



Berkeley's First and Third Arguments for Idealism

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Introduction to Idealism

- Secondary properties, like color, exist only in the mind (Locke/Descartes).
- Primary qualities are *also* only in the mind (Berkeley).
 - Primary qualities are also just mental perceptions.
 - This is what Berkeley's three arguments attempt to prove.
- Objects' *esse* (being) is *percipi* (perceived).
 - There are perceptions and perceivers.
 - We perceive only our perceptions, but not what is causing them.
 - Berkeley then argues that there is no reason to believe in a material world if we can have no perception of it. No extra-mental reality.

First Argument: From the Sensibility of Objects

- D1. Objects are sensible things.
- D2. Sensible things are things with sensible qualities.
 - D2*. Sensible things are things that have no properties other than their 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.

First Argument: From the Sensibility of Objects

D1. Objects are sensible things.

- “Sensible things are all immediately perceivable [through the senses]” (Second Dialogue, AW 475b)

D2. Sensible things are things with sensible qualities. (D2*
Sensible things are things that have no properties other than their sensible qualities.)

- “The table I write on, I say, exists; that is, I see it and feel it” (*Principles* §3, AW 447a)
- Should realize that his argument is only valid with D2*

First Argument: From the Sensibility of Objects

D3. The sensible qualities are the secondary qualities.

- “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.” (*Principles* §3, *AW* 447a)

D4. Those secondary qualities are strictly mental properties.

- “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.” (*Principles* §3, *AW* 447a)

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

- We cannot attribute other properties to objects that are outside of our sense perception. This would infer that we have knowledge outside of what we can perceive.

Third Argument: Reductive

- R1. You can not have an idea of a primary quality without ideas of secondary qualities which accompany it.
- 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.
- RC2. So, objects are strictly mental and there is no physical world.

Third Argument: Reductive

R1. You can not have an idea of a primary quality without ideas of secondary qualities which accompany it.

- “it is impossible even for the mind to disunite the ideas of extension and motion from all other sensible qualities” (First Dialogue, AW 468a)
- “In short, extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable.” (*Principles* §10, AW 449a)

R2. So, wherever the secondary qualities are, the primary are.

- “does it not follow that where the one exists, there necessarily the other exists likewise?” (First Dialogue, AW 468a)

Third Argument: Reductive

R3. Secondary qualities are only in the mind.

- “Sensible things are all immediately perceivable; and those things which are immediately perceivable are ideas; and these exist only in the mind” (Second Dialogue, AW 475b)

RC. So, the primary qualities are mental, too.

- “Where, therefore, the other sensible qualities are, these must be also, namely, in the mind and nowhere else (*Principles* §10, AW 449a)

RC2. So, objects are strictly mental and there is no physical world.

- No primary/secondary distinction yields a strictly mental reality.

Further Explication

- “But, you say, surely there is nothing easier than to imagine trees, for instance, in a park... But do not you yourself perceive or think of them all the while? This...only shows you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind, but it does not show that you can conceive it possible that the objects of your thought may exist without the mind... When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas. But the mind, taking no notice of itself, is deluded to think it can and does conceive bodies existing unthought of or without the mind” (Berkeley, AW 451).
- “...our sensations... are nevertheless ideas; that is, they exist in the mind or are perceived by it as truly as the ideas of its own framing. The ideas of sense are allowed to have more reality in them... but this is no argument that they exist without the mind... yet still they are ideas, and certainly no ideas can exist otherwise than in a mind

Ramifications

- So, there is no primary/secondary distinction. Right, ok, but so what?
- This means that there is no physical world, and that everything is purely mental/psychological.
 - “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” (Berkeley, AW451).

Discussion Questions

- Can there be a universal system of measurement without primary qualities? (weight, mass, temperature, etc.)
- If our ideas create our own reality, then can we ever be wrong?
 - Can there be a universal system of morality?
- Does this mean that nothing exists besides the perceiving self?
 - Berkeley never talks about this, it's a completely dark zone.
 - Solipsism?

Discussion Questions: Answers

1. & 2. “**Hylas.** What say you to this? Since, according to you, men judge of the reality of things by their senses, how can a man be mistaken in thinking the moon a plain lucid surface, about a foot in diameter; or a square tower, seen at a distance, round; or an oar, with one end in the water, crooked?

Philonous. He is not mistaken with regard to the ideas he actually perceives; but in the inferences he makes from his present perceptions. Thus in the case of the oar, what he immediately perceives by sight is certainly crooked; and so far he is in the right. But if he thence conclude, that upon taking the oar out of the water he shall perceive the same crookedness; or that it would affect his touch, as crooked things are wont to do: in that he is mistaken” (Berkeley, AW 490).

Indubitably.

End

