

Class18 - April 1

Berkeley's *Principles*, Introduction, (AW 438-4446); §86-§100 ([handout](#))
Three Dialogues, Second Dialogues (AW 475-484)

I. Berkeley's Reductive Argument Against the Primary Qualities

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

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

Saad discussed the first and mentioned the third, and Ian discussed the second.

Berkeley provides a last, direct, argument that the primary qualities reduce to secondary properties.

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, AW 449a).

Here is a version of Berkeley's reductive argument:

- 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.

To repeat, Berkeley considers as objects those things that we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste.

Philonous: Sensible things are all immediately perceivable; and those things which are immediately perceivable are ideas; and these exist only in the mind. This much you have, if I am not mistaken, long since agreed to (Second Dialogue, AW 475b).

The *esse* of such objects is to be perceived.

There is no reason to posit anything beyond such objects, aside from their cause, i.e. God.

Philonous: Since, therefore, it is impossible even for the mind to disunite the ideas of extension and motion from all other sensible qualities, does it not follow that where the one exists, there necessarily the other exists likewise?

Hylas: It should seem so.

Philonous: Consequently, the very same arguments which you admitted as conclusive against the secondary qualities are without any further application of force against the primary too (First Dialogue, AW 468a).

Locke thinks that our ideas of primary qualities resemble properties of material objects. The inference to an intermediate cause of our ideas (i.e. physical objects) is, for Berkeley, illegitimate. There is no primary/secondary distinction, since all qualities are, strictly speaking, secondary.

II. Substrata, Occasions, and Other Attempts to Infer a Material World

Hylas, in the *Three Dialogues*, makes several attempts to characterize an intermediate cause of our perceptions.

Hylas: I conclude it exists, because qualities cannot be conceived to exist without a support (First Dialogue, AW 469b).

For example, he grants that hard and soft are relative to the perceiver, but says that the causes of these are not relative.

To characterize this intermediate cause, Hylas uses several different names.

- IC1. Absolute extension (AW 467a)
- IC2. Passive object of an active sensation (AW 468a)
- IC3. Material substratum (AW 469b)
- IC4. External object (as opposed to immediately perceived idea; Caesar example) (AW 472b)
- IC5. Causes or occasions in the brain (AW 475a-b)
- IC6. Matter, as whatever causes my ideas (AW 479a)
- IC7. Instrument (AW 480a)

Philonous responds, in all cases, that such causes are not perceived, and thus that they are not sensible objects.

Absolute extension, IC1, is a general idea, and can neither exist in a particular object nor in our minds. Our minds are always passive, when sensing, so that the passive object, IC2, is the sensation itself, not an external object.

The material substratum, IC3, is either itself perceivable (as when we think of it as spreading) or imperceivable, in which case it can not be the object of sensation.

The external object, IC4, is not perceived, but inferred using reason or reflection.

The brain itself, IC5, is not (generally) the sensible object in question.

Moreover, taking motion in the brain to be the cause of my ideas leads to the puzzle, that Locke noticed, about why particular conscious experiences are correlated with particular motions in material objects.

Philonous: This way of explaining things...could never have satisfied any reasonable man. What connection is there between a motion in the nerves and the sensations of sound or color in the mind? Or how is it possible these should be the effect of that? (Second Dialogue, AW 476a).

Locke responded skeptically to the problem of explaining the correlations between conscious experiences and their material causes.

Berkeley denies the acceptability of such skepticism, and so denies the existence of material causes.

Perhaps the most interesting of the characterizations that Berkeley ascribes to Hylas, IC6 and IC7, employ a functional definition of matter.

Hylas: I find myself affected with various ideas of which I know I am not the cause; neither are they the cause of themselves or of one another, or capable of subsisting by themselves, as being altogether inactive, fleeting, dependent beings. They have therefore some cause distinct from me and them, of which I pretend to know no more than that it is *the cause of my ideas*. And this thing, whatever it is, I call matter (Second Dialogue, AW 479a).

I call this characterization a functional definition since it defines matter as whatever causes my ideas. It gives no positive characterization of matter.

