

Idealism Without God

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What would a nontheistic Berkeleyan idealism look like? God plays a crucial role in Berkeley's metaphysics, (i) explaining how to make sense of the common-sense view that objects continue to exist even when no (finite) mind is perceiving them, and hence (ii) accounting for the regularity of our perceptions. Without God, we might abandon the intuitive idea that the tree in the quad exists even when no (finite) mind perceives it. But this involves a radical departure from common-sense. Alternatively, we might grant it a kind of counterfactually grounded existence, such that what it is for the tree to exist is for it to be the case that *were* someone appropriately situated, they would have the relevant sensory impressions. But without God, we lack an explanation for these regularities. And it might seem unsatisfying to leave such regularities as brute, particularly if they are serving to ground the continued existence of objects.

In this paper, I explore a different way of resolving these explanatory challenges without appealing to a god. My aim is to first sketch a coherent nontheistic (quasi-)Berkeleyan idealism, which preserves the common-sense claims Berkeley was concerned to capture, and then to assess the distinctive virtues and challenges faced by the view.

The rough idea is this: We want something outside of our finite minds to sustain objects when (finite) minds are not perceiving them, and to account for the regularity of our perceptions. But, even for the idealist, this does not need to be a god in any recognizable sense. There is no reason it must contain desires, intentions, or beliefs. It needn't be an *agent*. On the view I offer, external reality – the tables, chairs, brains, stars, quarks around us – is constituted by a complex phenomenal unity, governed by laws of nature, structurally analogous to those materialists posit. This accounts for both the stability of the world external to us, and the regularity of our own experiences.

While this version of idealism is inspired by Berkeley, there are significant departures from his account. In particular, I offer a different (and I think superior) view of perception. On this view, rather than our perceptions being *caused* by the phenomenal unity (or God), they are

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constituted by the very sensations that make up external reality.

1 The Role of Berkeley's God

While it's clear that God plays a crucial role on Berkeley's metaphysics in (i) making it true that the tree in the quad continues to exist when no finite minds are around, and (ii) accounting for the regularities in human perceptual experience, just how God fulfills these roles has been debated. Is God continually perceiving the tree, as the famous limerick suggests? Perhaps, as Winkler (1985) suggests, the tree's continued existence depends on *both* God's perceiving the tree and God's intention that we should experience the tree were we in the right situation.² Or perhaps the tree's continued existence is grounded in dispositions that are sustained by God: To say that the tree continues to exist alone in the quad is to say that, although God is not continually perceiving the tree, his will is responsible for ensuring that *were we* to attend in the right way, we *would* perceive the tree.

Since the aim of this paper is not to reconstruct Berkeley, but to propose a new, quasi-Berkeleyan form of idealism, I'm not concerned with precisely which role Berkeley required God to play. But note that on each of these readings, many attributes of God are not essential to the role he is playing. God certainly needn't be omnibenevolent to play the requisite roles. And on the first reading of God's role (on which the tree's continued existence is grounded simply in God's perception of it), we require something even more minimal: It is God's *perceptions*, not his beliefs, desires, intentions, or indeed anything about him *as an agent* that are relevant to the tree's continued existence.

I want to use this first, simple reading of Berkeley as a starting point. We'll peel away the attributes of God that aren't essential for sustaining a reality, and see that what we're left with might be considered a quasi-Berkeleyan idealism without God.

2 The Phenomenal Unity

If God sustains the external world through continual experiencing of it, what features of

² The suggestion that God is always perceiving the tree raises a number of potential worries: (i) questions about how to distinguish possible from actual trees (since God's understanding will house all possible objects), and (ii) questions about how/whether God can have perceptions. Winkler's version of Berkeley avoids the first worry, as God's intentions are able to distinguish merely possible objects from actual objects. Pitcher attributes to Berkeley the more simplistic view, but thinks he is mistaken in endorsing this view (Pitcher 1977).

God are essential to his doing this? Not his beliefs, desires, understanding, intentions. What's essential are his sensory experiences: the experience of the greenness of the tree, the shape, the smell of pine, the roughness of the bark, the prickliness of the needles, and so on. And insofar as reality is not a disjoint set of colors, shapes, textures, etc., it's essential that these experiences be phenomenally unified. So let's do away with the idea that there's an agent (God) who is responsible for accounting for the external world's regularity and for sustaining reality when it's not perceived by finite minds. To be is still to be perceived (or, at any rate, *experienced*). The external world (physical reality), on the view I want to develop, is a vast phenomenal unity: a unity of consciousness, weaving together sensory experiences of colors, shapes, sounds, smells, sizes, etc. into the trees, chairs, black holes, and central nervous systems that fill the world around us.

