

Is Berkeleyan Idealism Compatible with Modern Science?

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ABSTRACT

Berkeleyan Idealism (BI) is the view that objects do not exist independently of our experience and perception. At first glance, this theory seems incompatible with science because it denies the existence of objective material reality, which is the focus of scientific investigation. This paper examines whether Berkeleyan Idealism is compatible with science by considering several common scientific platitudes, including the empirical basis of science, its aim of objective knowledge, the possibility of perceptual error, and the search for causal explanations. It argues that BI is compatible with the empirical foundations of science because all knowledge is grounded in perception and sense experience. The paper then addresses objections that BI is not compatible with science. It argues that objectivity depends on the formation of knowledge, that perceptual errors can be explained through differences in the quality of perception, and that causal explanations may be understood through repeated perception. The paper concludes that Berkeleyan Idealism remains compatible with contemporary science.

INTRODUCTION

Berkeleyan Idealism (BI) posits that objects do not exist independently of our experience and perception. First proposed by the English Enlightenment philosopher George Berkeley, this theory asserts that material substance does not exist independently of the mind perceiving it (Downing, 2020). According to material realism, things and their properties are the source of our perceptions and experience, and the aim of science is to describe that mind-independent world (Liston, n.d.). Next, according to BI, there are only minds and ideas, and what we perceive as physical objects are collections of ideas perceived by the mind.

Berkeleyan Idealism, at first glance, seems incompatible with science because it denies the existence of material objects and properties, the bedrock of scientific investigation. Despite seeming absurd, BI is more closely aligned with our everyday experience of the world, rejecting the notion that there is something beyond what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. This paper will argue that, because of its focus on perception and human sense experience, Berkeleyan Idealism is compatible with empirical science.

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This question matters for the philosophy of science. Much of modern science is interpreted through scientific realism, the view that our best theories accurately describe a mind-independent world, including unobservable entities such as electrons and fields (Chakravartty, 2011). Yet constructive empiricist philosophers have long argued that a theory need only be empirically adequate accurate about what can be observed, without committing us to the existence of anything beyond experience (van Fraassen, 1980). If Berkeleyn Idealism can accommodate the everyday practice of science while denying mind-independent matter, then material realism may not be a rigid requirement of science at all, but only one interpretation among several that should be included in the discussion. Examining this tension helps clarify what science truly depends on: empirical observation, or a further metaphysical belief in matter.

Berkeleyn Idealism begins with the premise that we have no experience of material substance. Everything that appears material is an idea that we form through our perceptions: everything we see is just an image in our minds created by our senses. For example, the existence of a glass bottle is nothing beyond one's perception of its observable qualities: the green color of the glass; its cold, hard texture; and its smell, perhaps that of stale wine or its former contents. However, beyond our perception, there is no thing that we are directly acquainted with. Rather, the perception of a thing is its existence—*esse est percipi*, or “to be is to be perceived” (Berkeley, 1710/2008, §3, p. 44). In short, there is no material world beyond our perceptions. As foreign as BI might seem today, this paper will argue that contemporary scientific inquiry is actually compatible with the idea that there is no material world beyond our sensory perceptions.

It is important to state Berkeleyn Idealism precisely. Berkeley does not claim that objects flicker in and out of existence whenever a person looks away. In his view, every idea is perceived by some mind, and God, as an infinite and constant perceiver, continuously perceives all things (Downing, 2020). This is what secures the permanence and order of the world: a tree in an empty Quad still exists because it remains perceived by God, even when no human is present. Establishing this from the outset prevents a common misreading of the theory and shows how Berkeleyn Idealism can accept the stable, law-governed world that science studies.

METHODOLOGY

This paper uses the method of conceptual analysis rather than empirical experimentation. Because the central question, whether Berkeleyn Idealism is compatible with science, concerns how we interpret scientific practice rather than a claim that can be tested in a laboratory, it is examined through philosophical argument rather than experiment or data collection.

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, it identifies five widely shared assumptions about science, referred to here as “platitudes”: that science is grounded in observation, that it aims at objective knowledge, that perception can be mistaken, that it seeks causal explanations, and that its results must be repeatable. Second, each platitude is tested against the core commitments of Berkeleyn Idealism to see whether the two can be reconciled. Note this is where “platitudes” became a technical method: Lewis instructs us to collect the platitudes of ‘common knowledge among us—everyone knows them, everyone

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knows that everyone else knows, and so on' (Lewis, 1972, p.256). Third, wherever a conflict appears, the paper reconstructs the strongest response a defender of Berkeleyan Idealism could give, drawing on primary texts (Berkeley, 1710/2008) and related philosophical arguments, such as Hume on causation. Sources are limited to established philosophical works and peer-reviewed reference material, and claims are judged by the clarity and consistency of their reasoning rather than by measurement.

