

Introduction to Philosophy

Philosophy 110W
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Class #5 - Berkeley's Idealism



An Empiricist's Problem

- The empiricist claims that all knowledge comes from experience.
- But we experience our sensations, not the causes of our sensations.
- So, we have no knowledge of what causes our sensations, i.e. objects in the supposedly material world.
- “So long as men thought that real things subsisted without the mind, and that their knowledge was only so far forth real as it was conformable to real things, it follows they could not be certain they had any real knowledge at all. For how can it be known that the things which are perceived are conformable to those which are not perceived, or exist without the mind?” (*Principles*, §86).

Idealism

- Locke: our ideas of primary qualities of objects resemble real qualities of those objects.
 - ▶ To assert a resemblance, we have to be able to perceive both objects.
 - ▶ We seem to be stuck with only our sensations.
- Berkeley: there are no material objects.
 - ▶ “It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing among men that houses, mountains, rivers, and, in a word, sensible objects have an existence, natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding... What are the aforementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense? And what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations?” (*Principles*, §4)
 - ▶ “By matter...we are to understand an inert, senseless substance, in which extension, figure, and motion do actually subsist. 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. Hence it is plain that the very notion of what is called matter, or corporeal substance, involves a contradiction in it” (*Principles*, §9).

Three Arguments for Idealism

1. From the sensibility of objects
2. From the relativity of perceptions
 - the major argument
3. A reductive argument

Berkeley on Sensible Objects

The table I write on, I say, exists; that is, I see it and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed - meaning by that that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. There was an odor; that is, it was smelled; there was a sound, that is to say, it was heard; a color or figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch. This is all that I can understand by these and the like expressions. For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible that they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them (*Principles* §3).

The Argument from the Sensibility of Objects

D1. Objects are sensible things.

D2. Sensible things are things with none other than sensible qualities.

D3. The sensible qualities are the secondary qualities.

D4. Those secondary qualities are strictly mental properties.

DC. So, objects are strictly mental, i.e. there is no physical world.

Berkeley's Arguments from the Relativity of Perceptions

- Locke's principles showed that the secondary qualities were not real.
- Berkeley extends the use of these principles against the primary qualities.
- Why may we not as well argue that figure and extension are not patterns or resemblances of qualities existing in matter, because to the same eye at different stations, or eyes of a different texture at the same station, they appear various and cannot, therefore, be the images of anything settled and determinate without the mind? (*Principles* §14).
- Let's look at these arguments in groups.

Number



- For the argument for the relativity of number, consider what number we might give to a deck of cards.
- It is 52 cards, 4 suits, 13 ranks, 1 deck.
- “The same thing bears a different denomination of number as the mind views it with different respects. Thus, the same extension is one, or three, or thirty-six, according as the mind considers it with reference to a yard, a foot, or an inch. Number is so visibly relative and dependent on men’s understanding that it is strange to think how anyone should give it an absolute existence without the mind” (*Principles* §12, AW 449b).
- The number correctly applied to the object varies as we think of the object in different ways.
- It may be a property of a concept, rather than of an object.



Extension



- To show that extension is relative to the perceiver, consider the mite (a tiny insect) and a giant.
- What appears large to the mite can appear tiny to us, and minuscule to the giant.
- The size of an object is relative to perceiver, just as the color or taste is.
- I appear large to the mite, but to a giant, I appear small.
- Thus extension is a secondary property, too.
- This example is of utmost importance, since extension is the most plausible primary quality.

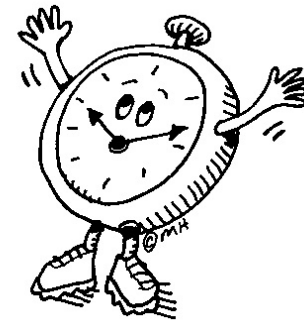
Shape



- To show that shape is relative to a perceiver, consider what we see under a microscope.
- Edges that appear straight to the naked eye will appear jagged when magnified.
- Consider our perception of a rectangular object, like a table.
 - ▶ The shape is never really seen as a rectangle, although we all infer that it is that shape.
 - ▶ What we really get from the senses about the shape is relative to the perceiver.

Motion

- The argument for the relativity of our perceptions of motion relies on an argument for the relativity of our perceptions of time, since motion is change in place over time.
- Our perception of time varies with the succession of our ideas.
- If our ideas proceed more quickly, a motion will appear more slow.
- Just as we can not rely on an external measurement of extension, since we have to agree on a standard unit measure, we can not rely on an external measurement of time.



Solidity

- Berkeley's argument for the relativity of solidity to the perceiver takes solidity to be resistance to touch.
- A strong person will find something soft that a weaker person will find hard.
- This is even more plausible if we consider giants and mites again.

Summary of Berkeley's Arguments From the Relativity of Perceptions

- Berkeley has considered all of Locke's primary qualities as we experience them.
- He has shown that these perceptions vary in the same way that perceptions of the secondary qualities do.
- All qualities are secondary qualities.
- We have no veridical primary qualities, representing a material world.

Berkeley's Reductive Argument Against the Primary Qualities

If it is certain that those original [primary] qualities are inseparably united with the other sensible qualities and not, even in thought, capable of being abstracted from them, it plainly follows that they exist only in the mind. But I desire anyone to reflect and try whether he can, by any abstraction of thought, conceive the extension and motion of a body without all other sensible qualities. 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. In short, extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable. Where, therefore, the other sensible qualities are, these must be also, namely, in the mind and nowhere else (*Principles* §10).