Here's the basic picture: External reality is a vast unity of consciousness, independent from all finite minds. This unity is vastly more complex than the unities we're directly acquainted with. Consider my cup. The cup exists independently of any (finite) minds insofar as it is a part of this vast phenomenal unity. But what's included in the phenomenal unity isn't merely the sensations *I* have when perceiving the cup from a particular vantage point. The unity must include the experience of the cup from every possible perspective it could be viewed from, binding together the experience of the cup from every possible angle and also from every possible sort of perceiver (humans, bugs, bats, color-inverts, etc.).³

We might think of this vast phenomenal unity as a kind of tapestry, in which the phenomenal threads of reality are woven together into the structure of reality⁴. These phenomenal threads are bound together by the same unifying relations that structure our own experiences. Among the relevant relations are what I'll call the *unity-of-consciousness relation*, the *objectual-unity relation*, and *spatial-unity relations*. The broadest of these is the unity-of-consciousness relation. When you look at the paper you're reading and simultaneously hear the doorbell ringing, there's an overall unity to your experience: You are not conscious of the look

³ Note: The phenomenal unity binds together experiences as from every possible perspective. It does not bind together *possible experiences* from different perspectives.

⁴ Here and elsewhere in the paper, I'll use 'reality' as shorthand for 'physical reality' or 'the external world'. What I mean is, roughly, the tables, chairs, black holes, computers, brains, electrons, etc. that we ordinarily think make up the physical world. Whether you think things like pains and sensations of redness are included in 'reality' will depend on your inclinations on the mind-body problem.

of the paper and the sound of the doorbell as separate experiences (as might be if you heard the doorbell and I looked at the paper), rather you're aware of these things together as though forming a single conscious experience. I won't endeavor to give an account of the unity of consciousness here, but will take for granted that everyone needs to accept that there is some such relation binding together our own experiences.⁵

But reality is not merely a disjoint set of "co-conscious" shape and color experiences (greenishness, brownishness, tree-shapedness), anymore than my own experiences are disjoint.⁶ Certain of my experiences seem to be bound together: When I look at a tree, I experience the greenishness of the tree as bound up with the leaf-shape and the brownishness as bound up with the trunk-shape. These experiences have what Bayne and Chalmers (2003) call *objectual unity* and what Tye (2003) calls *object unity*. The same objectual-unity relation that affords this structure to my experiences provides structure to the phenomenal unity that is reality. This ensures that a tree is a single unified object, rather than a disjoint collection of experiences. My experience of a tree might bind together a simple shape and color. In the tapestry of reality, the tree will bind together shapes and colors from many different perspectives into a much more complex structure. But while the structure is more complex, the thought is that we don't need any new tools to explain how it's held together.⁷

⁵ Dainton (2000) offers an account of the unity-of-consciousness relation as a primitive "co-consciousness" relation. Bayne and Chalmers (2003) offer an account based on the idea that unified experiences are *subsumed* under a single broader experience.

⁶ I don't mean to presuppose that co-consciousness is the correct way of accounting for the unity of consciousness. The point is simply that the unity-of-consciousness relation (however it is fleshed out) is not the only relation necessary to make sense of the structure of my mental life.

⁷ In our experiences, the objectual-unity relation binds together things like triangularity and brownness (e.g. of an ice cream cone). But in the case of the phenomenal tapestry, objectual unity must bind together triangularity (of the cone from the side) and circularity (of the cone from above). One might question whether a single objectual-unity relation can do both these things.

While we cannot imagine what it would be like for two distinct shape experiences to be bound together in this way, I'm inclined to view this as a (mere) limitation of our imaginative powers. It's not clear that this inability of our imagination shows that the objectual-unity relation is thus restricted in what it can relate. It might be objected that it seems *incoherent* that something could be both completely triangular and completely circular. But, of course, there is nothing incoherent about an object being completely triangular looking (from here) and completely circular looking (from there). We may not be able to wrap our minds around a single experience that encompasses many perspectives, but it isn't clear that this inability to imagine is the result of incoherence, as opposed to a psychological deficit. (Arguably, God's mind simultaneously could encompass many perspectives in just such a way.) But more should be said to give a full defense of this.

Thanks to Dean Zimmerman and Daniel Greco for raising this objection.

Likewise, my experiences seem to exhibit certain sorts of spatial-unity relations. All of my experiences appear to belong to a single shared space. And this shared experiential space has structure: The blue, cup-shaped bit of my experiential field seems to be *to the right of* the silver, laptop-shaped bit, and *in front of* the orange, nectarine-shaped bit. Again, these same relations provide structure to the phenomenal unity that is reality.

