

Part III
Empiricists

Chapter 6

Berkeley



Figure 6.1: Berkeley

6.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Berkeley, *Three Dialogues*, LMP pp. 52-74
- 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” (LMP p.53)?
 2. What objection does Berkeley raise against the idea that primary qualities are really in external objects, whereas secondary qualities are only in our minds?

3. How does Berkeley prove the existence of God?
4. What is Berkeley's argument against the idea that matter is the cause of our ideas?
5. According to Berkeley, does the moon exist when we do not look at it? Why or why not?

6.2 Introduction

6.2.1 Berkeley

- Berkeley: 1685-1753
- Bishop of Cloyne, Ireland
- Important philosopher but also well known for his work on vision, mathematics, physics, morals, economics and medicine.
- Strong religious motivation for his philosophy

6.2.2 The *Dialogues*

- Characters:
 - Hylas: from matter
 - Philonous: 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

- Best medium for objections and answers

- Other works by Berkeley:

- *Principles of Human Knowledge*

- *An essay toward a new theory of vision*

- *De motu, or the principle and nature of motion and cause and the communications of motions*

6.2.3 Berkeley in a nutshell

- Berkeley wants to keep together:

1. Empiricism
2. Idealism
3. Common sense

- 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 two 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.

6.3 Criticism of materialism

6.3.1 Berkeley's targets

- Berkeley's targets are:
 - Of course: full blown materialism: Hobbes
 - But most of all: Descartes' and Locke's dualism, that is, not the idea that *only* matters exists, but that matter exists beside thought.
- The main target is thus the idea that something exists independently of the mind.

6.3.2 In what sense do sensible things exist?

What are sensible things?

Common sense and empiricism both tell us that: *the ordinary object that we perceive exist*. Now, what can we conclude from this? the existence of mind-independent material objects? Berkeley's core argument against this is:

1. Definition 1: sensible things: "sensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense"
2. We perceive nothing but sensible qualities
3. Hence definition 2: "sensible things are nothing else but so many sensible qualities, or combination of sensible qualities"
4. CONCLUSION: *Esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived)

The point is going to raise objections against the view that sensible objects outside of the mind: for Berkeley, sensible things exist only in so far as they are perceived. That is to say: *sensible things exist only as sensations*.

6.3.3 Against Representationalism

Representationalism

- Representationalism object about assumption 2. above: "we perceive only sensible qualities"

- Instead, the representationalists say:
 - we perceive immediately sensible qualities
 - we perceive mediately (through our sensations) properties of external objects, these properties being the cause of our sensations.
 - 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
- In this view, the conclusion that only sensations/ideas exist does not follow anymore

Criticism

Five main objections against representationalism in the *Dialogues*

- Sensations come altogether: example of heat and pain p.55-56
 1. we sense heat and pain at the same time
 2. we said that sensible things are the cluster of (immediate) sensible qualities
 3. hence, if heat is part of the fire, then heat is part of it too, just as much as heat is.
 4. by contrast, it is inconsistent to attribute heat to the fire, while denying pain to be part of it.
- It is contradictory to empiricism to postulate the existence of unobservable qualities as cause of our sensations. Example of the sound: Berkeley brings the representationalist to the position that “real sounds are never heard”, which arguably is untenable from the empiricist point of view and is in conflict with common sense.

SO: DILEMMA for the empiricist representationalist: either the corporeal substance is but sensible qualities or it is an empty notion.
- All sensible qualities are relative – the color of something, as well as its extension depends on the subject perceiving.
 - this is of course clear for colors, and all “secondary qualities”

- Concerning primary qualities, the same arguments apply: we cannot see the mite's foot, but the mite can

SO: which extension belongs to the mite's foot: the one that you attribute to it with your sense (none) 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

- If you say that *the mite's foot has extension in general, even if we cannot say how much in particular*, then, according to Berkeley, you violate the requirement of empiricism : You cannot form any idea of extension that is not a particular degree of extension.

Berkeley rejects the idea that we can form general ideas by abstraction:

This is a strong thesis, the full justification of which is a matter of controversy among commentators on Berkeley.

Here is what Berkeley gives us in the *Dialogues*: we can treat particulars in an abstract way; however, we can never form a clear and distinct idea of an abstract notion.

- Matter as a cause of ideas (direct or indirect)

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: causal relationships are only at the level of appearances.

Note, however, that Berkeley's argument presupposes the following assumption: that the cause of X must have some properties in common with X. This seems reasonable at first sight: it is difficult to see how something deprived of thought could produce thought. However, it is not clear that such principle stands well under close scrutiny: is not it possible to make something solid out of something which is not?

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

The second objection that Berkeley levels is more general: postulating matter is postulating an unnecessary unobservable entity. We can explain everything with ideas alone. No need to include a supplementary being in our ontology. Worse, to consider that matter is the instrument of God seems to contradict the idea that God is all powerful.

- One last argument (p.65) : we cannot conceive the unconceived
 - on one reading, the argument is not valid for it conflates the nature of the representation and the nature of what represented. 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.
 - on another, more charitable, reading, Berkeley make a point from the point of view of the empiricist: we cannot conceive what is not conceived because we never experienced it.

6.4 Idealism, empiricism and common sense

6.4.1 Sensible things exist

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

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

- Rather than Philonous' idealism, it is Hylas's materialism which leads to scepticism!
- SO: Ordinary objects exist as clusters of sensations. We do not deny the reality of the world in saying this. See the quote:

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.

6.4.2 God

- 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.

6.4.3 Minds

- We are spirits (or minds). We have ideas. Note that Berkeley 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.

Note, however, that, regarding the third argument, someone could object that ideas are passive, just as matter is supposed to be, so that the problem of how ideas come in our minds is not solved in Berkeley's philosophy.

6.4.4 Idealism and common sense

- One point should be made clear: Berkeley believes that his philosophy is the most compatible with 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....