SCIENTIFIC PLATITUDES

If Berkeleyan Idealism asserts that nothing exists beyond our perceptions, how could it possibly align with science, which purports to investigate real things and their objective properties? To consider this question, one must acknowledge the platitudes or common beliefs that inform our understanding of science.

First, all scientific theories are fundamentally grounded in empirical observations, i.e., sense experience. It is impossible to confirm a claim without direct observation or evidence derived from prior observations. In fact, what we do not generally accept as science are completely and utterly unobserved claims, such as the existence of ghosts. Ghosts and telekinesis are not observable by the average person; their existence cannot be experimentally proven or disproven, and must remain a mere possibility. Consider, also, that most absurd things are called absurd because no one has perceived them in everyday life. Take, for example, a floating blob that talks. It is considered an absurd idea because no one has ever seen one. But, if floating blobs appeared in the middle of New York City and many people saw and touched them, and their appearance was a regular occurrence, they would be no more absurd than the ubiquitous city rats.

Apart from the supernatural, there are other branches of knowledge that we do not consider science because they are not grounded in empirical observation. For example, pure mathematics is based on logic and deduction rather than observable facts about the world. Even so, mathematics remains central to science: it supplies the models, measurements, and predictions through which empirical observations are organized, quantified, and tested (Wigner, 1960).

A second platitude is that science appears to appeal to an objective and independent material world that is the source of our observations. It is objective because its truth and existence are independent of the human mind. Things such as black holes and the Big Bang did not come into existence when humans thought of them; in theory, they existed even before Earth. So while science is never independent from human observation, it does attempt to study an objective or independent truth and aims at objective knowledge.

A third platitude is that science presupposes that we can be mistaken in our perceptual judgments. It seeks to explain both objective facts and the mechanisms that explain why we might be misled. Science, as it developed, opened up to the possibility that we may be wrong in our perceptions. Our senses can deceive and play tricks on us. An extreme example is schizophrenia, a mental disorder characterized by hallucinations, hearing voices, delusions, and disorganized thinking or behavior. In such cases,

perceptions do not reliably indicate reality. For example, someone with schizophrenia might hear voices, but that does not mean the voices really exist, because they are not perceived by anyone else.

Furthermore, there are errors that are common in our perception. The impairment of sight is an everyday experience: far-away letters may appear blurry and may be mistaken for different letters, or one thing can be mistaken for another in the dark. However, mistaking the numeral '5' for the letter 'S' does not mean the '5' becomes an 'S.' Rather, the error can be corrected through further observation, which provides a clearer and more reliable perception of the sign.

A fourth platitude is that science provides causal explanations for the phenomena we observe. For example, consider the case of curtains catching fire. One might assume that the existence of the curtain and its observable properties can be explained by the billions of atoms that it is made up of. According to a common scientific way of thinking, one might say that the curtain catching fire is caused by the curtain's particles reacting with oxygen particles. Our observation of the curtain on fire might also be explained by the light waves bouncing off of the curtain and interacting with the human eye in a way that causes us to perceive colors, or the sound waves traveling that prompt in us the auditory sensation of a crackling sound, or the smell of smoke as diffused particles traveling up one's nose.

A fifth platitude is that the results of scientific experimentation ought to be repeatable or replicable. Doing one thing under the same conditions will always cause something similar to happen or lead to the same observable results. For example, when one puts an open fire in contact with a curtain, the curtain will always catch on fire, causing smoke and flames. When made with the same material, its flammability will remain the same, as well as the science behind the way it burns—a combustion reaction—and the way it smokes.

Science introduces techniques of measurement and instrumentation that help us in this investigation. For example, temperatures are universally measured in Celsius and in Kelvin. Celsius is standardized by the boiling and melting points of water, while Kelvin adds 273 to those numbers, because -273°C is the lowest theoretical temperature possible. These standards are set after multiple rounds of observation, during which it is agreed that a single measurable state will always bring about the same conditions.

IS BI COMPATIBLE WITH THESE PLATITUDES?

Berkeleyn Idealism easily accommodates the first platitude that all scientific knowledge is fundamentally empirical. This is to say that, at bottom, all scientific beliefs are grounded in ideas we have on the basis of perception and sense experience (Markie & Folescu, 2021). For BI, this is easy to explain because this thesis states that all knowledge, scientific or otherwise, is fundamentally empirical. BI claims that the only things that exist are those that we perceive. So there can be no knowledge of anything that is not perceived.

