

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”?
 2. What are the fundamental constituents of the world, according to Berkeley? In what sense do they “exist”?

3. Explain one argument that Berkeley provides in support of the thesis that secondary qualities do not exist outside of our minds.
4. Explain how Berkeley undermines the idea that, while secondary qualities only exist in our minds, primary qualities exist in the external objects.
5. Explain one of the objections that Berkeley levels against the notion of a unobservable mind-independent material substance that causes our sensations.
6. Why must we admit that God exist according to Berkeley? Why does he think that postulating the existence of an infinite mind – God – is better than postulating the existence of an independent material substance?
7. In what sense do ordinary object exist according to Berkeley? What does “to be is to be perceived” mean? To what extend can we know these objects?
8. Explain why, according to Berkeley, his philosophy is compatible with empiricism, while the philosophy of Locke is not.
9. Explain why, according to Berkeley, his philosophy does not lead to skepticism, while the philosophies of Descartes and Locke do.
10. Explain why, according to Berkeley, his philosophy is more compatible with common sense than the philosophies of Descartes and Locke.

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 and 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 20 – Representationalism

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

In the *Dialogues*, Berkeley takes the view defended by the representationalist, and pushes to its extreme :

1. **Secondary qualities exist only insofar as they are perceived** – 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.
 - (a) we agreed that we perceive ordinary objects as 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.

→ *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.**

Against Locke this time, Berkeley 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”.

Try to explain this to the layman in the street, it should be clear very soon that this view is not common sensical. Nor is it in agreement with empiricism, since one has to postulate the existence of some unobservable entity – matter.

→ *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. **Secondary and Primary Qualities alike** – the color, taste and smell of something, as well as its extension depends on the subject perceiving.

One could rehearse the argument about heat and pain, and show that the so-called primary qualities appear to us in exactly the same way as the so-called secondary qualities. We have no empirical reason to believe that extension, duration or solidity are more “real” than sounds and colors. In fact, quite the opposite: all sensible qualities are relative:

- 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 well.

- On one reading, the argument is simply not valid for it conflates the nature or properties of the representation (which is to be conceived) and the nature and properties of what is represented (which does not need to be conceived). These, however, do not have to match: for example, a postcard of Mount Sentinel is small and two-dimensional, while Mount Sentinel 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 makes 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. What Berkeley has yet to show is that, besides the fact that the main tenets of representationalism materialism are explanatorily useless, they are also superfluous: we can explain the entirety of our cognitive lives without them, and this, in a way that is compatible with both empiricism and common sense. Accordingly, Berkeley will defend that:

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

8.4 Berkeley's positive metaphysics: Idealism

8.4.1 Sensible things exist: Philonous not a skeptic

Berkeley does not deny that the *physical* world exist, just that it exist as a mind-independent being.

Berkeley's idealism: the world exist only as ideas in some mind.

- *From the idea that all that exist is but sensations it does NOT follow, either that nothing exists, or that everything is an illusion.:*

- It does not follow that nothing exists: Berkeley does not deny that things existing, but instead he gives a new definition of existence.

- Ordinary objects exist as clusters of sensations. This is all what their "being" consists in. Berkeley not deny the reality of the world in saying this. What he does is to re-define what it means to "exist", what it means to be "real". It does not take to have a mind-independent absolute existence in order to be "real". All it takes is to be perceived by a mind.

- So, ordinary objects, that is, clusters of sensations, are real according to Berkeley:

A piece of sensible bread, for instance, would stay in my stomach better than ten thousand times as much of that insensible, unintelligible, real bread you speak of.

- The paradoxical consequence of this is that rather than Philonous' idealism, it is Hylas's materialism which leads to scepticism!

- It is only because Hylas is assuming the existence of a second kind of beings, which remain unknown, unobservable and unintelligible for us, that he finds himself being a skeptic. It is because he assumes that there is something beyond our sensations that these sensations appear to be "mere appearances"

- By contrast, Berkeley denies that there exists anything beyond our sensations which would remain unknown to us. Sensations are all there is, and we know them well. So, we actually know sensible things the

way they are directly through our sensations. Sensations are not “mere appearances”, there are the real thing!

- So: while the representationalist makes the following reasoning:

P1. all we have epistemological access to are our sensations

P2. sensations are but appearances, the effect of the true properties of the real external objects existing absolutely outside our minds

CC: we have epistemological access only to mere appearances and the true properties of real external object remain unknown to us

This obviously leads to skepticism regarding knowledge. In denying P2, Berkeley avoids the conclusion: all we have epistemological access to are our sensations but these clusters of sensations are the real things and there is nothing more to know ! Appearances are not “mere” appearances, but the reality.

