

Philosophy 203
History of Modern Western Philosophy

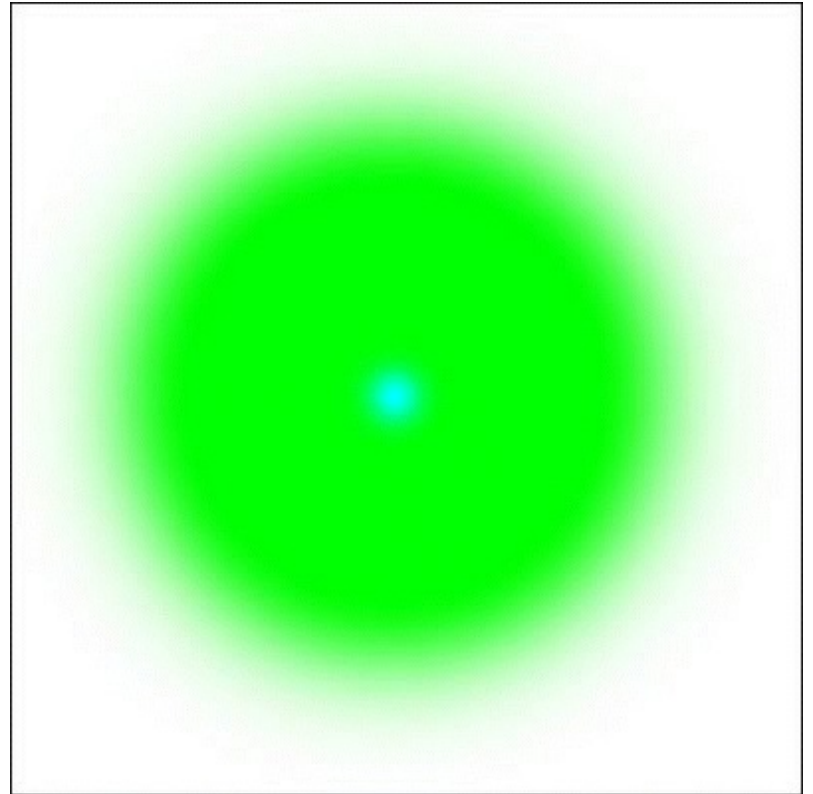
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Class 18 - Berkeley II
More On Idealism
The Self and God
Against Abstract Ideas

Three Arguments for Idealism

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



The Argument From the Sensibility of Objects

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.

- ▶ 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 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).
- ▶ Remember, strictly speaking, we experience only our perceptions.

Berkeley's Arguments From the Relativity of Perceptions

- Berkeley considered all of Locke's primary qualities (extension, shape, motion, number, solidity) 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.

Berkeley's Reductive Argument Against the Primary Qualities

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, AW 449a).

Berkeley's Reductive Argument, in Syllogistic Form

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.

“Philonous: Sensible things are all immediately perceivable; and those things which are immediately perceivable are ideas; and these exist only in the mind. This much you have, if I am not mistaken, long since agreed to” (Second Dialogue, AW 475b).

An Intermediate Cause of Our Perceptions?

- Berkeley claims that there is no reason to posit anything beyond such objects, aside from their cause, i.e. God.
- “*Hylas*: I conclude [the material world] exists, because qualities cannot be conceived to exist without a support” (First Dialogue, AW 469b).
- To characterize this intermediate cause, Hylas uses several different names.
 - IC1. Absolute extension (AW 467a)
 - IC2. Passive object of an active sensation (AW 468a)
 - IC3. Material substratum (AW 469b)
 - IC4. External object (as opposed to immediately perceived idea) (AW 472b)
 - IC5. Causes or occasions in the brain (AW 475a-b)
 - IC6. Matter, as whatever causes my ideas (AW 479a)
 - IC7. Instrument (AW 480a)

Berkeley on Intermediate Causes

IC1. Absolute extension
IC2. Passive object of an active sensation
IC3. Material substratum
IC4. External object
IC5. Causes or occasions in the brain
IC6. Matter, as whatever causes my ideas
IC7. Instrument

- Philonous responds, in all cases, that such causes are not perceived, and thus that they are not sensible objects.
- Absolute extension, IC1, is a general idea, and can neither exist in a particular object nor in our minds.
- Our minds are always passive, when sensing, so that the passive object, IC2, is the sensation itself, not an external object.
- The material substratum, IC3, is either itself perceivable (as when we think of it as spreading) or imperceivable, in which case it can not be the object of sensation.
- The external object, IC4, is not perceived, but inferred using reason or reflection.
- The brain itself, IC5, is not (generally) the sensible object in question.
 - ▶ Moreover, taking motion in the brain to be the cause of my ideas leads to the puzzle, that Locke noticed, about why particular conscious experiences are correlated with particular motions in material objects.
 - ▶ “*Philonous*: This way of explaining things...could never have satisfied any reasonable man. What connection is there between a motion in the nerves and the sensations of sound or color in the mind? Or how is it possible these should be the effect of that?” (Second Dialogue, AW 476a).

A Functional Definition of Matter

- “*Hylas*: I find myself affected with various ideas of which I know I am not the cause; neither are they the cause of themselves or of one another, or capable of subsisting by themselves, as being altogether inactive, fleeting, dependent beings. They have therefore some cause distinct from me and them, of which I pretend to know no more than that it is *the cause of my ideas*. And this thing, whatever it is, I call matter” (Second Dialogue, AW 479a).
- Philonous responds that only God can be taken as the true cause of my ideas, and that 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).
- God would just not waste her time making material things!