Berkeley's Reductive Argument, Regimented

- R1. You can not have an idea of a primary quality without secondary qualities.
- R2. So, wherever the secondary qualities are, the primary are.
- R3. Secondary qualities are only in the mind.
- RC. So, the primary qualities are mental, too.

Causes and Intermediate Instruments

- For Berkeley, only God can be taken as the true cause of my ideas.
- An all-powerful God could have no use for an intermediate instrument.
- “Though we do the utmost we can to secure the belief of *matter*, though, when reason forsakes us, we endeavor to support our opinion on the bare possibility of the thing, and though we indulge ourselves in the full scope of an imagination not regulated by reason to make out that poor *possibility*, yet the upshot of all is that there are certain *unknown ideas* in the mind of God; for this, if anything, is all that I conceive to be meant by *occasion* with regard to God. And this at the bottom is no longer contending for the *thing*, but for the *name*. Whether therefore there are such ideas in the mind of God, and whether they may be called by the name *matter*, I shall not dispute. But, if you stick to the notion of an unthinking substance or support of extension, motion, and other sensible qualities, then to me it is most evidently impossible there should be any such thing, since it is a plain repugnancy that those qualities should exist in or be supported by an unperceiving substance” (*Principles*, §§75-6).

Locke's Error

The *ideas of primary qualities* of bodies are resemblances of them and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves, but the *ideas produced* in us *by* these *secondary qualities have no resemblance* of them at all. There is nothing like our *ideas* existing in the bodies themselves. They are, in the bodies we denominate from them, only a power to produce those sensations in us. And what is sweet, blue, or warm in *idea* is but the certain bulk, figure, and motion of the *insensible parts in the bodies themselves* which we call so (Locke's *Essay* II.VIII.15, emphasis in last line added).

Berkeley on the Resemblance Hypothesis

- RH1. My ideas resemble material objects.
- RH2. My ideas resemble their causes.
 - Berkeley rejects RH1, but accepts RH2.
 - Ideas can only resemble other ideas.
- “But, you say, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them of which they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind in an unthinking substance. I answer, an idea can be like nothing but an idea; a color or figure can be like nothing but another color or figure” (*Principles*, §8, AW 448b).
- My ideas resemble, we presume, the ideas in the minds of other persons.
- And, they resemble their causes, which are ideas in the mind of God.

Berkeley on God

“When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or not, 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”
(*Principles* §29, AW 453a).

Not a presumption, but an inference.

Berkeley on Abstract Ideas

- If we thoroughly examine this tenet [materialism] it will, perhaps, be found at bottom to depend on the doctrine of *abstract ideas*. For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived? Light and colors, heat and cold, extension and figures - in a word, the things we see and feel - what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas, or impressions on the sense? And is it possible to separate, even in thought, any of these from perception? For my part, I might as easily divide a thing from itself... In truth, the object and the sensation are the same thing and cannot therefore be abstracted from each other (*Principles* §5).

Look Ma, No Problem of Sense Error

- On the materialist view, there is no yellow, no sweetness in external objects.
 - As applied to objects, terms for secondary qualities are mere names.
- Berkeley interprets terms for secondary qualities as referring to our mental states.
 - The lemon is yellow, since I really have a yellow sensory experience.
- Berkeley's account solves the problem of error for our beliefs based on the senses.
 - All ideas are independent.
 - We need not ascribe contradictory properties to an external object.
 - The problems of error that motivated Descartes and Locke are obviated.
- Berkeley has a new set of problems.



Intersubjectivity and Persistence

- How do we account for different people having similar experiences?
- How do we account for the fact that objects do not seem to go in and out of existence, that they persist?
- Berkeley posits God.
- “For, though we hold indeed the objects of sense to be nothing else but ideas which cannot exist unperceived; yet we may not hence conclude they have no existence except only while they are perceived by us, since there may be some other spirit that perceives them though we do not. Wherever bodies are said to have no existence without the mind, I would not be understood to mean this or that particular mind, but all minds whatsoever. It does not therefore follow from the foregoing principles that bodies are annihilated and created every moment, or exist not at all during the intervals between our perception of them” (*Principles*, §48).

The Limerick

There was a young man who said, "God
Must think it exceedingly odd
When he finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there's no one about in the quad."
"Dear Sir, your confusion is odd.
I am always about in the quad.
And that's why this tree
will continue to be
Since observed by, yours faithfully,
God."

Berkeley's World

- There are colors, sounds, and smells.
- The apple is just how I experience it.
- The mental world, while not a material world, is not a world of imagination.
- “The ideas imprinted on the senses by the author of nature are called *real things*; and those excited in the imagination, being less regular, vivid, and constant, are more properly termed *ideas*, or *images of things* which they copy and represent” (*Principles* §33).
- But Berkeley's world is purely psychological.



Summary

- We started the term by calling into question some of our most basic beliefs.
- Descartes argued that sense experience cannot lead to knowledge.
- Locke defended the principle that all knowledge derives from sense experience.
- Berkeley showed that such a commonsense principle led to serious questions about the existence of the material world.

Coming Up

- Tuesday: Moore and Wittgenstein
- Exegeses are due next Thursday (September 18).
 - ▶ In the précis, you were asked to present an argument.
 - ▶ In the exegesis, you are asked to present the arguments in their context.
 - What is the ultimate goal of the selection?
 - How do the specific arguments support that goal?