The phenomenal unity of reality is vastly more complex than my own unity of consciousness. As a result, it involves far more features being woven together than in my own experiences. But the same relations are at work. My experience of my cup might bind together a simple shape and color. In the tapestry of reality, the cup will bind together shapes and colors from many different perspectives into a much more complex structure. But while the structure is more complex, the thought is that we don't need any new tools to explain how it's held together.

Further, just as on materialist views, there are laws of physics, governing reality and accounting for the regularities we find in the world. But whereas the materialist interprets these laws as governing mind-independent things, on this view the laws govern the unfolding of the phenomenal tapestry. (Note that we have not done away with the physical objects – trees, stars, electrons – we have simply told a unique story about the nature of these physical objects.) Consider an example: The law of conservation of energy tells us that energy within an isolated system can neither be created nor destroyed. When a physics textbook tells you that “energy” here means, roughly, the ability of a system to do work, it does not specify that such a system is to be understood in materialistic terms. *Energy* can just as well be understood as the ability of an intrinsically phenomenal system to do work. *Work* can again be understood in idealist-neutral terms. The physical laws (rightly) don't take sides in this debate. But while I think that the idealist can adopt the same physical laws as materialists, a question remains as to whether they can do so by positing such a small and streamlined number of laws, or whether the idealist will have to posit an unpalatable profligacy of laws. We'll return to this question in §4.2.

We have arrived at the following theory of reality:

Reality as a phenomenal unity: Reality is a vast unity of consciousness, binding together sensory impressions of every point-from-a-perspective. This phenomenal unity is

governed by laws analogous to those posited by materialists.

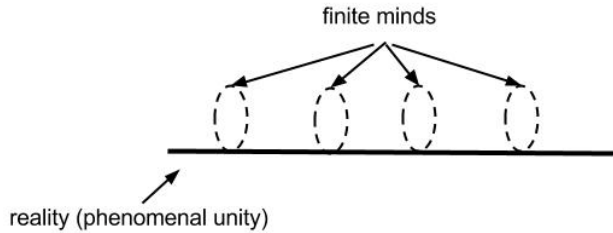
In addition to the phenomenal unity that constitutes the external world, there are the finite minds of agents like us. The nature of finite minds like ours and the question of how these minds are related to the phenomenal tapestry is a topic for another paper. Here I'll simply take for granted that there are such minds, so that we can outline: (i) how the view proposed view makes sense of perception and (ii) how it distinguishes between *reality* and things like mental images, beliefs, and hallucinations.

2.1 Perception

If reality is itself a vast unity of consciousness, we can tell a very simple story about what it is to have veridical perceptions: In perception, the objects of perception (or at least the perceived facets of these objects⁸) are literally a part of my mind. When I perceive the world around me, my mind overlaps with – and is partially constituted by – bits of the phenomenal tapestry that is reality.

Consider the blue cup, sitting on my desk. The cup is a bundle of sensory impressions: blueness-from-here, cylindricalness-from-there, and so on. Many of the sensory impressions that constitute the cup are things that I (given my limited perspective) am not aware of in perception. But consider some aspect of the cup that I do veridically perceive: the cup's blueness-from-here. What it is for me to perceive the blueness of the cup is for that aspect of reality (that "thread" of the phenomenal unity) to *literally* be a part of my mind. When I perceive some facet of reality, that facet is simultaneously part of (at least) two phenomenal unities: the phenomenal unity that is reality, and the phenomenal unity that is my mind.

⁸ When I perceive the computer in front of me, I am not aware of all aspects of the computer. For instance, there are some features of the computer that bats "tap into", that I cannot perceive, just as there are aspects of the computer (it's back) that cannot be perceived from the front where I'm seated. Accordingly, it is only some "threads" of the tapestry of reality that overlap with my mind. Nevertheless, just as seeing a man's face and arms seems sufficient for seeing the man, it also seems right to say that I see the computer by seeing the threads that are accessible to me.



Hence, this view quite literally captures the intuitions underlying direct realism.⁹

[T]he phenomenal character of your experience, as you look around the room, is *constituted by* the actual layout of the room itself: which particular objects are there, their intrinsic properties, such as color and shape, and how they are arranged in relation to one another and to you (Campbell, 116, emphasis added).

Some of the objects of perception – the concrete individuals, their properties, the events these partake in – are *constituents of* the experience (Martin, 39, emphasis added).

