

About Idealism:

An Exploration of Some Philosophical Viewpoints that Put Mind Before Matter

by Mark F. Sharlow

What Is Idealism?

People have both minds and bodies. Everyone knows this. Yet over the centuries, there has been much disagreement about the exact relationship between the human mind and the human body.

Many people regard the mind as something separate from the body. This includes many religious believers, who regard personality and self as attributes of an immortal soul. Some philosophers, relying on logic instead of faith, also have taken the position that the mind is distinct from the body and is not explainable in terms of bodily processes alone. The belief that a person is composed of a mind and a body, with neither one reducible to the other, has traditionally been called **dualism**.

Other thinkers, especially those influenced by scientific thought, have held that the mind is not distinct from the body, but is in some way a product of the body. Typically, such thinkers hold that the mental functions of a person are simply functions of that person's brain. The belief that the mind is reducible to material things and processes is known as **materialism**.

Still other thinkers, influenced by logical arguments and reflective thought, have maintained that the mind is not really separate from the body, but that the physical world is in some sense a product of minds. This viewpoint is known as **idealism**.

Idealism, then, is the philosophical view that material things owe their existence to minds.

Actually, there are other philosophical positions called "idealism" which are different from the position I just described. The view that material things owe their existence to minds is sometimes called **metaphysical idealism** to distinguish it from other viewpoints called "idealism." I won't go into these other ideas here, but I will name a few of them: epistemological idealism (a hypothesis about what we can know); ethical idealism (the belief that moral ideals are worth striving for); and political idealism (the belief that one should strive for an ideal form of government). The words "dualism" and "materialism" also have other meanings, but I won't go into these here, either.

What Idealism Is Not

First, let me dispel one of the greatest myths about idealism: **Idealism does not deny the reality of the observable world.**

No idealist (at least no sensible idealist) has believed that there is no observable world - that the world we see, hear, touch, smell and taste is not there at all.

Idealists typically believe in the existence of the observable world, just like everyone else. They do not regard the observable world as a figment of anyone's imagination. What makes idealists different is their understanding of the **nature** of the observable world. Most people think of the observable world as something independent of minds - something that could continue to exist even if all minds were to disappear from the universe. Idealists go beyond this view; they think of the observable world as depending, in some way or other, on minds and the activities of minds. According to the idealist view of reality, if there had never been any minds of any sort in the

universe, then there would not have been a universe at all. But the observable world is not merely something that people dream up. Some idealists (especially Berkeley, whom I discuss below) even have claimed that there is no matter - but by "matter" these idealists generally mean a non-mental, mind-independent substance. Claiming that the world is dependent on minds isn't the same as claiming that the world isn't really there!

Another common belief about idealism is that it is contrary to reason - or, as some people put it, "crazy." This too is a myth that needs to be put to rest. Most idealistic thought, particularly in the West, is based on logical arguments of various sorts. In itself, idealism isn't contrary to reason or logic. The worst that might be said is that it's contrary to common sense. But this same charge can be leveled at many of our beliefs about the world - such as the true belief that the Sun is a star, which contradicts the common-sense observation that the Sun is just too big to be a star!

Still another myth about idealism is that idealism is contrary to science. Actually, the idealistic concept of the material world is logically compatible with the scientific view of matter. Idealism does not say that the natural world is unreal; it does not say that the laws of nature are mere inventions of the human mind; it does not say we can change the world magically by thinking differently. Nor does idealism place humanity at the center of the universe; it merely assigns conscious minds (of any kind, human or nonhuman) to a rather important role in the universe. Most of the best-known idealists of the western world have been either scientists or scientifically oriented philosophers. And as anyone knows who follows the popular scientific literature, some scientists start sounding like idealists when they discuss the picture of reality provided by quantum physics.

Also, idealism does not have any direct relation to the idea of "mind over matter." Although idealism affirms that matter depends on mind, idealism does NOT require you to believe that your own mental processes (or even everyone's mental processes together) can affect the actual course of material events. Some individuals who regard themselves as skeptics have associated idealism with belief in paranormal phenomena, and have tried to tar both beliefs with the same brush. Actually this is silly, since idealism neither supports nor contradicts belief in the paranormal.

Idealism Comes in Several Flavors

All idealists agree that matter somehow depends on mind. However, different idealists have held different views on exactly **how** matter depends on mind. Thus, there are several different kinds of idealism. A few of these are discussed below.

(Warning: To keep these summaries brief, I may gloss over some of the fine points of the theories I am describing. The summaries given here are meant only to provide a thumbnail summary of idealistic thought. **Do not rely on any information in this document for school papers or for any other purpose;** consult appropriate research sources instead.)

