

Class #5 - Idealism  
Berkeley - from the *Principles*

I. An Empiricist's Problem

The empiricist like Locke claims that all knowledge comes from experience.

We saw that by using the primary/secondary distinction, Locke believes that he can account for the errors of sense perception that led Descartes to posit innate ideas while maintaining the central claim of empiricism.

But a problem arises when we notice that we experience our sensations, not the causes of our sensations. We see the way that objects affect our senses and not how they are in themselves.

So, we seem to have no knowledge of what causes our sensations.

In other words, the empiricist seems cut off from the supposedly material world.

We seem only to know our experiences, and not the external world as it is in itself.

So long as men thought that real things subsisted without the mind, and that their knowledge was only so far forth real as it was conformable to real things, it follows they could not be certain they had any real knowledge at all. For how can it be known that the things which are perceived are conformable to those which are not perceived, or exist without the mind? (Berkeley, *Principles*, §86).

Descartes argues that we can judge that there is an external world, and what it is like, with our minds.

Such a judgment extends beyond experience, and so is unavailable to an empiricist.

Locke says that our ideas of primary qualities of objects resemble real qualities of those objects.

So we have some knowledge of the external world in that way.

But, as Berkeley observes, to assert that there is a resemblance between two things, we have to be able to perceive both of them, and compare those perceptions.

We are stuck with only our sensations, our perceptions, and not their causes.

In contrast to both Descartes and Locke, Berkeley argues that there are no material objects.

He starts with a commitment to empiricist principles, and notices their limits.

It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing among men that houses, mountains, rivers, and, in a word, sensible objects have an existence, natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding... What are the aforementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense? And what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations? (*Principles*, §4)

And, he concludes that only ideas, and their perceivers, exist.

By matter...we are to understand an inert, senseless substance, in which extension, figure, and motion do actually subsist. But it is evident from what we have already shown that extension, figure, and motion are only ideas existing in the mind, and that an idea can be like nothing but another idea, and that consequently neither they nor their archetypes can exist in an unperceiving substance. Hence it is plain that the very notion of what is called matter, or corporeal substance, involves a contradiction in it (*Principles*, §9).

## II. Three Arguments for Idealism

Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley all agree that secondary properties, like color, exist only in the mind.

Berkeley extends the point, arguing that even the primary qualities are only in the mind.

Berkeley wants to show that they too are only perceptions, that they are essentially mental.

Berkeley's idealism is often summarized, as he writes in §3, that for objects, their *esse* is *percipi*.

'*Esse* is *percipi*' means 'being is being perceived'.

In fact, for Berkeley, there are perceptions, and perceivers.

But, we perceive only our perceptions, not what is behind them, under them, or causing them.

Since we can have no knowledge of any material world, Berkeley concludes, there can be none.

There is no extra-mental reality.

Berkeley provides three arguments to show that primary qualities are in the mind:

1. From the sensibility of objects
2. From the relativity of perceptions
3. A reductive argument

## III. The Argument from the Sensibility of Objects

Berkeley's argument for idealism from the sensibility of objects is an argument from the definition of what it means to be a sensible object.

The table I write on, I say, exists; that is, I see it and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed - meaning by that that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. There was an odor; that is, it was smelled; there was a sound, that is to say, it was heard; a color or figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch. This is all that I can understand by these and the like expressions. For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible that they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them (*Principles* §3).

I take Berkeley's argument to be as follows:

- D1. Objects are sensible things.
- D2. Sensible things are things with none other than sensible qualities.
- D3. The sensible qualities are the secondary qualities.
- D4. Those secondary qualities are strictly mental properties.
- DC. So, objects are strictly mental, i.e. there is no physical world.

Remember, the empiricist's claim is that all we know must originally come in through the senses.

Berkeley's claim is that to impute further qualities to the sensible objects, qualities beyond their sense properties, is to extend beyond anything knowable by sense, to make an unjustifiable inference.

#### IV. Berkeley's Arguments from the Relativity of Perceptions

Locke's principles showed that the secondary qualities were not real.  
Berkeley extends the use of these principles against the primary qualities.

Why may we not as well argue that figure and extension are not patterns or resemblances of qualities existing in matter, because to the same eye at different stations, or eyes of a different texture at the same station, they appear various and cannot, therefore, be the images of anything settled and determinate without the mind? (*Principles* §14).

Each of Berkeley's arguments against the primary qualities show that LP2 and LP2C are not fulfilled. There are no properties that do not vary with the perceiver.  
He proceeds by example, for all the primary properties: number, extension, shape, motion, solidity

For the argument for the relativity of number, consider what number we might give to a deck of cards. It is 52 cards, 4 suits, 13 ranks, 1 deck.

