

**Philosophy 203: History of Modern Western Philosophy**  
Spring 2010  
Tuesdays, Thursdays: 9am - 10:15am

Hamilton College  
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Berkeley's *Principles*, §1-§33 (AW 447-453)  
*Three Dialogues*, First Dialogue (AW 454-474)

## I. An Empiricist's Problem

The empiricist claims that all knowledge comes from experience.  
But we experience our sensations, not the causes of our sensations.  
So, we have no knowledge of what causes our sensations, i.e. objects in the supposedly material world.  
That is, we seem only to know our experiences, and not an external world.

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? (*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 a strict 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, AW 447a)

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, AW 448b).

## II. Three Main Topics for our study of Berkeley's work

1. Arguments for idealism, and against materialism
2. Arguments against abstract ideas
3. Accounts of mathematics and science

Berkeley's work is mainly found in his *Principles* (i.e. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*), which was not well-received at the time (1710), and his *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), which was Berkeley's attempt to present a popular version of his work.

In the *Three Dialogues*, Hylas (man of matter) mostly presents Locke's materialism and Philonous (lover of mind) is Berkeley's mouthpiece.

We will read the first two dialogues, but I prefer the earlier exposition in the *Principles*.

Ariew and Watkins only present the Introduction and the first thirty-four (of 156) sections of the *Principles*.

In addition to the sections printed in AW, I have assigned §86 to the end of the *Principles*, and made copies [available on the course website](#).

I have also posted §34-§84, in which Berkeley presents objections and replies, and which is a good source of paper topics.

The *Three Dialogues* are fun, and contain a bit more useful exposition of a few points, but both works cover the same material.

## III. Metaphysics and Epistemology

We have discussed three positions concerning the nature of reality: materialism, dualism, and idealism.

For the materialist, like Hobbes, all reality is made of matter.

Even ideas are material, motions in the brain.

For the dualist, some reality is mental and some is physical.

Descartes and Locke are both dualists.

Lastly, for the idealist, all reality is mental.

Leibniz held this view, though we did not pursue his idealism in depth.

We will look a bit more carefully at Berkeley's idealism.

Note that these metaphysical positions are independent of epistemology.

Locke and Descartes agree on dualism, despite their disagreement over epistemology.

Berkeley disagrees with Locke about metaphysics, though he mainly agrees about epistemology.

The beginning of Berkeley's Introduction may be taken as criticism of Descartes's work, and is in the spirit of Locke's criticism of innate ideas.

No sooner do we depart from sense and instinct to follow the light of a superior principle, to reason, meditate, and reflect on the nature of things, but a thousand scruples spring up in our minds concerning those things which before we seemed fully to comprehend. Prejudices and errors of sense do from all parts discover themselves to our view; and, endeavoring to correct these by reason, we are insensibly drawn into uncouth paradoxes, difficulties, and inconsistencies, which multiply and grow upon us as we advance in speculation, till at length, having wandered through many intricate mazes, we find ourselves just where we were, or, which is worse, sit down in a forlorn skepticism (*Principles*, Introduction §1).

Berkeley and Locke agree on methodology: one should avoid innate ideas and account for all knowledge on the basis of sense experience.

Compare the following quotes from Locke and Berkeley:

If by this inquiry into the nature of the understanding, I can discover the powers thereof; how far they reach; to what things they are in any degree proportionate; and where they fail us, I suppose it may be of use to prevail with the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its comprehension; to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether; and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things which, upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities... The discoveries we can make with this ought to satisfy us; and we shall then use our understandings right, when we entertain all objects in that way and proportion that they are suited to our faculties, and upon those grounds they are capable of being proposed to us; and not peremptorily or intemperately require demonstration, and demand certainty, where probability only is to be had, and which is sufficient to govern all our concernments. If we will disbelieve everything, because we cannot certainly know all things, we shall do much as wisely as he who would not use his legs, but sit still and perish, because he had no wings to fly (Locke, *Essay*, Introduction §4-§5, AW 317a-318a).

It is said the faculties we have are few, and those designed by nature for the support and comfort of life, and not to penetrate into the inward essence and constitution of things...But, perhaps, we may be too partial to ourselves in placing the fault originally in our faculties, and not rather in the wrong use we make of them...We should believe that God has dealt more bountifully with the sons of men than to give them a strong desire for that knowledge which he had placed quite out of their reach...I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to ourselves-- that we have first raised a dust and then complain we cannot see (*Principles*, Introduction §2-3, AW 439a-b).

While Both Locke and Berkeley think that we can gain a great deal of knowledge on the basis of sense experience, Locke accepts that certain questions are unanswerable.

Berkeley believes that Locke's limitations arise from his materialism.