Idealistic Theory No. 1: Subjective Idealism

The most straightforward kind of idealism - and possibly the most famous kind as well - is known as **subjective idealism**. This is the view that matter is a construct built up from the mental contents of the mind which observes it. In other words, the sensations that observers have when they experience a brick are all there really is to the brick. A brick is simply an aggregate or system of sensations. When you experience a brick (by seeing it, feeling it, etc.), the sum total of these sensations, and other sensations like them, are all that you really can find there. The brick exists, but there is nothing else to the brick besides these sensations.

Of course, this doesn't mean that the brick isn't made of atoms, electrons, etc., as science says it is. A subjective idealist might argue that the atoms and electrons also are systems of sensations - perhaps including the sights and sounds that scientists experience when they read instruments that detect atoms and electrons. These systems of sensations could be parts of a greater system of sensations, namely the brick.

Subjective idealism may seem weird, but it has a certain logic behind it. After all, what do you really know of the brick besides the sensations you get when you experience it? When you think about it, it seems as though the

sensations are all you really find there. Normally, people assume that along with the sensations of a brick, there also is a non-mental brick which causes the sensations. But if the non-mental brick vanished - and only the sensations were there - **how would you know the difference?**

Could you know the difference, if all the sensations remained exactly the same?

So how do you know that there's anything behind the sensations, even as things are now?

Even if you don't believe subjective idealism, these three questions are worth thinking about!

The philosopher usually regarded as the founder of subjective idealism is George Berkeley, who lived in the 17th and 18th centuries. Using arguments rather like the one I just used (but much more complete and precise), Berkeley argued that physical objects, though quite real, actually are collections of sensations. He expounded his views in two books, *The Principles of Human Knowledge* and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. Berkeley tried to show that the concept of "matter" as a non-mental substance is a mistaken idea.

One of the big problems facing subjective idealism is the problem of why the same objects should exist for everyone even though everyone has different mental contents. If you and I both see a brick, then you and I will have slightly different experiences, depending on our positions, the lighting, etc. The brick as I see it is constructed from my mental contents, and the brick as you see it is constructed from your mental contents. So how can we say we're seeing the same brick? How can I even know that you are seeing a brick at all? Berkeley recognized a problem much like this, and thought he could solve it without abandoning subjective idealism. Other idealists abandoned subjective idealism and devised idealistic theories which seemed to avoid such problems. I will mention some of these theories below.

Idealistic Theory No. 2: Absolute Idealism

Absolute idealism is the view that the existence of material things depends upon one underlying mental reality rather than upon the mental contents of individual observers. It differs from subjective idealism mainly in its picture of the "mind" that underlies matter. According to subjective idealism, matter is a construct based on the mental contents of individual observers, like you and me. According to absolute idealism, there is a single underlying mental or spiritual thing, or principle, whose mental activity and content underpins the existence of the entire material world.

In Western philosophy, the best-known absolute idealist is the 18th/19th-century philosopher G. W. F. Hegel. Hegel regarded the universe as a manifestation of what he called "the Absolute." The Absolute, as Hegel conceived of it, is a spiritual principle which encompasses minds and material objects alike and is the ground of all existence. Hegel thought of the evolution of the universe, from atoms to galaxies, as an image of the process of unfoldment or development of the Absolute. He wrote a number of books, including one known in English as *Science of Logic*.

The idea that there is one mental or spiritual reality behind everything may sound religious or mystical. One can interpret it that way if one likes; certainly, some idealists with religious or mystical inclinations have equated the Absolute with God. But absolute idealism, in and of itself, does not require one to believe in any particular religion or to be a mystic.

Idealistic Theory No. 3: Pluralistic Idealism

Pluralistic idealism is the view that there are many individual minds which together underlie the existence of the observed world. Unlike absolute idealism, pluralistic idealism does not assume the existence of a single ultimate mental reality or Absolute. According to pluralistic idealism, it is individual minds which make possible the existence of the physical universe.

Pluralistic idealism differs from absolute idealism by denying that all minds are encompassed by one absolute mind. According to the pluralistic idealist view, individual minds are the sources of reality; it is the individual

minds, not the Absolute, that do all the work. Pluralistic idealism also should be distinguished from subjective idealism. Although it is possible to be a subjective idealist and also a pluralistic idealist, most pluralistic idealists have regarded matter as the resultant of the activity of interrelated minds acting together, rather than as constructs built up from the contents of single minds.

