

Berkeley



1685-1753

BERKELEY'S POSITION

AN OVERVIEW

The Position that Berkeley Argues Against Maintains:

1. That objects, like tables and chairs, exist independently of minds.
2. These objects consist in collections of either: a) primary qualities alone, or b) of both primary and secondary qualities.
3. Minds, on the other hand, contain ideas of both primary and secondary qualities.

But this view, Berkeley thinks, leads to skepticism because there is a gap between the objects and their qualities, on the one hand, and our ideas of them, on the other.

And the source of this position lies in the doctrine of abstract ideas. We end up abstracting existence from perception and come to the view that objects can exist independently of what we perceive, and thereby come to believe that objects can exist unperceived.

By refuting this doctrine together with the distinction between the qualities of objects and our ideas of them, Berkeley ends up with the view that *esse est percipi* (i.e., to be is to be perceived). For if things are just collections of qualities, and qualities are sensible ideas, and sensible ideas exist only in the mind, then what it is for a thing to exist is just for it to be perceived.

In contrast, Berkeley:

1. Denies that material substance exists.
2. Argues for idealism (i.e. that mind constitutes the ultimate reality).
3. Argues that the existence of sensible things consists in their being perceived.
4. Argues that the mind which is the substance of the world is a single infinite mind, viz., God.

In this way he hopes to refute both epistemological and theological skepticism.

Does this mean that Berkeley is a phenomenalist?

No. Why not? A phenomenalist maintains that objects like tables and chairs are constructions from both actual and possible sensations. The table, then, is a collection of the sensations we are having of it plus all those possible perceptions of it we would have if we were “located” elsewhere. So it exists even when unperceived because of the possible but non-actual perceptions we could have of it, even when no mind is actually perceiving it. Berkeley’s position, in contrast, is that if it is not actually being perceived then it doesn’t exist.

But doesn’t this imply that when no mind is perceiving the table it doesn’t exist? Well, yes. But God may be having perceptions of it even when no other mind is having such perceptions.

Unfortunately, this way of expressing his position is a bit misleading. The table is nothing over and above the perceptions some mind or minds are having of its color, size, shape, etc.

Let’s now look at some of the arguments Berkeley presents for his view, with a particular focus on his objections to Locke’s view, and the replies a realist might have to them.

BERKELEY ON LOCKE

BERKELEY ON ABSTRACT IDEAS

BERKELEY'S FORMULATION OF LOCKE'S THESIS:

“It is agreed on all hands that the qualities or modes of things never do really exist each of them apart by itself and separated from all others, but are mixed, as it were, and blended together, several in the same object. But we are told the mind, being able to consider each quality singly or abstracted from those other qualities with which it is united, does by that means frame abstract ideas to itself.... Not that it is possible for color or motion to exist without extension, but only that the mind can frame to itself by abstraction the idea of color exclusive of extension and of motion exclusive of both color and extension.” [p. 464, #7]

Note here, and throughout that Berkeley doesn't distinguish between the qualities of objects and the ideas of those qualities. This is the older interpretation of Locke, and it is almost certainly wrong. We are sometimes going to need to worry about how much of a difference it makes.

Note also that if Locke's doctrine is correct, we can account for general terms without invoking universals.

Three types of Abstraction:

A. Abstraction Concerning Integral Parts (e.g., the head, arms, and legs are integral parts of the body).

B. Abstraction Concerning Modes:

1. Considering a mode apart from a substance (e.g., considering the color of a piece of chalk independently of the piece of chalk).

2. Considering one mode when it is joined together in the same substance with another mode (e.g., considering the color without the shape).

C. Abstractions of Reason (e.g., conceiving a triangle as equilateral without conceiving it as equiangular).

Berkeley denies B and C, but not A. He cites three reasons:

1. The Inconceivability Argument:

He claims that he can't do it because it is impossible for those qualities to exist apart. [#10 on pp. 464f.] The argument proceeds as follows:

P1) Impossible states of affairs are inconceivable (The Conceivability Criterion of Possibility).

P2) It is impossible for a mode to exist apart from a substance.

C) It is impossible to conceive of a mode apart from a substance.

If we rephrase this on the more modern interpretation of Locke, the complaint amounts to saying that we cannot have an idea of yellow without having an idea of some thing that is yellow. Berkeley seems to me to be on solid ground here.

2. The Redundancy Argument:

He claims that Locke's hypothesis is unnecessary. [#10 on pp. 464f.]

P1) If we can construct a theory of meaning that does not introduce such ideas it will be simpler.