Descartes, on the Possibility of a Berkeleyan Universe

There clearly is in me a passive faculty of sensing, that is, a faculty for receiving and knowing the ideas of sensible things; but I could not use it unless there also existed, either in me or in something else, a certain active faculty of producing or bringing about these ideas...[I]t is in some substance different from me, containing either formally or eminently all the reality that exists objectively in the ideas produced by that faculty...[T]his substance is either a body, that is a corporeal nature, which contains formally all that is contained objectively in the ideas, or else it is God, or some other creature more noble than a body, which contains eminently all that is contained objectively in the ideas. But since God is not a deceiver, it is patently obvious that he does not send me these ideas either immediately by himself, or even through the mediation of some creature that contains the objective reality of these ideas not formally but only eminently. For since God has given me no faculty whatsoever for making this determination, but instead has given me a great inclination to believe that these ideas issue from corporeal things, I fail to see how God could be understood not to be a deceiver, if these ideas were to issue from a source other than corporeal things. And consequently corporeal things exist (*Meditations* AT VII.79-80, AW 64b).

Berkeley, Against Descartes's Argument for the Material World

- Berkeley could argue for idealism from a Principle of Sufficient Reason.
 - BAD1. God does not do anything without sufficient reason.
 - BAD2. God either created physical objects or did not create them.
 - BAD3. We do not need physical objects in order to have all of our experiences, since God can implant them in our minds directly.
 - BAD4. So, there is no good reason for God to have created physical objects, in addition to minds.
 - BADC. So, God did not create physical objects. God creates our ideas directly, instead of taking the detour through physical objects.
- “In short, if there were external bodies, it is impossible we should ever come to know it; and if there were not, we might have the very same reasons to think there were that we have now” (*Principles* §20, AW 451a).
- Descartes says that an argument like BAD is obviously unsound.
- What step or inference would Descartes deny?

On Locke's 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, AW 334a, emphasis in last line added).
- There appears to be a 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, we can have no experience, no sensation, of insensible parts.
- Still, even though Locke and Berkeley reject innate ideas, they have to admit that we have some ability to reason or infer.
- Since we have such an ability, it is unclear why an inference to material objects is illegitimate.

Other Persons

- There is no universally accepted argument for the existence of other minds.
- Berkeley claims that we can infer the existence of other minds from their effects on us.
 - ▶ “From what has been said, it is plain that we cannot know the existence of other spirits otherwise than by their operations, or the ideas by them excited in us. I perceive several motions, changes, and combinations of ideas, that inform me there are certain particular agents, like myself, which accompany them and concur in their production. Hence, the knowledge I have of other spirits is not immediate, as is the knowledge of my ideas; but depending on the intervention of ideas, by me referred to agents or spirits distinct from myself, as effects or concomitant signs” (*Principles* §145).
- The problem of other minds is perennially troubling, and nothing Berkeley says here resolves it.
 - ▶ How do we know that the things we call other people are not craftily constructed robots?
 - ▶ How do we know that the effects Berkeley mentions are really originating in a thinking thing?

The Self

- Even our own existence is an illegitimate inference.
- “A spirit is one simple, undivided, active being; as it perceives ideas it is called the *understanding*, and as it produces or otherwise operates about them it is called the *will*. Hence there can be no idea formed of a soul or spirit; for all ideas whatever, being passive and inert (see §25), they cannot represent unto us, by way of image or likeness, that which acts... The words *will*, *soul*, *spirit* do not stand for different ideas or, in truth, for any idea at all, but for something which is very different from ideas, and which, being an agent, cannot be like or represented by any idea whatsoever - though it must be admitted at the same time that we have some notion of soul, spirit, and the operations of the mind, such as willing, loving, hating, inasmuch as we know or understand the meaning of those words” (*Principles* §27, AW 452b).

Ideas and Notions

- Thus Berkeley distinguishes ideas, which are images, from notions, which can be conceptual, if not abstract.
- Notions can be devised by inference, as Locke claimed that ideas of reflection were formed.
- From such notions, we can infer the existence of other persons.
- “In a large sense, indeed, we may be said to have an idea or rather a notion of *spirit*; that is, we understand the meaning of the word, otherwise we could not affirm or deny anything of it. Moreover, as we conceive the ideas that are in the minds of other spirits by means of our own, which we suppose to be resemblances of them; so we know other spirits by means of our own soul, which in that sense is the image or idea of them; it having a like respect to other spirits that blueness or heat by me perceived has to those ideas perceived by another” (*Principles* §140).

Berkeley on 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).
- 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.

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).
- “*Philonous*: Men commonly believe that all things are known or perceived by God because they believe the being of a God, whereas I, on the other side, immediately and necessarily conclude the being of a God because all sensible things must be perceived by him” (Second Dialogue, AW 477a).
- “A human spirit or person is not perceived by sense, as not being an idea; when therefore we see the color, size, figure, and motions of a man, we perceive only certain sensations or ideas excited in our own minds; and these being exhibited to our view in sundry distinct collections, serve to mark out unto us the existence of finite and created spirits like ourselves. Hence it is plain we do not see a man, if by *man* is meant that which lives, moves, perceives, and thinks as we do, but only such a certain collection of ideas as directs us to think there is a distinct principle of thought and motion, like to ourselves, accompanying and represented by it. And after the same manner we see God; all the difference is that, whereas some one finite and narrow assemblage of ideas denotes a particular human mind, whithersoever we direct our view, we do at all times and in all places perceive manifest tokens of the divinity: everything we see, hear, feel, or anywise perceive by sense, being a sign or effect of the power of God; as is our perception of those very motions which are produced by men” (*Principles* §148).

Idealism and Abstraction

- We have seen three arguments for idealism: from sensibility, from relativity of perceptions, and the reductive argument.
- If Berkeley's denial of the existence of a material world were based solely 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.
- Berkeley attacks Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas as the source of a skeptical, atheistic materialism.