It only says that matter is whatever functions as the cause of my ideas.

Philonous responds that only God can be taken as the true cause of my ideas, and that an all-powerful God could have no use for an intermediate instrument.

Here is a similar section, in the *Principles*.

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).

Descartes, in the Sixth Meditation, had rejected the possibility of a Berkeleyan universe.

There clearly is in me a passive faculty of sensing, that is, a faculty for receiving and knowing the ideas of sensible things; but I could not use it unless there also existed, either in me or in something else, a certain active faculty of producing or bringing about these ideas...[I]t is in some substance different from me, containing either formally or eminently all the reality that exists objectively in the ideas produced by that faculty...[T]his substance is either a body, that is a corporeal nature, which contains formally all that is contained objectively in the ideas, or else it is God, or some other creature more noble than a body, which contains eminently all that is contained objectively in the ideas. But since God is not a deceiver, it is [patently obvious](#) that he does not send me these ideas either immediately by himself, or even through the mediation of some creature that contains the objective reality of these ideas not formally but only eminently. For since God has given me no faculty whatsoever for making this determination, but instead has given me a great inclination to believe that these ideas issue from corporeal things, I fail to see how God could be understood not to be a deceiver, if these ideas were to issue from a source other than corporeal things. And consequently corporeal things exist (*Meditations* AT VII.79-80, AW 64b).

Against Descartes, Berkeley could argue for idealism from a Principle of Sufficient Reason.

BAD1. God does not do anything without sufficient reason.

BAD2. God either created physical objects or did not create them.

BAD3. We do not need physical objects in order to have all of our experiences, since God can implant them in our minds directly.

BAD4. So, there is no good reason for God to have created physical objects, in addition to minds.

BADC. So, God did not create physical objects. God creates our ideas directly, instead of taking the detour through physical objects.

Berkeley does not present this argument himself, though it is implicit in his work. He does insist on BAD3.

In short, if there were external bodies, it is impossible we should ever come to know it; and if there were not, we might have the very same reasons to think there were that we have now (*Principles* §20, AW 451a).

Descartes says that an argument like BAD is obviously unsound. I think Descartes would deny the inference from BAD3 to BAD4. Instead, he would claim that while the reason is obscure, the clarity and distinctness of my perception of the existence of material objects is sufficient evidence for the existence of a good reason.

I leave it to you to adjudicate the debate between Berkeley and Descartes. The question of whether we can infer the existence of material objects on the basis of our sense perception is a point of disagreement between Berkeley and Locke. Berkeley is showing that the claim that material objects exist must be an inference, not a perception. Locke's description of our experiences of primary and secondary qualities makes explicit the danger of relying on such an inference.

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 (II.VIII.15, AW 334a, emphasis in last line added).

Berkeley is taking advantage of the apparent contradiction between saying, on the one hand, that all knowledge comes from sense experience and, on the other, that we have knowledge of insensible objects. If we are empiricists, says Berkeley, we can have no experience, no sensation, of insensible parts. Still, even though Locke and Berkeley reject innate ideas, they have to admit that we have some ability to reason or infer.

Since we have such an ability, it is unclear why an inference to material objects is illegitimate. Let's take a moment to look at some inferences Berkeley admits as legitimate.

III. God, Me, and the Resemblance Hypothesis

Berkeley allows that we can infer the existence of our selves, other persons, and God, despite having no ideas of either.

Let's start with other persons.

There is no universally accepted argument for the existence of other minds.

Berkeley claims that we can infer the existence of other minds from their effects on us.

From what has been said, it is plain that we cannot know the existence of other spirits otherwise than by their operations, or the ideas by them excited in us. I perceive several motions, changes, and combinations of ideas, that inform me there are certain particular agents, like myself, which accompany them and concur in their production. Hence, the knowledge I have of other spirits is not immediate, as is the knowledge of my ideas; but depending on the intervention of ideas, by me referred to agents or spirits distinct from myself, as effects or concomitant signs (*Principles* §145).