This picture of perception requires that the relation ‘being phenomenally unified with’ is not transitive, as the very same sensory experience can be bound up in multiple unities (e.g. reality and my mind). But I see no reason to reject the possibility of overlapping unities of consciousness.

2.2 Non-Perceptual Mental States

I have a rich mental life. Non-perceptual mental states – feelings of anxiety, pains, mental imagery, beliefs, hallucinations – do not put me in direct contact with external reality. These

⁹ Materialist direct reference theorists take themselves to capture these same intuitions. But I take idealism to be able to offer a much more robust accounting of these intuitions.

The materialist might count the table as being a constituent of your mental state in virtue of how they individuate mental states, but creative individuating doesn’t get one magical epistemic advantages. Alternatively, they might take a nonreductive view of mental states on which these states supervene on states that extend out into the world (Debus ms). It’s difficult to see why a state that merely supervenes on P (but does not comprise P) should get you robust access to P. How this could work is in need of serious explanation. Further, even if a mental state that supervenes on the table before me can get me *some* unique epistemic advantages, it does not literally contain the table in the way suggested by the intuition.

If we want to capture the very robust sense of acquaintance with reality that is voiced by direct realists (As in the following quotes), external reality must be the kind of thing that can literally serve as a constituent of my mind. It is hard to see how a mind-independent table could literally be a constituent of my mind in any interesting sense. By contrast, if external reality is fundamentally mental, it is ripe to serve as a constituent of my mind. The table can be a constituent of my mental state in precisely the same way that my feelings of anxiety and pleasure are.

non-perceptual mental phenomena are part of *my* unity of consciousness, but are not a part of the unity of consciousness that constitutes reality.¹⁰ I might simultaneously see a bird fly across my window, hear my cat purring, feel a slight soreness in my calves, and be thinking about idealism. This visual, auditory, interoceptive, and cognitive phenomenology form a unified conscious experience. But only some of these threads of experience – the visual and auditory – are also threads that make up reality. Were I to hallucinate a bloody dagger hanging in front of my computer screen, the threads of my total phenomenal experience corresponding to the computer would also be elements of reality, whereas the bits of phenomenology corresponding to the (apparent) bloody dagger would be bound up in my unity of consciousness, but not the phenomenal unity that is reality. This is what fundamentally distinguishes perceptual from non-perceptual mental phenomena. In perception, and only in perception, reality is a constituent of my experiences and my mind.

So what distinguishes hallucination from perception is not the phenomenal character of the experience or the intrinsic metaphysical nature of the experience, but whether the experience involves a direct connection with reality. Because the unity of consciousness that is reality is governed by laws that account for its regularity, reality (and our veridical perceptions of it) will also exhibit a regularity that hallucinations do not.

2.3 Summary

So the rough outline of the theory is this: (i) Reality is a vast unity of consciousness, governed by physical laws, and binding together the sensory impressions of every point-from-a-perspective (using whatever phenomenal unity relations are responsible for binding together our own phenomenal experiences). (ii) Insofar as we perceive reality, threads of the unity of consciousness that is reality are *also* bound up within our own unities of consciousness. In this way, the objects of my experience (and my very mind itself) can be partially composed out of reality. ‘Being phenomenally unified with’ is non-transitive, and my non-perceptual sensory experiences and other non-perceptual mental states are unified with the rest of my mind, but not with the phenomenal tapestry of reality.

¹⁰ This is not essential to the idealist picture. There could be idealist possible worlds that contain pains, cognitive phenomenology, and so on as parts of them. But insofar as I am trying to capture what I take *our* external world to be like, it seems most plausible to me to hold that these are not part of external reality. (If the reader disagrees, they can imagine a more expansive phenomenal tapstry.)

3 Virtues of Nontheistic Idealism

Thus far, I've outlined a new form of idealism that accounts for the persistence and regularity of the external world without appeal to God, and have shown how this can support a particularly robust form of direct realism. The reader may already be trying to poke holes in the view that I've sketched. But before turning to the problems facing this version of idealism (§4), I want to make the case for taking the view seriously. The world-view I've developed has some unique and attractive virtues. Even if there are also hurdles to be overcome, the benefits we gain from adopting the view are such that we should not dismiss it out of hand.

I'll discuss three related advantages that this form of idealism can offer: (i) It offers a robust account of Johnston (2011)'s "neglected epistemic virtue"; (ii) it renders the intrinsic nature of reality intelligible in a way that materialism cannot; (iii) it accords with common-sense in offering us a world that fundamentally is as it appears.

