

Philosophy 101: Introduction to Philosophy, Queens College, Spring 2006
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Lecture Notes, April 5

I. Three arguments for idealism

Berkeley's idealism is often summarized, as he writes in §3, that for objects, their esse is percipi. 'Esse is percipi' means 'being is perception'.

In fact, for Berkeley, there are perceptions, and perceivers.

The notion of a perceiver causes difficulties for Berkeley, to which we will return.

Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley all agree that secondary properties, like color, exist only in the mind.

Berkeley extends the point.

We perceive only the perceptions, not what is behind them, under them, or causing them.

So, we have no knowledge of the material world.

Locke and Berkeley disagree over the status of our ideas about primary qualities.

Locke argues that they represent, and resemble, material objects.

Berkeley wants to show that they too are only perceptions, that they are essentially mental.

Berkeley provides three arguments to show that primary qualities are in the mind:

1. From the sensibility of objects
2. The extended Lockean arguments
3. A reductive argument

II. The argument from the sensibility of objects

Berkeley's argument for idealism from the sensibility of objects is an argument from the definition of what it means to be a sensible object.

- 1) Objects are sensible things.
 - 2) Sensible things are things with sensible qualities.
 - 3) The sensible qualities are the secondary qualities.
 - 4) Those secondary qualities are strictly mental properties.
- So, objects are strictly mental.
I.e. there is no physical world.

On premises 1) and 2), read §3.

This argument is not valid, as it stands.

You might take some time to find the problems with it.

I think it fairly represents Berkeley's intentions though.

Remember, the empiricist claim is that all we know must originally come in through the senses.

III. Berkeley's Lockean arguments

The Lockean arguments demonstrate, for each supposedly primary quality, that it is really a secondary quality. Most of the Lockean arguments appear more explicitly in the handout excerpt from the *Three Dialogues* I call these arguments Lockean because Berkeley uses Locke's principles against him. Remember, the disagreement between Berkeley and Locke is over metaphysics, not methodology.

The use of the following principles characterize a Lockean argument:

P₁: If some quality of an object appears different to two or more people (or to one person in two or more different states) then that quality is merely mental.

Remember the hot and cold water experiment.

P₂: If the quality appears the same to every one, then it is a real property of the object.

Locke uses the example of the sphere.

Berkeley's Lockean argument against the primary qualities is that P₂ is never fulfilled.

There are no properties that do not vary with the perceiver.

He proceeds by example, for all the primary properties: number, extension, shape, motion, solidity

IV. Berkeley's Lockean argument against number

Consider what number we might give to a deck of cards.

It is 52 cards, 4 suits, 13 ranks, 1 deck.

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.

Read §12, on the relation of number to extension.

V. Berkeley's Lockean argument against extension

For extension (size), consider the mite, a tiny insect.

What appears large to one perceiver can appear tiny to another.

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.

One response to Berkeley's argument about extension is that there is something on which the mite, the giant, and I can agree: I am six feet tall.

That is, the correspondence between a scale of measurement and an object is not relative to the perceiver.

If there is an objective fact about my extension which is not relative to the perceiver, then Berkeley's argument fails.

But this response is insufficient.

The scale of measurement itself is relative to a perceiver.

A yard was originally defined as the distance between the end of the king's finger and the tip of his nose.

We have more objective measures now, but even these do not solve the problem.

There used to be an actual standard meter bar, against which all other meters could be measured.

Now, we use the distance light travels in a specific period of time, since the speed of light is supposedly a constant.

(See the website for links to interesting histories of measurement.)

According to Einstein, the speed of light is a constant, though some scientists question this result.

But consider, what if we awoke tomorrow and found that everything had doubled in size.

We would have no way of discovering this fact.
Dilations and restrictions could happen all of the time, without us knowing!
We settle our scales relative to useful sizes and distances.
Extension does seem to be a secondary quality, according to the Lockean principles.

VI. Berkeley's Lockean argument against shape

For shape, consider what we see under a microscope.
See Handout, Column III.
Straight edges will appear as jagged.
Also, consider that the rectangular table is never really perceived as a rectangle.
The shape is inferred, not perceived.

VII. Berkeley's Lockean argument against motion

Consider how motion varies with the succession of our ideas, §14; also Handout, Column III.
Take motion as the reciprocal of time, the change in an object's position over time.
If our ideas proceed more quickly, the motion will appear more slow.

VIII. Berkeley's Lockean argument against solidity

Berkeley considers solidity as resistance to touch, Handout, column IV.
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.

Hylas grants that hard and soft are relative to the perceiver, but says that the causes of these are not relative.
Philonous responds that the causes are not perceived.
Compare with Locke, Book II, Chapter VIII, §15.
Locke says that the secondary qualities arise from the impulse of insensible parts of matter on our senses.
But if we are empiricists, says Berkeley, we can have no experience, no sensation, of insensible parts.
This is a contradiction.
This is what Berkeley relies on in the argument for idealism from empiricism.
Berkeley considers 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.