

Chapter 8

Berkeley



Figure 8.1: Berkeley

8.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*
- Study questions:
 1. What does Berkeley think of the “most extravagant opinion that ever entered the mind of man, to wit, that there is no such thing as material substance in the world” (p.415, col.2)? What are the fundamental constituents of the world, according to Berkeley?
 2. Explain how Berkeley argues that his philosophy does not lead to skepticism, while the philosophies of Locke and Descartes do.

3. Which arguments does Berkeley provide in support of the thesis that secondary qualities do not exist in external bodies?
4. What objection does Berkeley raise against the idea that primary qualities are really in external objects, whereas secondary qualities are only in our minds?
5. What is Berkeley's argument against the notion of substance? Compare with Locke.
6. What is Berkeley's argument for the existence of God?
7. What is Berkeley's arguments against the existence of matter? Distinguish between various notions of matter.
8. According to Berkeley, things exist only in so far as they are perceived. Does it mean that the moon does not exist when we do not look at it? Why or why not?

- Text Analysis:

8.2 Introduction

8.2.1 Berkeley

- Berkeley: 1685-1753
 - Irish, Trinity College
 - Anglican priest
 - Travel: Europe, U.S.
 - Bishop of Cloyne, Ireland
- Main works: Important philosopher but also well known for his work on vision, mathematics, physics, morals, economics and medicine.
 - *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*
 - *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*
 - *De Motu* (On movement)
 - *The Theory of Vision, or Visual Language Vindicated an Explained*

Both the *Principles* and the *Dialogues* are clear expositions of Berkeley's metaphysical and epistemological views. We will focus on the *Dialogues*.

8.2.2 The *Dialogues*

- Characters:
 - Hylas: *hyle* = literally, material
 - Philonous: *philo* - *nous* = literally, “lover of mind”
- What does the dialogue form involve?
 - Plato's tradition: philosophy as common search for the truth through argumentative discussion
 - The rules of the philosophical dialogue are:
 1. Two partners: one asks questions, the other answer;
 2. One topic: usually one thesis which the two partners want to discuss – they should agree on the topic;
 3. Logic: if you agree that a proposition P is true, and if it is shown that this proposition P logically entails another proposition Q, then you must accept that you agree that Q is true as well;
 4. Conversely: if you do not want to accept Q, then you have to admit that P was false in the first place

—→ *Dialogues can be seen as the best medium for exposing a controversial thesis, because one can consider objections and provide answers. It is also more lively*

8.2.3 Berkeley in a nutshell

- Berkeley wants to keep together:
 1. Traditional religious views – against materialism and atheism
 2. Empiricism – against speculative philosophy
 3. Idealism – immaterialism

4. Common sense – against philosophical views which conflict with the layman’s view of the world
- That Berkeley is an *idealist* means that he takes that only ideas in minds exist, and nothing else. In particular, Berkeley famously denies that matter exists. Now, this seems at odds with his commitment to empiricism and common sense. In fact, Berkeley’s main aim is to prove that his idealism:
 - is the philosophy which follows from a true commitment to empiricism;
 - is the philosophy which is most compatible with common sense.
 - In general, Berkeley presents his philosophy in three steps:
 1. A negative step: criticism of the idea that anything else than ideas in minds exist;
 2. A positive step: show that idealism is the philosophy which is most compatible with both empiricism and common sense.
 3. Answers to objections

This is roughly the structure of the *Dialogues*.

8.3 Berkeley’s Immaterialism

8.3.1 Berkeley’s targets

- The general target is the idea that something, most often matter, exists independently of the mind.
- Berkeley targets the following metaphysical views:
 - Of course: full blown materialism: Hobbes
 - But most importantly: Descartes’ and Locke’s dualism, that is, not the idea that *only* matters exists, but that matter exists beside thought.
- Berkeley targets the following epistemological view:
 - Representationalism

Definition 23 – Representationalism

Representationalism is the epistemological view that we indirectly perceive external objects through the mediation of the direct perception of ideas, which are mind-dependent items, produced by, and representing these external objects.

According to Berkeley, representationalism :

1. is contrary to common sense (it involves, for example, that sounds are not what we hear but rather some movement of matter)
2. is dangerous because it opens the door to skepticism, in leaving the following question with no satisfactory answer: how do we know that our ideas, which are representations of the external objects in our minds, are actually resembling these external objects?

—→ *In short, Berkeley's diagnosis is that most of the success of skepticism is due to the representationalist theory of perception and the assumption of the existence of the material substance as a rather unknowable cause of our sensations.*

8.3.2 Esse est percipi – to be is to be perceived

If the idea that there exists external, material objects of which our ideas are more or less truthful representations is to be rejected, what is the world like and how do we know it?