Pluralistic Idealism, Version 1: Monadism

One form of pluralistic idealism is **monadism**. According to monadism, the minds that underlie the material world are not limited to human and animal minds. They also include rudimentary minds that exist within all material things. In modern terms, one might state this form of idealism as follows: The ultimate particles which make up matter are not merely material; they have some slight degree of consciousness. It is these primitive consciousnesses, together with more complex minds such as human minds, that underpin the existence of the world.

According to monadism, matter is not a construct of mind, but is made of minds - very simple minds, which perhaps don't have thoughts and feelings as we do, but which nevertheless have some degree of consciousness.

Monadism is the creation of the 17th/18th-century philosopher G. W. Leibniz, who also co-invented calculus. Leibniz used the term "monad" to refer to any of the different minds in his theory - human and animal minds, the primitive minds within matter, and some other minds as well. Leibniz also held other views about monads that I won't discuss here because they aren't directly relevant to my discussion of idealism.

Leibniz's idealism is presented in a straightforward way in his short book, *Monadology*.

Pluralistic Idealism, Version 2: Personal Idealism

Another form of pluralistic idealism is **personal idealism**. This is the view that the minds which underlie reality are the minds of persons. According to personal idealism, the world is at heart a world of conscious, personal beings, including ourselves. The interactions or relationships among these beings give rise to the system of experiences that we call experiences of the observable world.

Like other types of idealism, personal idealism acknowledges the existence of the observable world, and regards that world as dependent upon the activity of minds. Personal idealism denies that there is a single absolute mind behind the world. It also denies that things are merely constructs of the mental contents of single minds. Instead, personal idealism regards things as resultants of the interrelated mental activities of persons. For example, if you and I both see a brick, the existence of the brick depends upon your experiences and upon my experiences, and perhaps upon the experiences of other observers as well. If you hand me a brick, your experience of handing it and my experience of receiving it both contribute to the existence of the brick.

One of the leading personal idealists (and the one who used the term "Personal Idealism" most specifically for his ideas) was the 19th/20th century philosopher George H. Howison. Howison put particular emphasis on the role of purpose and values in idealism. He argued that the flow of time is a result of the activity of personal minds, and that for this reason, persons must be regarded as beings who transcend the flow of time. Howison's ideas are expounded in his book *The Limits of Evolution and Other Essays*.

My Own Suggestions: Physioidealism and Recursive Idealism

Earlier I said that idealism is compatible with the scientific view of nature. One possible sticking point in this compatibility is the fact that scientists are attempting to understand the human mind in terms of the activity of the brain. Scientists have made considerable progress in explaining mental functions in terms of brain functions. Although no complete explanation is yet available, many people believe that such an explanation (known as a materialistic explanation of mind) is possible.

In my opinion, the possibility of a materialistic explanation of mind is not as blatantly obvious as many scientifically inclined philosophers might believe. There still are major open philosophical problems about the

nature of the mind. Even if every single mental function were found to be associated with a specific physical process, we still would have trouble establishing that each mental function really IS the corresponding physical process. Before such an identification could be made, there would be philosophical questions to answer as well as scientific ones. Science alone cannot do this job; both science and philosophy are necessary.

But suppose that a materialistic explanation of mind is found one day. Idealism claims that matter depends on minds for its existence. If minds ever are shown to be reducible to matter, will metaphysical idealism still be a tenable philosophical position?

In my opinion, the answer to this last question is a resounding YES. **Even if the mind were shown to be nothing but a set of functions of the brain, the material universe still could owe its existence entirely to minds.**

My argument for this opinion is found in my book, *From Brain to Cosmos*. There I describe a version of metaphysical idealism that I call **physioidealism**, and a specific type of physioidealism that I call **recursive idealism**. These viewpoints are not entirely new; both of them have precedents in recent philosophy, and especially in the current thinking of some scientists. I discuss these precedents in the book.

Recursive idealism is an idealistic view of reality which will work just as well if the mind is a mere function of the brain as it will if the mind is something independent of the brain. Despite its compatibility with materialism, recursive idealism is a genuine metaphysical idealist theory; it does not back down from the claim that material things literally owe their existence to minds. I will not attempt to argue for recursive idealism here, since I already have published the relevant arguments elsewhere. Those interested are referred to my book, *From Brain to Cosmos*.

Note on Sources

Much of the information presented in this document is common knowledge in the field of philosophy and can be found in general philosophy textbooks. Information about the ideas of particular philosophers is based on my understanding of the works mentioned in the text. As the reader will have noticed, this document also contains some of my own opinions and interpretations.

- Mark F. Sharlow

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