BI would also appear to have no major problems in accommodating the fifth platitude. Because BI

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grounds knowledge in perception, it can readily account for the scientific practice of making repeated observations and assigning standardized measurements to them, whether it be temperature, length, weight, or other units of measurement. For example, if one were to observe that the density of a block of ice is less than the density of the same volume of water, and were able to repeat this measurement, repeatedly observing that ice has a lower density than water, then it would become an empirical, scientific observation.

By contrast, Berkeleyan Idealism would appear to struggle to accommodate the remaining three platitudes (i.e., the second, third and fourth). The second platitude asserts that science describes a world that is objective and independent of us. But, according to BI, no such world exists. The third platitude asserts that science can be mistaken, because our perception can be mistaken. But, according to BI, whatever we perceive exists and is a source of truth. The fourth platitude asserts that the purpose of science is to investigate the underlying causes of our perceptions, but BI doesn't allow for underlying causes beyond our perceptions.

In what follows, I will try to explain the various ways that a defender of BI might try to accommodate these remaining platitudes. I will argue that the case for BI still looks very strong on balance, and that these objections pose no serious challenge to the assertion that BI is compatible with contemporary scientific practice.

BERKELEYAN IDEALISM'S COMPATIBILITY WITH THE OBJECTIVE AND INDEPENDENT WORLD

Having shown that Berkeleyan Idealism meets the first and fifth platitudes, we now turn to the three that appear more difficult, beginning with objectivity. It helps to notice that objectivity is itself a layered notion, commonly analyzed as faithfulness to the facts, freedom from personal bias, and independence from any particular perspective (Reiss & Sprenger, 2014). Berkeleyan Idealism need not reject objectivity so understood; it need only relocate its source.

Is Berkeleyan Idealism compatible with the notion that the objects of scientific investigation are objective and independent from us? Scientific investigations aim for objective knowledge, and scientists believe that material reality must exist in order for this knowledge to be objective. However, whether an objective thing exists or not, this does not determine the objectivity of the knowledge itself.

Science is empirical, which means that whatever kinds of objects it investigates, our understanding and knowledge also need to be processed by the human mind. A piece of information floating through time and space untouched by the human mind cannot count as human knowledge. This objective truth is not available to human beings. Once something is perceived by a person, it cannot exist in the mind in its pure, unperceived state; it is simply impossible. Therefore, the fact that a thing would exist independently of our experiences cannot contribute anything essential to the objectivity of our knowledge of that thing; rather, the objectivity of our knowledge is a property of our experience and how that knowledge gets

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formed in our minds. The irony is that scientists will never be able to perceive this world as it is independent of our minds. Even science itself may not be absolutely compatible with this kind of mind-independent objectivity, and if scientific knowledge is the only kind of knowledge that exists, then there is no reason to believe that this kind of mind-independent objectivity is possible either.

CORRECTNESS CONDITIONS: HOW BI IS COMPATIBLE WITH SCIENCE BEING MISTAKEN

Berkeleyan Idealism at first glance doesn't appear to allow for mistaken judgments. The fact that nothing exists beyond perception seems like a denial of truth. This might mean that science, which aims at objective knowledge, is futile in the world of Berkeleyan Idealism.

But although an objective, mind-independent truth may not exist, mistaken perception does. Not all things exist as they are processed by the mind—perception confirms existence, but not mind-independent truth. For example, Descartes also notes, someone perceiving in the dark might think that they see a figure standing in the doorway, and terrified, turn the light on, only to see nothing (Cottingham, 1996). Intuitively, their perception of a figure does not make it true that the figure exists. If the person were to keep the lights off and walk closer to the doorway, they might realize that there was nothing there, and it was a figment of their imagination. While the material realist can appeal to an explanation involving the bending of light, when nothing exists beyond perception, as BI would have it, one might object that the defender of BI can provide no scientific explanation for mistaken perception. At no point can we be sure that what we perceive is the truth.

However, a defender of BI can appeal to explanations related to perception. For example, the perception of paranoia as an emotion may conjoin with the perception of the dark to create a figure. Paranoia would contribute to the sensory experience, compromising the objectivity of the experience. The perception of the emotion, along with the perception of darkness, could distort our sense of reality and keep us from sensing what is real. The reason the figure isn't there when the lights turn on is that we can see better. The reason brighter settings help us see better could depend on the contrast between brightness and darkness. Similarly, as Descartes notes in Meditation ii, there would appear to be different conditions and scales that affect every other quality of perception (Cottingham, 1996). For example, when something is too far from the eye, it is harder to perceive. When something is too close to the eye, it is also difficult to tell exactly what it is. When it's a certain distance, it is easier to see rather than when it's too close or too far. The same happens with darkness or light; when it's pitch-black, it would be hard to perceive, and when there is too much light, like when staring directly at the sun, it would also be hard to perceive. Thus, there is a state of ideal perception, as Descartes argues, and anything out of this range of ideal perception could amount to mistaken perception (Cottingham, 1996). Ideal perception incorporates the most senses and experience; it would be closer to the truth because the more a group of people experiences the same thing, the more there is an overlap in agreement.