3.1 *The Neglected Epistemic Virtue*

Mark Johnston (2011) has argued that episodes of conscious perception have a distinctive (and oft-neglected) epistemic virtue. When I come to know that there's a cup in front of me by *seeing* the cup, I instantiate a unique epistemic virtue – one that a blindsight patient cannot possess even if her judgment of the cup is equally immediate and reliable, and also constitutes knowledge.¹¹

Following Johnston, let's understand an Attentive Sensory Episode (ASE) to be a conscious event in which one stands in a certain perceptual relation (e.g. seeing, hearing) to an external target (e.g. a sound, color, computer, doorbell). Johnston argues that ASEs have a distinctive epistemic virtue insofar as their objects "genuinely are truthmakers for the associated immediate perceptual judgments" (193). My envatted twin does not have such ASEs, as her conscious experience (e.g. as of a cup before her) does not have the truthmaker of the associated perceptual judgment as its object. Likewise, the judgment of the blindsight patient (who uses her eyes to judge that there's a cup before her) lacks this epistemic virtue, as she lacks the relevant

¹¹ Johnston (2011) varies between attributing the epistemic virtue to the believer and to the belief. He writes (167, my emphasis) both of the "distinctive positive epistemic virtue *exemplified by the normally sighted*", and of the "neglected epistemic virtue that sensory awareness *confers on immediate perceptual belief*". I don't aim to take a stand on which is the central locus of the virtue.

ASEs.

Crucial to this account is that, as Johnston (2011) puts it:

When it comes to most ASEs, ‘ontic externalism’, the claim that their occurrence supervenes on more than is in the head, is as trivially straightforward as externalism about kicking a football, or bathing in water, or eating sushi. The sensory event kind—*smelling a (some particular) rose*—consists of events that essentially involve particular roses, even if each such event has all the neural effects it has in virtue of that part of it which is merely neural in its constitution. (177-178)

The joint metaphysical/perceptual account that I’ve given captures this epistemic virtue in an especially robust way. Ontic externalism is true of conscious perceptual experiences not merely due to the way that we individuate these experiences. Rather, this metaphysical account facilitates bits of reality literally constituting part of my mind when I perceive them. When I perceive my cup, the cup itself (aspects of it) are literally constituents of my mind and my experience. The truthmaker for my immediate perceptual judgment that there’s a cup before me is the object of my perception in the most immediate sense possible.

Conscious perception puts us in direct contact with reality – by making it literally a component of our minds – in a way that is far more robust than materialist views can account for, yielding an especially strong vindication of Johnston’s neglected epistemic virtue.

3.2 *Intelligibility of Reality*

A second advantage of the idealist view I have developed is that it renders reality *fundamentally intelligible*, in a way that it isn’t on standard materialist pictures. This point has been made by panpsychists (e.g. Strawson 2006, Goff forthcoming) as well as idealists (e.g. Foster 1993) to motivate the idea that there is something intrinsically experiential about reality. As Foster (1993) puts it, materialism

imposes a severe limit on the scope of our *knowledge* of [the physical world]. For, within the realist framework, we can at best acquire knowledge of the *structure and organization* of the physical world, not, at least at the fundamental level, of its *content*. Thus while ... we may be able to establish the existence of an external space with a certain geometrical structure (one that is three-dimensional, continuous, and approximately Euclidean), we can never find out what, apart from this structure, the space is like in itself: we cannot discover the nature of the thing which has these geometrical properties and forms the medium for physical objects. (294-295)

Physics is likewise unable to provide an account of the natures of the objects that fill space, giving us only a relational characterization of these objects. Fundamental physical properties –

mass, charge, spin – are all characterized by physics in terms of how they dispose entities to relate to one another. Fundamental physical objects are characterized in terms of how these entities relate to other physical entities.

But the challenge for the materialist is not simply that science fails to specify what the intrinsic nature of reality is. When we look about logical space for candidates, the only possibilities we seem to find are experiential. In experience I seem to be presented with a substantial reality; not merely an empty structure. I can grasp the possibility that reality is as it appears, or that reality is very different from how it appears, but every contentful possibility that I can wrap my mind around is equally phenomenalist.

The point is not that phenomenology is the only thing that could be the intrinsic nature of reality, but that it is the only possibility that is *intelligible* to us. Insofar as we think that it's a virtue of a metaphysical picture that it renders reality comprehensible, idealist accounts of reality have an advantage.¹²

3.3 Eden

If the metaphysical/perceptual hypothesis I've developed is correct, we are living in Chalmers's Eden:

In the Garden of Eden, we had unmediated contact with the world. We were directly acquainted with objects in the world and with their properties. Objects were simply presented to us without causal mediation, and properties were revealed to us in their true intrinsic glory.