According to Berkeley, common sense and empiricism together tell us that: *the ordinary objects that we perceive exist.*

Now, what can we conclude from this? can we infer the existence of mind-independent material objects? Berkeley's core argument against this is:

- P1: (Empiricism and Common Sense:) Only ordinary objects exist.
- P2: Ordinary objects = what is perceived by the senses = Sensible things
- P3: What is perceived by the senses = nothing but combinations of sensible qualities

- CC1: Ordinary objects are nothing else but combinations of sensible qualities
- CC2: Only combinations of sensible qualities exist. In other words: *Esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived)

—→ *A strong commitment to empiricism and common sense suggest that sensible things exist only in so far as they are perceived, that is to say: sensible things exist only as sensations.*

8.3.3 A possible objection to Berkeley: Representationalism

In the argument above, P1 and P2 are pretty hard to deny. That said, what about P3?

- Advocates of representationalism will object to P3, that is to say, the premise that we perceive only sensible qualities. Instead, the representationalists claims that:
 - we perceive immediately sensible qualities
 - we perceive mediately (through our sensations) properties of external objects, these properties being the cause of our sensations, and our sensations being representations of these properties.
- Representationalism is elaborated through the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.
 - Remember Descartes and his piece of wax! true qualities of matter are only: extension, figure and movement
 - Remember Locke: while extension, figure, movement, solidity are properties of the eternal objects, heat, color, smells and taste are not. Primary qualities were taken to be the “real qualities” of the objects, while secondary qualities were taken not to belong to the external object and to be “in our mind” only.
- With this distinction in hand, we can avoid the conclusion that only sensations/ideas exist. Instead, both external objects and our representations of them exist. External object then exists as mind-independent entities, that is to say, independently of whether some mind perceives them or not.

8.3.4 Berkeley's objections to the representationalist view

Berkeley raises three main objections against representationalism in the *Dialogues*:

1. **Pleasure and Pain come together with sensations of secondary qualities** – Berkeley takes back Locke's example of heat and pain being similar in the way we feel them, and hence similar in the way they exist. Berkeley uses it for a different conclusion though:
 - (a) we agreed that ordinary objects are nothing but the combinations of perceived qualities
 - (b) when we perceive some fire, we perceive heat and pain, in the same way and together
 - (c) CC: It is inconsistent to attribute heat to the fire, while denying that pain is part of it.
 - (d) Berkeley, just as Locke did, concludes from this that secondary qualities, like heat, colors, smells and taste do not belong to the external objects but rather exist in our minds.
 - (e) Question: Could Berkeley apply the same argument to smells, tastes, sounds and colors etc.?

→ *We have no empirical reasons to believe that sensations of heat, but not of pain, correspond to qualities existing in the external objects. As empiricists, we should give both pain and heat the same ontological status.*

2. **Against unobservable qualities in external objects as the true causes of our sensation of secondary qualities.**

If we are not convinced by the argument above (sensations being intrinsically linked with pleasure and pain), Berkeley gives us a second argument against the postulation that secondary qualities exist outside of the external objects.

Berkeley indeed notices that *it is contradictory to empiricism to postulate the existence of unobservable qualities as the causes of our sensations.*

Example of the sound: The representationalist takes it that our sensation of a sound comes from the unperceived movement of the external object, transmitted to the surrounding air, and finally to our ears. The sound that we hear is thus not the “real” sound. And “real sounds are never heard”.

→ *The view that the sounds that we hear are not real, while the real sounds are never heard is arguably untenable from the points of view of both empiricism and common sense.*

3. **All sensible qualities are relative: Secondary and Primary Qualities alike** – the color, taste and smell of something, as well as its extension depends on the subject perceiving.

- Secondary qualities: fishsticks may taste good to you, while not to me. By contrast, overdone raw milk soft cheese may taste good to me, but not to you. This suggests that colors, tastes etc. are really in us and not in the external object.
- Concerning primary qualities (figure, extension, number, movement, solidity) , the same arguments apply!

Among the primary qualities, Berkeley considers extension, the size of objects, because *all other primary qualities depend on extension*. Without extension, there is no figure, number, movement or solidity. Extension is in some sense the “master quality”.

Now, Berkeley’s argument goes, just as the perception of tastes and warmth vary with the perceiving subject, so do the perception of sizes.

- The perceived size of an object depends on the distance at which I perceive an object: which size is the true one?

The point is:

1. We have no reason to believe that one of these sizes is the true one, while the other are “mere appearances” in our minds.
2. So, either all sizes belong to the external object, or none of them do, and all perceived sizes are mere appearances
3. But it would be absurd to say that an object can have different sizes.

CC: all perceived sizes are mere appearances in our minds.

