomenology remains influential in some quarters, and some agree with his eventual view that it implies a form of transcendental idealism (see Husserl, E.). Some regard the antirealism associated with Michael Dummett as idealist in spirit (see Realism and antirealism), while some of the continuing school of Wittgensteinians regard the thought of Wittgenstein as a form of social idealism. Much closer to traditional idealism, however, is the conceptual idealism of the important US philosopher Nicholas Rescher (which synthesizes idealism and pragmatism) and idealist positions (not, it must be admitted, so far very influential) advocated in the UK by John Foster and, if he may say so, by the author of this entry.

### References and further reading

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(This and the following work give the complete statement of Berkeley's theistic idealism.

Berkeley's introduction is essential reading.)

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(The second of Berkeley's two most important works. Many other satisfactory editions of these works exist.)

Bradley, F.H. (1897) *Appearance and Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930.

(This work represents the high point of British idealism in the nineteenth century.)

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(A fine, much-neglected work, presenting an idealism that lies somewhere between that of Berkeley and the German Idealists.)

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(Wide-ranging essays by an idealistically inclined philosopher.)

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(A difficult but important argument for an idealist conception of the physical world.)

Green, T.H. (1883) *Prolegomena to Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

(Argues that a naturalistic, in particular Darwinian, account of the origin of mind in the universe can never explain how it can have anything beyond the momentary as its object. This ability shows that it is a stage in the self-realization of an infinite mind.)

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(A set of essays sufficient for a general grasp of Hartshorne's process philosophy which he regards as a form of idealism.)

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(Personal idealist manifesto against the submerging of the individual by absolute idealism. See especially the contributions of F.C.S. Schiller and Hastings Rashdall.)

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