Materialism, and the materialist element of dualism, leads to skepticism.

But this skepticism is unjustified, and avoidable if one abandons materialism for idealism.

#### IV. 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

#### V. 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.

- D1. Objects are sensible things.
- D2. Sensible things are things with 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.

Notice that the argument, as it stands, is not valid.

To conclude that objects are strictly mental, we need a stronger premise than D2, something like D2\*.

D2\*. Sensible things are things that have no properties other than their sensible qualities.

The dispute between Hylas and Philonous in the *Three Dialogues* seems, at times, to rely on Berkeley's insistence on D2\*, when Hylas has agreed only to D2.

D2\* certainly seems to be Berkeley's claim.

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, AW 447a).

Berkeley makes the definition more explicit in the *Three Dialogues*.

This point then is agreed between us - that *sensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense* (First Dialogue, AW 457b).

Remember, the empiricist 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.

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

We have seen the form of Berkeley's arguments from the relativity of perceptions before, in Locke's defense of the primary/secondary distinction.

I attributed two general principles, with some corollaries, to Locke.

LP1: If one perceives an object as having two (or more) incompatible ideas, then those ideas do not represent real properties of the object.

LP1C1: Even if a change in us entails the change in the perceived quality, the ideas which change can not be veridical.

LP1C2: Qualities that appear different to different observers are not veridical.

LP2: If an idea of an object is the same under all conditions, that idea is veridical.

LP2C: If every observer receives the same idea from an object, then that idea is veridical.

From those principles, Locke argued that some ideas were of primary qualities, and resembled real properties of external objects, while other ideas were secondary qualities, and did not resemble anything in external objects.

Berkeley uses the same Lockean principles against the primary/secondary distinction, in *Principles* §14-§15, but more explicitly in the first of the *Three Dialogues*.

*Philonous*: Have you not acknowledged that no real inherent property of any object can be changed without some change in the thing itself?

*Hylas*: I have (First Dialogue, AW 465b)

Remember, the disagreement between Berkeley and Locke is over metaphysics, not methodology.

Berkeley's argument against the primary/secondary distinction comes in two stages.

In the first stage, Berkeley echoes Locke's arguments against the veridicality of the secondary qualities.

There is nothing particularly new in this portion of the dialogue, which runs from AW 458a to AW 464b.

At the end of that section, Hylas is espousing precisely Locke's view.

Colors, sounds, tastes, in a word, all those termed *secondary qualities*, have certainly no existence without the mind. But by this acknowledgment I must not be supposed to derogate anything from the reality of matter or external objects... (First Dialogue, AW 464b).

In the second stage of his argument against the primary/secondary distinction, Berkeley shows that, for each supposedly primary quality, it is really a secondary quality.

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, AW 449b).

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, AW 449b).

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.

[One response](#) to Berkeley's argument about extension is that there is something on which the mite, the giant, and I can agree: I am six feet tall.

That is, the correspondence between a scale of measurement and an object is not relative to the perceiver. If there is an objective fact about my extension which is not relative to the perceiver, then Berkeley's argument fails.

But this response is insufficient.

The scale of measurement itself is relative to a perceiver.

A yard was originally defined as the distance between the end of the king's finger and the tip of his nose. We have more objective measures now, but even these do not solve the problem.

There used to be an actual [standard meter](#) bar, against which all other meters could be measured.

Now, we use the distance light travels in a specific period of time, since the speed of light is, according to our best scientific theories, a constant.

But consider if we awoke tomorrow and found that everything had doubled in size.

We would have no way of discovering this fact.

Dilations and restrictions could happen all of the time, without us knowing!

We settle our scales relative to useful sizes and distances.

To show that shape is relative to a perceiver, consider what we see under a microscope.

*Philonous*: Is it not the very same reasoning to conclude there is no extension or figure in an object because to one eye it shall seem little, smooth, and round, when at the same time it appears to the other, great, uneven, and angular?

*Hylas*: The very same. But does this latter fact ever happen?

*Philonous*: You may at any time make the experiment by looking with one eye bare and with the other through a microscope (First Dialogue, AW 465b).

Edges that appear straight to the naked eye will appear jagged when magnified.

Here is another consideration for the relativity of our perceptions of shape that I think works in Berkeley's favor.

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.

Consider that 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.

*Philonous*: Is it not possible ideas should succeed one another twice as fast in your mind as they do in mine or in that of some spirit of another kind?

*Hylas*: I admit it.

*Philonous*: Consequently, the same body may to another seem to perform its motion over any space in half the time that it does to you. And...it is possible one and the same body shall be really moved the same way at once, both very swift and very slow (First Dialogue, AW 466a).

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.