In response to the objection that ideal perception does not amount to truth, a defender of BI could argue that truth can be defined in two different ways. First, we get closer to the truth as we gain a wider scope of perception, for example, as more people perceive the same thing. The more widely accepted truths, such as $1+1=2$, are not perceptible things, but they are also not mind-independent; rather, they are social constructs that involve agreed-upon concepts (Hersh, 1997). Likewise, although people may not fully align with what they take to be real or perceived, we can get infinitely closer as more people perceive and the perception becomes more ideal.

CAUSALITY AND CAUSAL EXPLANATIONS: HOW BI IS COMPATIBLE WITH OUR PERCEPTIONS BEING CAUSED

Again, someone might object that the lack of an existence beyond perception would mean that one thing cannot cause another. The idea of causation is not that one perception is causing another perception, but rather that there is some kind of physical thing that is behind it whose properties “cause” or result in our experiencing a particular sequence of perceptions (Ducasse, 1926).

However, the very concept of causation can be challenged, as one thing is never certain to cause another. According to David Hume, an 18th-century philosopher, the only reason we believe that one thing is the cause of the other is that one perception is always followed by the other perception, but we cannot assume that a pattern should always imply causation: it is simply correlation or “constant conjunction” (Hume, n.d.). One cannot assume that one thing will always cause the other, because in the empirical world of science, we simply have not perceived this causation to be true. This idea can be rebutted by saying that these correlations are what science studies. For example, water reaching a temperature of 100 degrees Celsius causes it to evaporate. This observation is scientific, and water reaching its boiling point is labeled as the cause of its evaporation. However, there is no direct proof in any context that one thing causes the other. We simply perceive that water evaporates every time it reaches 100°C , and assume causation. That which we call causes are assumptions based on observed correlation.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations follow from this approach. First, the argument is conceptual rather than empirical, so it cannot be confirmed or refuted by experiment; it shows only that Berkeleyan Idealism can be made consistent with common beliefs about science, not that it is true. Second, the five “platitudes” examined here are a selected list, and other descriptions of scientific practice might raise objections this paper does not address.

A deeper limitation concerns scientific realism. Many philosophers of science hold that our best theories succeed precisely because they describe a mind-independent world, including unobservable entities such as atoms, electrons, and fields that no one directly perceives (Chakravartty, 2011). Berkeleyan Idealism must either treat such unobservables as permanent ideas in the mind of God or reinterpret them as useful instruments for organizing perception, in the spirit of empiricist views on which theories need only be

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empirically adequate (van Fraassen, 1980). Whether either move fully captures the explanatory power that realists attribute to unobservable entities remains an open question.

Relatedly, it is not obvious that perception-based explanations can fully replace material ones. Appeals to the “quality” of perception, to ideal observation carry much of the explanatory weight in this paper, and readers who reject these premises, most particularly Berkeley’s reliance on God and Hume’s reduction of causation to constant conjunction might find the related defenses less convincing. Finally, the paper does not engage directly with modern physics, such as debates over observation in quantum mechanics, where philosophy of science discourse has focused on in the past decades, so the conclusions of this paper apply at the general level of scientific practice rather than to any particular science. A final limitation is a linguistic one. This paper relies exclusively on sources written in English, which means that relevant work in other languages, and the philosophical traditions those represent, may have been overlooked. Ideas developed outside the English-language literature could bear on the compatibility of Berkeleyan Idealism and science in ways this paper does not capture.

CONCLUSION

Berkeleyan Idealism, on the surface, may seem incompatible with empirical science, because perception on its own cannot prove objectivity, error, and causation. However, these notions do not undermine the compatibility of Berkeleyan Idealism with science. Instead, they invite a reinterpretation of scientific platitudes and the way that we approach scientific knowledge itself.

More specifically, Berkeleyan Idealism is compatible with the core commitments of scientific practice. It accommodates empirical observation, because all knowledge begins in perception; repeatability, because standardized, repeated perceptions can be shared and measured; corrected perception, because a state of ideal perception explains how errors are identified and revised; objectivity, understood as broad agreement among perceivers or as alignment with God’s perception rather than as correspondence to mind-independent matter; and causal explanation, reinterpreted after Hume as regular, observed patterns rather than hidden material powers. None of these commitments requires belief in matter existing beyond all perception. As the limitations above make clear, what Berkeleyan Idealism cannot yet do is fully answer the realist about unobservable entities. But that is a challenge for interpretation, not a demonstration that the view is unscientific.

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