

Immaterialism

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September 30, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Immaterialism*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=30917>

Immaterialism

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy (Metaphysics, Epistemology)

Proponents: George Berkeley, Plato (as precursor), Augustine of Hippo (as precursor)

1. Core Principles

Immaterialism is a philosophical theory that fundamentally denies the existence of material objects or substances independent of perception. At its heart, this theory posits that reality consists solely of minds (or spirits) and their ideas. Consequently, what we commonly refer to as "physical objects" are not external, unthinking, extended entities but rather collections or bundles of perceptions existing only in the mind of a perceiver. This position stands in stark contrast to various forms of materialism or physical realism, which assert the existence of a mind-independent physical world that serves as the foundation of reality.

The most famous articulation of immaterialism is found in the philosophy of Bishop George Berkeley, an Irish philosopher of the 18th century. Berkeley famously encapsulated his core principle with the Latin phrase, "Esse est percipi," meaning "to be is to be perceived." This dictum implies that the existence of an object, apart from minds, is contingent upon its being perceived by a mind. For an apple to exist, for example, it must be seen, touched, smelled, or tasted by a mind. If it were not perceived, it would cease to exist in any meaningful sense for that mind.

Thus, immaterialism challenges the intuitive notion of a world "out there" that continues to exist even when no one is observing it. Instead, it proposes that the entire fabric of our experienced reality—including colors, shapes, sounds, and textures—is inherently mental. There is no hidden, unperceivable "stuff" or substratum that underlies these perceptible qualities. The world, in this view, is a grand collection of ideas, and these ideas can only exist within a perceiving mind, whether human or divine.

2. Historical Development and Precursors

While Bishop Berkeley is the most prominent figure associated with immaterialism, the roots of the concept of an immaterial reality can be traced back to ancient philosophy. Plato, for instance, in his Theory of Forms, posited the existence of eternal, unchanging, and perfect Forms (e.g., the Form of Beauty, the Form of Justice) that exist independently of the material world and are accessible only through intellect, not through sensory experience. These Forms, being non-spatial and non-temporal, represent an immaterial realm of ultimate reality, contrasting sharply with the fleeting and imperfect material copies we perceive.

Similarly, early Christian theology and medieval philosophy, significantly influenced by Platonism and Neoplatonism, embraced the idea of an immaterial divine being. Figures like Augustine of Hippo

Hippo integrated Platonic ideas into Christian doctrine, asserting that God and the human soul are fundamentally immaterial. God, as the ultimate Prime Mover or First Cause of the universe, is conceived as a purely spiritual, non-physical entity. This theological stance established a strong tradition of believing in the existence of powerful, non-material realities, paving the conceptual ground for later philosophical arguments against material substance.

The philosophical landscape of the 17th and 18th centuries, marked by the rise of modern philosophy, provided the immediate intellectual context for Berkeley's immaterialism. Philosophers like René Descartes posited a radical dualism between mind (thinking substance) and matter (extended substance), while John Locke, a prominent empiricist, argued that our knowledge of the world comes from sensory experience, distinguishing between primary qualities (inherent in objects, like extension) and secondary qualities (mind-dependent, like color). Berkeley's immaterialism emerged as a critical response to what he perceived as the inherent problems and skeptical implications arising from these earlier attempts to define the relationship between mind and matter, particularly Locke's concept of an unknowable material substratum.

3. George Berkeley's Immaterialism

George Berkeley's immaterialism, often termed **subjective idealism**, was a revolutionary attempt to resolve the perceived inconsistencies and skeptical challenges of his philosophical predecessors, particularly John Locke. Berkeley contended that Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities was untenable, as both types of qualities are equally dependent on the perceiving mind. For instance, the extension (a primary quality) of an object is perceived, just as its color (a secondary quality) is perceived. To speak of extension without perception is to speak of an abstract idea, which Berkeley vehemently rejected as nonsensical.