When an apple in Eden looked red to us, the apple was gloriously, perfectly, and primitively *red*. There was no need for a long causal chain from the microphysics of the surface through air and brain to a contingently connected visual experience. Rather, the perfect redness of the apple was simply revealed to us. The qualitative redness in our experience derived entirely from the presentation of perfect redness in the world.

Eden was a world of perfect color. (Chalmers, 49)

There are two components to living in Eden: (i) the world is precisely as it appears; (ii) our perceptions of the world are unmediated, such that we directly grasp the nature of reality.

Berkeley makes point (i) in the Third Dialogue, when he writes that, unlike the materialist, he has captured the common-sense view that “those things [we] immediately

¹² Note that this doesn't distinguish between views on which there is a single phenomenal unity, versus multiple such unities, provided both give complete reductions of reality to the phenomenal.

perceive are the real things” (Berkeley, 208):

Can [materialists] account by the laws of motion, for sounds, tastes, smells, or colours, or for the regular course of things? Have they accounted by physical principles for the aptitude and contrivance, even of the most inconsiderable parts of the universe? But laying aside matter and corporeal causes, and admitting only the efficiency of an all-perfect mind, are not all the effects of Nature easy and intelligible? (Berkeley, 202-203)

This point goes beyond the idea that reality is fundamentally intelligible on the idealist picture. On this view, not only is reality intelligible; we live in a “world with respect to which our visual experience is perfectly veridical” (Chalmers, 75). This is a distinctive benefit that’s arguably unique to idealism.¹³

Point (ii) is facilitated by the conjunction of the metaphysical picture and the theory of perception it renders possible (according to which, in perception, our minds are literally constituted by aspects of reality). This gives a robust rendering of Chalmers’s (2006) characterization:

[I]n the purest Edenic worlds, subjects do not perceive instances of perfect color by virtue of having color experiences that are distinct from but related to those instances. That would seem to require a contingent mediating connection. Instead, Edenic subjects perceive instances of perfect colors by standing in a direct perceptual relation to them: perhaps the relation of acquaintance. Edenic subjects still have color experiences: there is something it is like to be them. But their color experiences have their phenomenal character precisely in virtue of the perfect colors that the subject is acquainted with. ... We might say: in Eden, if not in our world, perceptual experience extends outside the head. (78)

On the joint metaphysical/perceptual account I’ve developed, the relationship we stand in to the objects of perception is precisely the same relationship of acquaintance that we stand in to our own experiences (as, in perception, bits of reality *are* our own experiences).¹⁴

¹³ It might be objected that this view does not give us a reality that accords perfectly with our perceptions, on grounds that the world does not seem to be experiential. The cup before me, it might be argued, may seem to instantiate the *quality* blueness, but it does not seem to instantiate the *phenomenal property* blueness. It is certainly right that common sense does not tell us that the world is fundamentally experiential. But this is a high-level interpretation, not something that we are directly given in perception. The world as it is given to us in perception does not distinguish between qualities and phenomenal properties. To see this, try to imagine what it would seem like to veridically perceive a world constituted by phenomenal properties. I hazard that it would seem precisely like our world seems. Likewise, if you try to imagine what it would seem like to veridically perceive a world constituted by qualities. We may *judge* that the world is not fundamentally experiential, but our visual experiences remain silent on this.

¹⁴ This arguably explains how it is that the idealist can so fully account for Johnston’s neglected epistemic virtue. The truthmaker for my judgment “there’s a cup before me” is the cup, which is – by virtue of the relationship of direct acquaintance I stand in to it – the object of my experience.

4 Challenges for Nontheistic Idealism

The idealist account of reality I've sketched has the potential to offer significant advantages over materialistic alternatives. What are the costs of adopting such a view? I'll focus on the two challenges I see as the most serious: (i) theoretical complexity, and (ii) explanatory disunity.

4.1 Theoretical Complexity

While idealism is no more qualitatively profligate than materialism (positing only one fundamental kind: sensory experiences) it does seem to be vastly more *quantitatively* profligate. On the materialist's world-view, the pencil I'm holding, the cup I'm drinking from, the sun overhead ... these are all relatively simple things: combinations of physical particles, whose nature (insofar as we have any grasp of it) seems relatively simple. By contrast, the form of idealism I've developed holds that the pencil is a bundle of a myriad sensory impressions, all bound together in a structured way by the objectual-unity relation (and other unifying relations). Things as seemingly simple as pencils look infinitely complex. The idealist posits that there are far more aspects to reality than we might have realized. In this sense we have a kind of *quantitative* profligacy.