- We cannot perceive the size the mite's foot, but the mite can!
By the same argument as above, one can say that no true extension belongs to the mite's foot: neither the one that you attribute to it with your sense or the one that the mite attributes to it with its senses.
If you say the one that we measure with our rules, it seems rather anthropocentric!

—→ *Berkeley seems to have shown that (1) the distinction between secondary and primary qualities does not stand, (2) all qualities, primary and secondary, do not exist in any other way than being sensations in our mind.*

8.3.5 Against the idea of material substance

If all the qualities corresponding to our sensations really do not exist outside our minds, what is left of the external objects? One way to answer is to postulate the existence of an unknown we do not know what – the material substance or substratum, which possesses properties such that to cause our sensations.

Against the notion of substance

Against the notion of substance, Berkeley develops two main arguments against this view:

1. The “Master Argument”

The master argument holds that we can no more conceive of something existing unconceived (existing outside of the mind) than we can see something existing unseen.

It is called the master argument because Berkeley seems to believe that it is the most convincing argument he can make. Unfortunately, it is in fact *the* argument, among Berkeley's, which does not work welll.

- On one reading, the argument is simply not valid for it conflates the nature of the representation (which is to be conceived) and the nature of what represented (which does not need to be conceived). These, however, do not have to match: for example, a postcard of the Sears tower is small and two-dimensional, while the Sears Towers are neither

of these. Back to the problem of conceiving the unconceived, one can conceive of a representation of a remote world which has never been conceived. That the representation of such a world needs to be conceived in order to do so, does not make the object of the representation, i.e. the remote world, conceived.

- On another, more charitable, reading, Berkeley make a point from the point of view of the empiricist: if, as the empiricist representationalist has it, all our ideas come from experience, then we cannot conceive what is not conceived because we never experienced it. Under this reading, Berkeley's argument fares much better.

2. The Likeness argument

- According to the representationalist, the idea of X resemble the thing X . If true, then our idea of substance should resemble the substance.

- Now, the Likeness principle states that an idea cannot "resemble" anything else than another idea.

- If this is true, then the "things" of which we have ideas must also be ideas, and hence exist within the mind.

- If true, then the notion of us having the idea an unconceived substance is contradictory.

—→ *In the two arguments above, Berkeley shows that the notion of unknown, unconceived substance is contradictory with the commitments of empiricism and representationalism.*

Against Matter

In the second Dialogue, Hylas will desperately try to salvage the existence of matter. Some of these argument involves a discussion of Malebranche, which is not our primary interest. That said, Berkeley proposes two interesting arguments against the notion of matter as a *cause*.

One could argue that to postulate the existence of matter, or of some kind of external objects, is necessary in order to explain that we have ideas: the external table would be the cause of my idea of the table.

The main objection that Berkeley levels against the above reasoning is that it is incoherent to think that matter can be a cause of ideas:

1. Matter, defined as an extended, solid, moveable, unthinking substance cannot be a cause of ideas, defined as unextended, not solid, not moveable substance made of thought

Remember that it is an important problem for Descartes: if matter and thought are different substances, that is, different kinds of stuff, how can they influence each other?

Remember also that Leibniz had solved the problem in denying that causation be a reality at the fundamental level, while Spinoza had turned matter and thought to points of view from which the unique substance is understood.

2. More generally, matter, as defined as INACTIVE or inert, cannot “cause” anything by itself.

This should speak for itself: how an inactive thing can cause anything?

Conclusion on Berkeley on Matter

Berkeley seems to make a good argument against the idea of a “I do not know what” – material substance, whose absolute existence – i.e. independently of any mind – explains that we have ideas.

Berkeley indeed shows that:

1. Postulating the existence of a unobservable, unknown material substance is contradictory to empiricism
2. Postulating the existence of a unobservable, unknown material substance as a cause of resemblant ideas in our minds leads to difficulties (if not contradictions), both because of the notions of resemblance and of causality.
3. Because of these difficulties, postulating the existence of a unobservable, unknown material substance does not have any explanatory power.

Berkeley will finally argue that postulating the existence of a unobservable, unknown material substance is superfluous – We can explain everything with ideas only...

8.3.6 Conclusion on Berkeley's immaterialism

We have seen that the first aspect of Berkeley's philosophy is his criticism of the notion of material substance, existing absolutely outside of any mind. Berkeley attacks this view both from an epistemological and a metaphysical point of view:

1. Against the epistemological view of representationalism, Berkeley undermines the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.
2. As to the metaphysical hypothesis of a unknown, unobservable material substance existing absolutely independently of our minds, he contends that such an hypothesis
 - stands in contradiction with the principles of empiricism
 - has no explanatory power, and at worse, is contradictory.
 - leads to contradiction

What remains to explain is the positive part of Berkeley's philosophy, including the view that:

- Ideas in minds are all there is
- This view is not a skeptic view
- Indeed, it is compatible with common sense.