The same thing bears a different denomination of number as the mind views it with different respects. Thus, the same extension is one, or three, or thirty-six, according as the mind considers it with reference to a yard, a foot, or an inch. Number is so visibly relative and dependent on men's understanding that it is strange to think how anyone should give it an absolute existence without the mind (*Principles* §12).

The number correctly applied to the object varies as we think of the object in different ways.  
It may be a property of a concept, rather than of an object.

To show that extension is relative to the perceiver, consider the mite (a tiny insect) and a giant. What appears large to the mite can appear tiny to us, and minuscule to the giant.  
The size of an object is relative to perceiver, just as the color or taste is.  
I appear large to the mite, but to a giant, I appear small.  
Thus extension is a secondary property, too.  
This example is of utmost importance, since extension is the most plausible primary quality.  
Indeed, Descartes concluded that it is the only essential characteristic of physical objects.

To show that shape is relative to a perceiver, consider what we see under a microscope. Edges that appear straight to the naked eye will appear jagged when magnified.  
Also, consider our perception of a rectangular object, like a table.  
If we were to stand over the table, we would receive a roughly rectangular image in our field of vision. But, ordinarily, we are not placed in such a way as to receive a rectangular image, even if we perceive the table as rectangular.  
Everyone in a room may perceive the desk at the front as rectangular, even though we are receiving different images of the shape of the desk.  
The shape is never really seen as a rectangle, although we all infer that it is that shape.  
What we really get from the senses about the shape is relative to the perceiver.

The argument for the relativity of our perceptions of motion relies on an argument for the relativity of our perceptions of time, since motion is change in place over time.  
Our perception of time varies with the succession of our ideas.  
If our ideas proceed more quickly, a motion will appear more slow.

Note that just as we can not rely on an external measurement of extension, since we have to agree on a standard unit measure, we can not rely on an external measurement of time.

Berkeley's argument for the relativity of solidity to the perceiver takes solidity to be resistance to touch. A strong person will find something soft that a weaker person will find hard. This is even more plausible if we consider giants and mites again.

Berkeley thus has considered all of Locke's primary qualities as we experience them. He has shown that these perceptions vary in the same way that perceptions of the secondary qualities do. All qualities are secondary qualities. We have no veridical primary qualities, representing a material world.

#### V. Berkeley's Reductive Argument Against the Primary Qualities

Berkeley provides a last, direct, argument that the primary qualities reduce to secondary properties.

If it is certain that those original [primary] qualities are inseparably united with the other sensible qualities and not, even in thought, capable of being abstracted from them, it plainly follows that they exist only in the mind. But I desire anyone to reflect and try whether he can, by any abstraction of thought, conceive the extension and motion of a body without all other sensible qualities. For my own part, I see evidently that it is not in my power to frame an idea of a body extended and moved, but I must in addition give it some color or other sensible quality which is acknowledged to exist only in the mind. In short, extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable. Where, therefore, the other sensible qualities are, these must be also, namely, in the mind and nowhere else (*Principles* §10).

Here is a version of Berkeley's reductive argument:

- R1. You can not have an idea of a primary quality without secondary qualities.
- R2. So, wherever the secondary qualities are, the primary are.
- R3. Secondary qualities are only in the mind.
- RC. So, the primary qualities are mental, too.

To repeat, Berkeley considers as objects those things that we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste. The *esse* of such objects is to be perceived.

There is no reason to posit anything beyond such objects, aside from their cause, i.e. God.

Locke thinks that our ideas of primary qualities resemble properties of material objects.

The inference to an intermediate cause of our ideas (i.e. physical objects) is, for Berkeley, illegitimate.

There is no primary/secondary distinction, since all qualities are, strictly speaking, secondary.

For Berkeley, only God can be taken as the true cause of my ideas.

An all-powerful God could have no use for an intermediate instrument.

Though we do the utmost we can to secure the belief of *matter*, though, when reason forsakes us, we endeavor to support our opinion on the bare possibility of the thing, and though we indulge ourselves in the full scope of an imagination not regulated by reason to make out that poor *possibility*, yet the upshot of all is that there are certain *unknown ideas* in the mind of God; for this, if anything, is all that I conceive to be meant by *occasion* with regard to God. And this at

the bottom is no longer contending for the *thing*, but for the *name*. Whether therefore there are such ideas in the mind of God, and whether they may be called by the name *matter*, I shall not dispute. But, if you stick to the notion of an unthinking substance or support of extension, motion, and other sensible qualities, then to me it is most evidently impossible there should be any such thing, since it is a plain repugnancy that those qualities should exist in or be supported by an unperceiving substance (*Principles*, §§75-6).

## VI. The Inference to Matter

Locke and Berkeley agree that all knowledge comes from experience. They disagree over whether we can know of a material world by experience. Berkeley shows that the claim that material objects exist must be an inference, not a perception. Locke's description of our experiences of primary and secondary qualities makes explicit the danger of relying on such an inference.