The cornerstone of Berkeley's philosophy is the principle "Esse est percipi," or "to be is to be perceived." This means that the entire phenomenal world--trees, mountains, tables, and even human bodies--is composed solely of ideas existing in minds. There is no inert, unthinking, material substance that underlies these ideas. When we perceive an object, we are not perceiving a material thing that then causes an idea in our mind; rather, we are directly perceiving the ideas themselves. The "object" is simply the collection of these ideas.

Berkeley argued that the notion of a material substance independent of mind is not only unnecessary but also incoherent. He believed that the concept of matter leads to skepticism, as it posits an unknowable substratum that we can never directly access. By eliminating matter, Berkeley sought to make reality more immediate and understandable, directly accessible through our perceptions. For Berkeley, the only true substances are active, thinking spirits (minds), which perceive ideas, and the ideas themselves, which are passive and perceived.

A crucial component of Berkeley's system, which addresses the common-sense objection of

objects ceasing to exist when unperceived by humans, is the role of God as the universal perceiver. God's infinite mind perpetually perceives all ideas, thereby ensuring the continuous existence and stability of the world even when no human mind is attending to it. This divine perception guarantees the objectivity and permanence that we attribute to physical objects, allowing for a consistent and orderly universe despite the absence of material substance.

4. Key Concepts and Components

Central to immaterialism are the concepts of **ideas** and **minds (or spirits)**. In Berkeley's framework, ideas are the immediate objects of all perception, thought, and imagination. They are passive, inert, and exist solely within a perceiving mind. Ideas encompass all sensory data--the color red, the hardness of a stone, the sweetness of sugar--as well as concepts formed through reflection. Berkeley makes a distinction between ideas of sense (those passively received through sensation, constituting our experience of the external world) and ideas of imagination (those actively formed by our own minds).

Minds, or spirits, are the active, thinking, and willing substances that perceive ideas. Unlike ideas, which are passive and fleeting, minds are active, indivisible, and enduring. They are the only true substances in Berkeley's ontology. A mind cannot be perceived itself but is known through its actions of perceiving and willing. Human minds are finite spirits, while God is an infinite spirit, the ultimate source and sustainer of all ideas of sense. This means that God is not merely a universal perceiver but also the cause of the orderly succession of ideas that we experience as the natural world.

The concept of **causation** is also reinterpreted within immaterialism. In a world without material substance, physical objects cannot cause anything. Instead, Berkeley asserts that all causation ultimately originates from spirits. Our own wills can cause ideas of imagination, but the highly regular and coherent ideas of sense are caused by God. The "laws of nature" are thus understood as the regular patterns and uniform sequences in which God presents ideas to our minds, providing a predictable framework for our existence without invoking an inert, material causal agent.

5. Implications for Science and Reality

The immaterialist perspective profoundly redefines our understanding of "physical objects" and the laws governing them. Instead of being independent entities, a physical object like a tree is understood as a stable collection of ideas--visual ideas of green leaves and brown bark, tactile ideas of rough texture, auditory ideas of rustling, olfactory ideas of its scent--all consistently presented together to a perceiving mind by God. The regularity and coherence of these perceived ideas give us the impression of a stable, external world, but this stability is guaranteed by divine

will and perception, not by an underlying material substratum.

For scientific inquiry, immaterialism does not deny the possibility of science but rather reinterprets its function. Scientific laws, such as the laws of physics, are not descriptions of the intrinsic behaviors of material particles or forces. Instead, they are descriptions of the regular and predictable correlations between different sets of ideas that God presents to us. For example, the law of gravity describes a consistent pattern in how certain visual and tactile ideas (e.g., an apple falling) succeed each other, rather than describing an invisible force exerted by material masses. Science, therefore, becomes the study of these divine regularities, enabling prediction and practical application without resorting to materialist assumptions.

Furthermore, Berkeley saw his immaterialism as a bulwark against atheism and skepticism, which he believed were fostered by the materialist philosophies of his time. By eliminating matter, Berkeley removed the supposed grounds for a universe operating independently of God, and also dispelled the notion of an unknowable material world that could lead to epistemological doubt. In his view, reality is directly knowable through perception, and the entire structure of existence points directly to an active, intelligent, and benevolent Creator who is immediately present in every experience.