P2) Other things being equal, the simpler theory should be considered true. (This appeals to Ockham's Razor.)

P3) We can construct such a theory.

C) It should be considered true.

In support of P3 Berkeley says that "... it seems that a word becomes general by being made the sign, not of an abstract general idea, but of several particular ideas, any one of which it indifferently suggests to the mind."

3. The Inconsistency Argument:

Berkeley claims that Locke's hypothesis is contradictory. [#13]

To prove this he points to Locke's description of the abstract idea of a triangle as an idea which "must be neither oblique nor rectangle, neither equilateral, nor isosceles, nor scalene, but all and none of these at once." [p. 466]

Berkeley uses this to criticize Locke's doctrine of material substances. Since, if he is right, it is impossible to separate the substratum from its modes.

My Evaluation, for what it is worth, is that Berkeley has some strong arguments against Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas.

BERKELEY'S ARGUMENTS FOR IMMATERIALISM

**BERKELEY'S ARGUMENTS THAT PRIMARY
AND SECONDARY QUALITIES ARE MENTAL**

THE ARGUMENTS THAT SECONDARY QUALITIES ARE MENTAL:

1. The Argument from Pleasure and Pain [p. 417]:

P1) An intense heat is a pain.

P2) No unperceiving thing can have a pain.

P3) A material substance is an unperceiving thing.

C1) A material substance cannot have a pain. (From P2 and P3.)

C2) A material substance cannot have an intense heat. (From P1 and C1.)

Hylas questions P1 and Philonous responds with the following argument:

P1) The fire produces the sensation of heat in me.

P2) The fire produces the sensation of pain in me.

P3) The fire produces only one sensation in me.

C) The heat = the pain.

As it stands, however, the last argument is invalid. All Philonous is entitled to infer is that the sensation of heat = the sensation of pain.

If we alter the conclusion to account for this we can then try to argue as follows:

P1) The fire produces the sensation of heat in me.

P2) The fire produces the sensation of pain in me.

P3) The fire produces only one sensation in me.

C1) The sensation of heat = the sensation of pain.

P4) The pain = the sensation of pain.

P5) The heat = the sensation of heat.

C2) The heat = the pain.

But now P5 seems to be simply false.

2. *The Argument from Perceptual Relativity:*

P1) Heat and cold are in material substances. (The assumption for the Reductio.)

P2) If heat and cold are in material substances, then the degree of warmth I feel is in the object.

C1) The degree of warmth I feel is in the object.

P3) If it feels hot, it is hot. [From C1.]

P4) If it feels cold, it is cold. [From C1.]

P5) It feels both hot and cold.

C2) It is both hot and cold.

But C2 is contradictory. So Philonous thinks we must reject P1.

However, P2 seems to be the faulty premise. Might I not feel warmth even though the object is not hot? In my girl friend's case, on a cool night she will suddenly turn on the air conditioner in the car. (She is going through menopause. Does the fact that she feels cold mean that it is cold? No.)

3. The Argument from the Analogy between Heat and Pain:

P1) When a pin pricks my finger this causes the sensation of pain.

P2) The sensation of pain is not in the pin.

P3) When the hot coal burns my finger this causes the sensation of heat.

C) The heat is not in the coal.

But are the cases really analogous? Pain = the sensation of pain, but heat \neq the sensation of heat.

4. *The Argument from Change:*

P1) A property possessed by a material substance cannot change unless the object changes in some way.

P2) Colors, for example, change under different lighting conditions with no change in the object.

C) Colors are not properties of material objects.

But can't we distinguish between the apparent and the real color in cases like this? Although the rose is red, it appears black in the dark.

THE ARGUMENTS THAT PRIMARY QUALITIES ARE MENTAL:

These are analogous to the arguments with respect to the secondary qualities so we won't run through them individually here. Most of them are relativity arguments. For example, when I look at a coin from two different angles, what seems round to me at one time may seem oval-shaped at another. But the coin can't be both. So the shape is not in the coin.

THE MASTER ARGUMENT

BERKELEY'S FORMULATIONS OF THE MASTER ARGUMENT

From the *Dialogues*:

Phil.: "I am content to put the whole upon this issue. If you can conceive it possible for any mixture or combination of qualities or any sensible object whatever to exist without the mind, then I will grant it actually to be so."

Hyl.: "If it comes to that, the point will soon be decided. What is more easy than to conceive a tree or house existing by itself, independent of, and unperceived by any mind whatsoever? I do at this present time conceive them existing after that manner."