It's not clear to what extent quantitative profligacy by itself should trouble us.¹⁵ Following Lewis (1973), the idealist might retort, "You believe in sensations already. I ask you to believe in more things of that kind, not in things of some new kind." Is a theory that posits that the universe contains x electrons, all else being equal, superior to one claiming that there are $2x$? The answer is far from clear.¹⁶

¹⁵ Beyond this, it's worth stressing that materialism comes out ahead on quantitative profligacy only insofar as we are correct in our *assumption* that the intrinsic nature of materialistic world is simpler than what's posited by the idealist. Insofar as science doesn't give us more than a relational characterization of reality (and the materialist doesn't supply an account of the intrinsic natures of fundamental physical particles), this is merely an assumption.

¹⁶ Further, there's a respect in which idealism is arguably not more quantitatively profligate than most materialistic and dualistic theories. When it comes to considering the ideological resources needed to account for logical space, we find that materialists – at least those who accept materialism as a contingent truth – and dualists are in no better a position than the idealist. Ross Cameron (2012) discusses this sense of ideological parsimony:

When judging what ideological resources you need, do you only count what you need to describe what there is, or do you need ideology enough to describe the ways things could have been? ... Parity with ontological parsimony suggests that you should only count the ideology you need to describe things as they are. ... Nonetheless, I can't shake the feeling that ideological parsimony is different from ontological parsimony in this respect. ... After all, a theory of reality is not

A more serious challenge stems from the attempt to make sense of the explanatory powers of the laws of physics, within the idealist framework I've described.

4.2 Explanatory Disunity

On the materialist's world-view, the water in my cup is relatively simple: a liquid, made up of H₂O molecules, which are in turn composed of hydrogen and oxygen, which are in turn ... down to the fundamental particles. When I put the cup in the freezer and the water changes phase, there's a simple explanation of this phase change in terms of how the H₂O molecules interact.

I've argued that on the idealist picture I'm developing, we are not doing away with physical objects or altering physics. We are simply giving an alternative account of the metaphysical nature of the objects governed by the laws of physics. Removing my cup from the freezer, the materialist accounts for the phase change from solid to liquid in terms of the increasing velocity of the molecules comprising the ice, and the increasing space between them. The idealist does not dispute this: If we "zoom in" on the liquid water, we find molecules bumping together (like in the cartoon from a physics class). This perspective too is part of the phenomenal unity that is water. Insofar as the phenomenal unity is governed by the physical laws revealed to us by science, some "threads" of the phenomenal unity are dependent on others: Were there not molecules arranged like so (where this is understood in the idealistic framework), the water would not be liquid (also understood in the idealistic framework).

Thus far, the idealist doesn't seem to be in any worse a position than the materialist. But I think this superficial gloss is concealing a very real worry. The laws of physics tell us about the behavior of physical objects. But on the idealist's view, these physical objects are much more complex than on the materialist's picture – an H₂O molecule has far more aspects than the materialist supposes. Because each physical object is more complex, we might worry that the laws connecting these physical objects will have to be more complex in a parallel way. My

complete without a description of how things could have been: so your fundamental theory of reality will have to talk about what could have occurred but doesn't...

While the idealist might invoke more tokens to describe the actual world (and on a fine-grained reading of kinds, they might even require more kinds, e.g. of phenomenal experience), the materialist will require the very same tools to account for modal space.

perception of the H₂O molecule with this microscope or that microscope, a Martian's perspective on it ... these might all seem to be distinct. If reality is a phenomenal unity that binds together many disjoint experiential threads, we might worry that we'll need multi-faceted laws to hold all of these threads together, and to ensure that they unfold in parallel. This would involve vastly more complex laws than materialism requires. Further, since all the phenomenal aspects of reality seem to unfold together – my perceptions of lightning striking a tree go hand in hand with your perceptions, the Martian's perceptions, the inverted twin's perceptions – we want an explanation of how these laws hang together. All the threads that make up reality unfold in a coherent way. What accounts for this coherence?

I think this is a real worry. A proliferation of laws governing reality would be a cost to the theory. If we not only had a proliferation of laws, but were also forced to accept that the relationship between these laws was brute, I think this would be a much more serious worry. It seems like there *should* be an answer as to why the different threads of reality unfold in a manner that coheres. When the Martian and I each perceive lightning striking a tree, we each tap into a thread of reality. And the threads seem to transform in parallel ways as the tree is engulfed in flames. Surely this is not just a brute miracle.