6. Criticisms and Limitations

Despite its intricate arguments, immaterialism has faced numerous criticisms since its inception, largely stemming from its radical departure from common-sense intuitions. The most immediate and enduring objection is the "common-sense" problem: how do objects continue to exist when no human mind perceives them? Samuel Johnson famously attempted to refute Berkeley's philosophy by kicking a stone and declaring, "I refute it thus!" Berkeley's answer, that God perceives all things continually, often strikes critics as an ad hoc appeal to divine intervention, introducing theological assumptions to solve a purely philosophical problem.

Another significant criticism revolves around the problem of solipsism and intersubjectivity. If all reality consists of my ideas, how can I be sure that other minds exist, or that we share a common, objective world? If what I perceive as a table is merely a collection of ideas in my mind, how can it be the same table that another person perceives? While Berkeley argues that we infer the existence of other finite spirits by observing their actions and that God ensures the commonality of our experiences, critics often find this explanation insufficient to fully bridge the gap between individual minds and a shared reality.

Critics also challenge the role of God as the universal perceiver. They argue that attributing all sensory experience and the continuous existence of objects to God's perpetual perception effectively makes God the sole agent of creation and maintenance, diminishing human agency and the explanatory power of natural laws. Furthermore, some find it problematic that Berkeley's

system relies so heavily on a specific theological premise, moving it beyond purely philosophical argumentation and making its acceptance contingent upon religious belief.

Finally, materialists and realists argue that immaterialism fails to provide a compelling explanation for the efficacy of scientific investigation and technological advancement. If the world is merely ideas, then how do we explain physical interactions, the precise mechanisms of biological processes, or the predictive power of theories based on material properties? While Berkeley offered an account based on regularities of divine ideas, many philosophers find the materialist explanation of underlying physical causes to be more parsimonious and robust in explaining the observable universe.

7. Varieties and Related Philosophical Positions

While George Berkeley's version is the most recognized form of immaterialism, the broader philosophical landscape includes various forms of **idealism** that share the core premise that reality is fundamentally mental or mind-dependent. Berkeley's position is specifically classified as **subjective idealism** because it maintains that reality consists solely of individual minds and their perceptions. The existence of objects is contingent upon their being perceived by finite minds or the infinite mind of God, making existence subjective to a perceiver.

In contrast, **objective idealism**, exemplified by philosophers like G.W.F. Hegel, posits that reality is a single, all-encompassing mind or spirit (often referred to as the Absolute Spirit or Geist) that manifests itself through the historical development of ideas, cultures, and consciousness. In this view, individual minds are merely parts or expressions of this larger, objective mental reality, and the world is not dependent on individual human perception but rather on the overarching mental structure of the Absolute. While still immaterialist, it avoids some of the solipsistic concerns associated with Berkeley's subjective approach.

Furthermore, elements of immaterialist thought can be found in other philosophical traditions. For instance, while Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism posits an unknowable "thing-in-itself" (noumenon) that exists independently of the mind, it argues that the phenomenal world--the world as we experience it--is structured by the mind's categories of understanding. Thus, our experienced reality is mind-dependent, even if an ultimate, external reality might exist beyond our grasp, sharing a conceptual affinity with immaterialism regarding the nature of perceived reality. Modern discussions in philosophy of mind and quantum mechanics, particularly regarding the role of the observer, sometimes touch upon themes that resonate with immaterialist inquiries, even if they do not explicitly endorse a full-blown immaterialist ontology.

Further Reading

[Immaterialism - Wikipedia](#)

[George Berkeley - Wikipedia](#)

[Esse est percipi - Wikipedia](#)

[Plato - Wikipedia](#)

[Augustine of Hippo - Wikipedia](#)

[Prime Mover - Wikipedia](#)

[First Cause - Wikipedia](#)

[God in Berkeley's philosophy - Wikipedia](#)

[Solipsism - Wikipedia](#)

[Subjective idealism - Wikipedia](#)

[Objective idealism - Wikipedia](#)

[Transcendental idealism - Wikipedia](#)

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