- The ode to the beauty at the beginning of the second dialogue has an important signification: while the person who wants to believe in matter becomes a sceptic, the idealist admires the beauty of nature:

—→ *It is very important to understand that Berkeley does not deny either that ordinary objects exists, or that we can know them. What Berkeley denies is that anything exists independently of some mind’s perceiving it. Berkeley gives a new definition to existence or being: to be is nothing more than to be perceived. Ordinary objects do exist, as clusters of sensations, and we know them very well, directly through our senses.*

8.4.2 Minds

It is not quite exact to say that only ideas exist according to Berkeley. Sure, what we call external object really exist as clusters of sensations within some mind. But, in order for ideas to exist this way, it is necessary that *minds* exist as well.

- We are spirits (or minds). Common sense tells us that we have minds.
- Note that Berkely commits to a form of dualism, that is to say, he accepts two kinds of “stuff”, and not only one, in his ontology: minds and ideas.

- One could say that we traded an ontology of minds and matter (Descartes) to an ontology of minds and ideas.
- What is the difference then? According to Berkeley:
 1. Contrary to Descartes, he does not postulate any unnecessary entity
 2. More importantly, he does not postulate anything beyond experience – idealism is a consequence of true empiricism
 3. The connection between ideas and minds is more intelligible than the connection between matter and minds. Matter cannot influence minds, while ideas could.
- Note, however, that, the argument that matter, being passive, cannot cause anything, could apply to ideas as well. If true, then the problem of how ideas come in our minds is not completely solved in Berkeley's philosophy.
- One way to solve the problem would be to take minds as clusters of ideas, which in turn are clusters of sensation. Such a view may have to face difficulties concerning the definition of identify and individuality, but such difficulties are faced by almost all the views we have encountered: so, it would not count as a definite objection.

—→ *At the end of the day, the fundamental constituents of the world for Berkeley are of two kinds: minds and ideas.*

8.4.3 God

It should be no surprise that Berkeley argues for the existence of God: after all, the whole point of his philosophy was to defend religious views against the threat of materialism and atheism.

- Besides the ode to nature, Berkeley uses a very common argument for the existence of God:
 1. I am sure (by common sense) that the sensible world exists independently of my perceiving it
 2. Hence: there must be some other mind wherein it exists: "As sure therefore as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite omnipresent spirit who contains and supports it."

- SO: Does the moon exist if we do not look at it?
 - Yes, because it is common sense that stuff does disappear when you put them in the drawer.
 - Yes, because God is watching them.

This means that without God, and under the hypothesis that all sentient being be annihilated, the physical world would not exist anymore.

- God is also responsible for the order between ideas: laws of nature exist for Berkeley. This means that you can go on doing physics and biology. Only, laws are about ideas, not about mind-independent objects.

→ *God is the last part of the picture: He is what guarantees the independent existence of things from our minds.*

8.4.4 Conclusion

- We have seen that, according to Berkeley, the fundamental constituents of the world are:
 1. Ideas
 2. Minds
 3. God

Of course, there is no material substance, and nothing whose existence does not depend on perceiving minds.

- We have also seen that to deny the existence of independent matter and to commit to idealism is a way to avoid skepticism.

8.5 Conclusion: Idealism, Empiricism and common sense

Berkeley's philosophy is challenging because it puts into question some of our cherished assumptions about how the world is like. The belief that there exists mind-independent beings, of which our sensations are the effect is deeply rooted. Berkeley shows that it is far from obvious that we can make such a belief compatible with empiricism and common sense.

8.5. CONCLUSION: IDEALISM, EMPIRICISM AND COMMON SENSE²²⁵

- Berkeley's metaphysical view: all there exists are ideas and minds
- Berkeley's epistemological view: strict empiricism: we perceive directly sensible things as they are, that is, as cluster of sensible qualities.
- Berkeley argues that his philosophy is not only the most compatible with empiricism, but also with the layman's common sense.
 - The difference between the "gardener" and the idealist is only a difference of words: both believe in the existence of what they perceive. Both believe, for example, in the existence of colors, cold or heat in physical objects. Only, the gardener does not know that these objects do not exist independently of the mind.
 - By contrast, the philosophers deny the existence of colors, flavors and so on in the ordinary objects: in this sense, they are the true sceptic....