*The ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves, but the ideas produced in us by these secondary qualities have no resemblance of them at all. There is nothing like our ideas existing in the bodies themselves. They are, in the bodies we denominate from them, only a power to produce those sensations in us. And what is sweet, blue, or warm in idea is but the certain bulk, figure, and motion of the insensible parts in the bodies themselves which we call so (II.VIII.15, emphasis in last line added).*

Berkeley is taking advantage of the apparent contradiction between saying, on the one hand, that all knowledge comes from sense experience and, on the other, that we have knowledge of insensible objects. If we are empiricists, says Berkeley, we can have no experience, no sensation, of insensible parts, of the material world. Since all knowledge comes from experience, our knowledge must be of an immaterial world.

## VII. Berkeley on the Resemblance Hypothesis

Consider two different refinements of the resemblance hypothesis.

- RH1. My ideas resemble material objects.
- RH2. My ideas resemble their causes.

Berkeley rejects RH1, but accepts RH2.  
Ideas can only resemble other ideas.

But, you say, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them of which they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind in an unthinking substance. I answer, an idea can be like nothing but an idea; a color or figure can be like nothing but another color or figure (*Principles*, §8, AW 448b).

So, my ideas resemble, we presume, the ideas in the minds of other persons. And, they resemble their causes, which are ideas in the mind of God. Indeed, it is from the need to infer a cause of my ideas that we can infer the existence of God.

When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or not, or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my view; and so likewise as to the hearing and other senses- the ideas imprinted on them are not creatures of my will. There is, therefore, some other will or spirit that produces them (*Principles* §29, AW 453a).

Our ability to infer affords us knowledge of the existence of God, yet, according to Berkeley, it cannot yield knowledge of a material world.

If Berkeley's denial of the existence of a material world were based solely, as he sometimes implies, on our inability to know about such a world, his idealism would be ill motivated.

But, Berkeley's idealism is more forcefully motivated by his objections to a particular kind of inference used by Locke to generate his materialism: the ability to abstract.

If we thoroughly examine this tenet [materialism] it will, perhaps, be found at bottom to depend on the doctrine of *abstract ideas*. For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived? Light and colors, heat and cold, extension and figures - in a word, the things we see and feel - what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas, or impressions on the sense? And is it possible to separate, even in thought, any of these from perception? For my part, I might as easily divide a thing from itself... In truth, the object and the sensation are the same thing and cannot therefore be abstracted from each other (*Principles* §5).

### VIII. Berkeley's World

According to Berkeley, we have a bundle of sensations which form an experience which we call a red chair, say, or apple.

We use the term 'apple' to refer to this collection of (strictly speaking distinct) sensory ideas.

'Apple', or even 'this apple', does not correspond to any abstract idea of apple, or of red, or of sweet, etc. The names 'apple' and 'chair' and 'red' are just convenient labels, and should not indicate any existence of the apple or chair or color beyond my current experience of it.

If 'chair' actually referred to a thing, it would have to refer to red chairs and blue chairs and tall chairs and short chairs.

We can give a name to commonalities among particular sensations, but this is just a name.

Berkeley is thus a nominalist about everything except particular experiences.

We have no positive idea of man, or triangle, or matter, as all are abstractions.

Locke and Descartes posit matter as the cause of our ideas.

This matter really has only the primary qualities as properties.

But on this picture, there is no yellow, no sweetness: all secondary properties are just names.

Berkeley tries making the terms refer to my sensory states.

The lemon is yellow, since I really have a yellow sensory experience.

Berkeley's account solves the problem of error for our beliefs based on the senses, like the water experiment.

This is the problem that led both Descartes and Locke to reject the resemblance hypothesis for ideas of secondary qualities.

But Berkeley has a new set of problems.

One of Berkeley's new problems is the problem of intersubjectivity.

How do we account for different people having similar experiences?

Similarly, how do we account for the fact that objects do not seem to go in and out of existence, that they

seem to persist?

Berkeley posits God, to ensure both intersubjectivity and persistence.

On a metaphoric level, our experiences are like peering into the mind of God.

What happens to ideas when we are not perceiving them?

They may subsist in the mind of other spirits.

But what if no person is perceiving them?

Sensible things have to be perceived.

But it does not follow that they are frequently created and annihilated.

Consider the limerick:

There was a young man who said God  
Must think it exceedingly odd  
When he finds that this tree  
Continues to be  
When there's no one about in the quad

Dear sir, your confusion is odd  
I am always about in the quad  
and that's why this tree  
will continue to be  
Since observed by, yours faithfully, God.

Berkeley gets to retain colors, sounds, and smells.

The apple is just how I experience it.

He thinks there is a real world.

It is just not a material world.

The drawback is that we are left with only our mental states.

Berkeley's world is purely psychological.