I'll close with a couple of speculative remarks about how the idealist might address this challenge. First, recall that the phenomenal “threads” of reality are bound together by the unity of consciousness relation. Much as my experience of a blue circle is not simply a single experience of blueness and circularity, but has *structure* – the blueness seems to inhere in the circle – so to the phenomenal unity that is reality has *structure*. The same unifying relations that account for the structure of my experiences binds together all of the experiences that constitute the tree and the lightning.¹⁷

I've described the phenomenal unity that is reality as a tapestry, binding together all these separate phenomenal threads. I think this analogy can help to illuminate one strategy for replying to the disunity challenge. Imagine there's a tapestry lying before you. You pick up a single thread of the tapestry and lift it into the air ... and all the adjoining threads are lifted up with it. Because the threads have a structure that binds them all together, by moving one thread, you move them all. You don't need a separate force to act on each thread. Thought of on this model,

¹⁷ These relations include the objectual-unity relation, spatial-unity relations, and the unity-of-consciousness relation, as described in §2.

it's a mistake to think of each thread of reality as disjoint: Yes, we can conceive of each thread separately, but they are no more disjoint from one another than the threads of a tapestry are. The unifying relations that give structure to the phenomenal unity ensure that all of the perspectives that comprise reality unfold in parallel.

If this were right we'd only need very simple physical laws, governing the behavior of a single thread of reality. The structure of reality would be sufficient to ensure that all other aspects of reality behave accordingly. One peculiar feature of this is that there doesn't seem to be a privileged thread of existence to which the laws most fundamentally apply. (Pick up any single thread of the tapestry and the rest of them come along for free.)¹⁸

Why think that the unifying relations would ensure that all perspectives unfold in parallel? It may be helpful to reflect on our own experiences to give us a more firm grip on these unifying relations. Suppose you have an experience of a blue circle. In this experience, the blueness and the circularity are bound together in a structured way (by the objectual-unity relation). Now imagine that a line is drawn in your experience, dividing the blueness in half. When the experience changes in this way, it also changes such that the circle has a line dividing it in half. There's no need to *both* draw a line through the blueness *and* draw a line through the circle in order to ensure that the experience contains a line through each. These phenomenal aspects are literally fused into a single experiential entity. A single phenomenal alteration to the bluish-circular unity affects everything that is bound up in that unity in a way that is predicted by the structure of the unity.

An alternative, I think less elegant, way to reply to the challenge would be to (i) accept that there are a multitude of physical (first-order) laws, governing each thread of reality, but (ii) to add that there are higher-order laws governing these first-order laws. On this view while we have a proliferation of laws, the connections between these laws would not be brute.

More would need to be said about the relations that structure the phenomenal unity and any about proposed higher-order laws in order to completely dispel this challenge. But I think our speculative exploration gives us reason to be optimistic that the idealist can overcome the

¹⁸ I'm not sure whether this should bother us. The logical connectives are interdefinable; we don't need each connective to be a primitive in our logic. And we don't seem to have compelling reason to take any particular connectives to be *the* privileged primitives. Yet we don't think this commits us to taking every candidate to be a primitive.

disunity challenge.

5 Conclusion

Contemporary philosophers are overwhelmingly materialists (at least about the domain of physical objects). I think it's unfortunate that this view is taken for granted, as idealism both has much to offer and need not be as radical in its commitments as it might first appear. In making the case for taking idealism seriously, I've outlined a non-theistic, quasi-Berkeleyan view. On this view, reality is a vast unity of consciousness that binds together the sensory impressions of every point-from-a-perspective. This does not do away with the physical world, but gives a unique account of its nature – one on which the world is fundamentally intelligible. Just as on materialist views, reality is governed by physical laws (the sorts of laws that physicists tell us about, and which it's clearly not the business of philosophers to dispute). Because reality is phenomenal, we open up the possibility that we can have a very robust sort of direct contact with reality. I've offered a view of perception on which (in perception) our minds are *literally constituted by* threads of reality. If this is right, I can stand in the same relation to the blueness of the sky as I do to the pain in my thigh.

While the idealist account that I've developed faces challenges – particularly worries about quantitative profligacy – it also offers some unique and intriguing benefits: (i) Due to the robust account it gives of our direct connection to reality, it yields an especially strong vindication of Johnston's neglected epistemic virtue. (ii) It renders reality fundamentally intelligible in a way that materialism does not. (iii) It captures our common-sense intuition that the world is as it appears. While the theory doubtless faces challenges not addressed in this short paper, these advantages are such that the view surely merits consideration.

In conclusion, idealism is awesome and everyone should take it more seriously.

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