Phil.: "Is it not a great contradiction to talk of conceiving a thing which is unconceived?" [p. 429]

From the *Principles*:

"I am content to put the whole upon this issue, if you can but conceive it possible for one extended, moveable substance, or in general, for any one idea, or anything like an idea, to exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it, I shall readily give up the cause.... To make this out, it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest repugnance." [p. 475]

PERRY'S INTERPRETATION: THE ARGUMENT IS INDUCTIVE:

In every case we examine, when we think of a book in the closet, we are thinking of the book, so it is perceived. So probably nothing exists unperceived.

But Berkeley is not arguing inductively here, so this interpretation won't work.

PRIOR'S INTERPRETATION (THE ARGUMENT IS A REDUCTIO):

Berkeley is arguing that it is absurd to suppose that an idea exists unperceived because the supposition entails that the idea in question is perceived.

But if this is how he is arguing, his argument is fallacious. The fact that I can't suppose that I perceive an idea which is unperceived doesn't entail that there isn't an idea that exists unperceived.

ANOTHER FORMULATION OF THE REDUCTIO INTERPRETATION:

P1) If x is possible then I can conceive of x.

P2) An unconceived object is possible. (Assumption for the Reductio.)

P3) Let A be an unconceived object.

C1) I can conceive of A. [From P2 and P3.]

C2) A is conceived. [From C1?]

C3) Contradiction. [From P3 and C2.]

C4) An unconceived object is impossible.

But C2 doesn't follow from C1. The fact that you can conceive of something doesn't mean that you do conceive it.

There is an important difference between conceiving of the truth of a proposition, and conceiving an object. In particular, you can conceive of an unconceived object without conceiving a particular unconceived object, since once you conceive it, it is no longer unconceived.

Berkeley is here failing to distinguish between (a) representations and (b) what they represent. Whenever I conceive something, there is a representation in my mind which represents that thing. However, the fact that the representation is in my mind does not show that the thing represented is in my mind.

A FINAL INTERPRETATION:

P1) A proposition p is proved, if the proposition 'I assume that p is false' is a contradiction.

P2) To suppose something about x implies to perceive x .

P3) The proposition 'I suppose that x is unperceived' implies that ' x is unperceived.'

However, there is a distinction between conceiving and perceiving, isn't there? The fact that you can suppose that there are unicorns does not imply that you are perceiving one. So P2 appears to be false.

Moreover, the third premise seems to be clearly false as well.

It also conflicts with Berkeley's claim that God conceives of things that I am not conceiving.

My conclusion here is that the Master Argument is flawed, and Berkeley has failed to establish his case.

This failure seems to me to arise primarily because Berkeley doesn't distinguish between two different senses of words like 'see' and 'perceive'.

Suppose a mad scientist has captured you and hooked electrodes up to your brain. He flips the switch and asks, “What do you see?” You respond, “I see a white elephant.”

Here, “I see x” does not imply that “x exists.” It may not even imply that the speaker thinks that x exists. And “You’re wrong” makes no sense.

But now suppose we are in the woods. It is dark. Suddenly you jump up agitated. I ask, “What do you see?” You respond, “I see a lion.”

Here, “I see x” does imply that “x exists.” And I might well respond with, “You’re wrong. It’s just a deer.”

Wittgenstein once said that “Philosophical problems arise when language goes on a holiday.” Maybe not always, but sometimes they certainly do.

BERKELEY'S GOD

B. The Passivity Argument:

“But, whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by Sense have not a like dependence on my will. When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or no, 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.”
[p. 476]

P1) Some ideas are not causally dependent on my will.

P2) All ideas are caused by active spirits.

C1) There is some active spirit other than myself.

P3) These ideas are produced in a regular and coherent order, in such a way that exceeds human powers. Such regularities (‘laws of nature’) established in highly providential way.

C2) Their author is benevolent wise and all powerful. [p. 477]

Berkeley's Defense of P2 above (viz., That all ideas are caused by active spirits).

P1) Change requires a cause or causes.

P2) Either ideas perceived, non-ideas that resemble ideas, or minds, are capable of causing.

P3) No idea or anything like an idea can cause anything because:

P3a) There is nothing in a perceived object but what is perceived.

P3b) An idea can be like nothing but an idea.

P3c)) Minds and only minds are substances.

P3d) No idea can be the resemblance of any active being.

