

# George Berkeley's Principles and Argument From the Sensibility of Objects

Saad Chaudhry

# General Principles

- Idea
  - Perceived through sensation, thought, or imagination
    - “It is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind or, lastly, ideas formed by help of memory and imagination...” (AW 447)
  - What one may call an “object” is a collection of ideas relating to one entity. Hence, there are no material objects. For example, a sensible object, such as a table, exists solely through its ideas of sensation
- Perceiver
  - An entity that knows or perceives an idea.
    - “This perceiving, active being is what I call *mind, spirit, soul, or myself...*” (AW 447)

# General Principles of Existence

- Existence
  - An object exists solely as an idea or set of ideas, and not as anything material.
  - For an object to exist, it has to be perceived.
    - “*Esse is percipi*”: “To be is to be perceived”
    - “[Ideas] *esse is percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.” (AW 447)
  - If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?
    - If nobody is around, then the particular falling tree does not exist anyway, so no, there is no sound made.

# Ideas and Abstraction

- An entity perceives its own ideas.
- It is impossible for ideas to exist unperceived.
- An idea can only be like an idea, and copies or resemblances of individual ideas cannot be conceived.
- Abstraction
  - Recognition of the existence of an object without perceiving the object (the collection of ideas related to the object).
  - Impossible to abstract an object contradicting perception.
    - “It is impossible for me to conceive in my thoughts any sensible thing or object distinct from the sensation or perception of it...the object and the sensation are the same thing and cannot therefore be abstracted from each other.” (AW 448)

# Substance and Existence

- There is only one type of substance that exists: perceivers. Perceivers are an immaterial substance.
- There can be no unthinking substance.
  - A substance is a perceiver. If an entity cannot think, it cannot perceive, so its perception cannot be perceived, and so the entity is not a perceiver, hence it is not a substance.
    - “Now, for an idea to exist in an unperceiving thing is a manifest contradiction, for to have an idea is all one as to perceive; that therefore wherein color, figure, and the like qualities exist must perceive them; hence it is clear there can be no unthinking substance or *substratum* of those ideas.” (AW 448)

# Primary Qualities

- Primary qualities: “extension, figure, motion, rest, solidity or impenetrability, and number” (AW 448)
- Locke believed primary qualities to describe matter, a senseless object.
- Berkeley argues primary qualities are ideas existing in the mind, thus any entity that a set of primary qualities describes is an idea that exists in the mind. Hence, matter without mind does not exist.
  - “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.” (AW 448)
- Berkeley argues primary qualities are relative.

# Secondary Qualities

- Secondary qualities: sensible qualities, such as color, taste, sound, etc.
- Since to understand primary qualities, such as extension and motion, one must include secondary qualities to understand an idea.
  - “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.” (AW 449)
- Thus, secondary qualities and primary qualities are both in the mind and inseparable.
- Secondary qualities can also be relative, adding to the argument that secondary qualities are not external, and thus are also mental; for example, taste depends on a perceiver’s viewpoint.

# The Argument from the Sensibility of Objects

- Anything that exists is a sensible thing.
- Sensible objects have sensible qualities, or secondary qualities.
- Secondary qualities are relative to the perceiver.
- Due to the relativity, it is established secondary qualities are mental.
- Since secondary qualities are mental, the perception, ideas, and the existence of all entities are all mental.
- Therefore, there is no material/physical world.

# Relating Berkeley to Science

- “Niels Bohr proposed the Copenhagen Interpretation, which merely says, in the manner of Godel, that **our equations do not describe the universe really**. They describe the mental processes we have to put ourselves through to describe the universe.” (Robert Anton Wilson)
  - We can never know about the physical world, rather we can only know how we define it. The definitions, or the equations, are derived using mental processes, thus any entities the equations describe are also mental and non-physical.