The problem of other minds is perennially troubling, and nothing Berkeley says here resolves it.

How do we know that the things we call other people are not craftily constructed robots?

How do we know that the effects Berkeley mentions are really originating in a thinking thing?

Some philosophers say that every one's problem is no one's problem.

But the problem seems even worse for Berkeley than for most others.

Even our own existence is an illegitimate inference.

Berkeley agrees that we have no idea of ourselves.

A spirit is one simple, undivided, active being; as it perceives ideas it is called the *understanding*, and as it produces or otherwise operates about them it is called the *will*. Hence there can be no idea formed of a soul or spirit; for all ideas whatever, being passive and inert (see §25), they cannot represent unto us, by way of image or likeness, that which acts... The words *will*, *soul*, *spirit* do not stand for different ideas or, in truth, for any idea at all, but for something which is very different from ideas, and which, being an agent, cannot be like or represented by any idea whatsoever - though it must be admitted at the same time that we have some notion of soul, spirit, and the operations of the mind, such as willing, loving, hating, inasmuch as we know or understand the meaning of those words (*Principles* §27, AW 452b).

Thus Berkeley distinguishes ideas, which are images, from notions, which can be conceptual, if not abstract.

Notions can be devised by inference, as Locke claimed that ideas of reflection were formed.

From such notions, we can infer the existence of other persons.

In a large sense, indeed, we may be said to have an idea or rather a notion of *spirit*; that is, we understand the meaning of the word, otherwise we could not affirm or deny anything of it. Moreover, as we conceive the ideas that are in the minds of other spirits by means of our own, which we suppose to be resemblances of them; so we know other spirits by means of our own soul, which in that sense is the image or idea of them; it having a like respect to other spirits that blueness or heat by me perceived has to those ideas perceived by another (*Principles* §140).

Notice that Berkeley is accepting a modified version of the resemblance hypothesis, one that is very different from the one that Descartes rejected and Locke partially accepted.

Locke used the resemblance hypothesis as support for his claim that material objects cause our ideas. Obviously, Berkeley does not follow Locke in this way.

Consider two different refinements of 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).

So, 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.

Indeed, it is from the need to infer a cause of my ideas that we can infer the existence of 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).

Similarly, the long passage about the beauty of the world in the Second Dialogue (AW 476a-b) is intended as a premise in an inference to the existence of God.

Philonous: Men commonly believe that all things are known or perceived by God because they believe the being of a God, whereas I, on the other side, immediately and necessarily conclude the being of a God because all sensible things must be perceived by him (Second Dialogue, AW 477a).

Berkeley thus claims that we can know of our selves, other persons, and God, despite having no ideas of the objects of our knowledge.

A human spirit or person is not perceived by sense, as not being an idea; when therefore we see the color, size, figure, and motions of a man, we perceive only certain sensations or ideas excited in our own minds; and these being exhibited to our view in sundry distinct collections, serve to mark out unto us the existence of finite and created spirits like ourselves. Hence it is plain we do not see a man, if by *man* is meant that which lives, moves, perceives, and thinks as we do, but only such a certain collection of ideas as directs us to think there is a distinct principle of thought and motion, like to ourselves, accompanying and represented by it. And after the same manner we see God; all the difference is that, whereas some one finite and narrow assemblage of ideas denotes a particular human mind, whithersoever we direct our view, we do at all times and in all places perceive manifest tokens of the divinity: everything we see, hear, feel, or anywise perceive by sense, being a sign or effect of the power of God; as is our perception of those very motions which are produced by men (*Principles* §148).

Our ability to infer affords us knowledge of the existence of God, yet, according to Berkeley, it cannot yield knowledge of a material world.

If Berkeley's denial of the existence of a material world were based solely, as he sometimes implies, on our inability to know about such a world, his idealism would be ill motivated.

But, Berkeley's idealism is more forcefully motivated by his objections to a particular kind of inference used by Locke to generate his materialism: the ability to abstract.

Berkeley attacks Locke's doctrine of abstract ideas as the source of a skeptical, atheistic materialism.