B. *The Continuity Argument:*

“Now it is plain that [perceptual objects] have an existence exterior to my mind, since I find them by experience to be independent of it. There is therefore some other mind wherein they exist, during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them: as likewise they did before my birth, and would do after my supposed annihilation... And as the same is true with regard to all other finite created spirits, it necessarily follows there is an *omnipresent eternal Mind.*” [p. 445]

There seems to be a problem with P1 in the Passivity Argument and with the claim that I find some perceptual objects to be “independent” of my mind in the Continuity Argument. How can Berkeley assume that there are ideas independent of his mind when he has no perception of them?

Assuming Berkeley's objections to matter to be correct why don't they also apply to Spiritual Substance?

The Parity Objection:

Hyl.: "You say your own soul supplies you with some sort of an idea or image of God. But at the same time you acknowledge you have, properly speaking, no idea of your own soul. You even affirm that spirits are a sort of beings altogether different from ideas, consequently, that no idea can be like a spirit. We have, therefore, no idea of any spirit." [pp. 445f.]

Hyl.: "Notwithstanding all you have said, it seems to me that, according to your own way of thinking and in consequence of your own principles, it should follow that you are only a system of floating ideas without any substance to support them." [p.446]

Berkeley's Response:

P1) The concept of a material substance is contradictory.

Phil: "I say, in the first place, that I do not deny the existence of material substance merely because I have no notion of it, but because the notion of it is inconsistent, or, in other words, because it is repugnant that there should be a notion of it." [p. 446]

P2) The concept of a spiritual substance is not contradictory.

C1) The two concepts are not analogous.

P3) Spiritual substances *can* exist. (from P2)

P4) If a thing can exist and I have some reason for believing it does, I am entitled to believe it does even though it is unperceived.

P5) It is contradictory to believe that ideas should exist in what does not perceive, but not contradictory to say that a perceiving thing should be the subject of ideas.

P6) Although I have no idea of spirit I have a notion of it through reflection.

C2) Spirits exist.

When Berkeley is pressed on this he suggests that when we have a visual perception of a bob-white and an auditory perception of “bob” followed by “white” we know through reflection that the same thing has all of these perceptions. (How else are we to distinguish this case from the case of one person having a visual perception of a bob-white, while a second has an auditory perception of “bob” and a third has an auditory perception of “white”?) **Note: This point is going to be extremely important when we come to Kant, so keep it in mind.**

There are some problems, however, with Berkeley’s account:

- 1. What is it to have a notion? How does a notion differ from an idea? And what experiences, if any, are required to have notions?**
- 2. How can Berkeley reject the idea of a material substance without also rejecting the idea of a spiritual substance?**
 - a. On p. 474 he claims that the idea of a material substance is “... an idea of being in general together with the relative notion of supporting accidents” and then claims that “The general idea of being appears to me the most abstract and incomprehensible of all others....” But why can’t the same be said of immaterial substance?**

Perhaps he might answer this by suggesting that claims like “Minds have ideas” really amount only to “Minds perceive ideas,” so there is no implication of their supporting accidents in this case.

b. Later, in Section 49 (not included in your text) he claims that "... in this proposition, 'A die is hard, extended and square,' they will have it that the word 'die' denotes a subject or substance, distinct from the hardness, extension and figure, which are predicated of it, and in which they exist. This I cannot comprehend: to me a die seems to be nothing distinct from those things which are termed its modes or accidents." **But why can't the same be said of immaterial substances?**

c. It is possible here that he wants to analyze "A die is hard" differently than "I am sad." While he views the former type of statement as of the subject-predicate form, where 'is' means the is-of-predication, in the latter case he rather sees the statement as of the subject-verb-object sort. Here Cummins claims that "My conclusion is that Berkeley may well have envisioned a differential analysis of singular propositions, depending upon whether they concerned sensibles or perceivers, even if doing so would now universally be regarded as wrong-headed."

BERKELEY'S PHILOSOPHY OF MIND

Berkeley rejects the first premise of the following argument:

P1) The only knowledge is knowledge of or through ideas.

P2) An idea is a mind-dependent sensible.

P3) Minds are not sensibles.

C) Minds cannot be known.

He contends that although we have no idea of minds, we nonetheless have a reflective awareness (a notion) of our own minds, and, through their operations, come to have knowledge of other minds.

In the Principles he says that, "... 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...." (§140 not included in your copy of the text), and later, "From what hath 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 several particular agents, like myself that accompany them, and concur in their production." (§145 also not included in your copy of the text)

But this seems to lead to a serious problem. How is he supposed to get to the conclusion that there is only one god and still maintain that there are other minds?

Compare Berkeley's position with Leibniz's? What similarities do you see, and what differences?