



George Berkeley: The Relativity of Perceptions

Introduction

When Bishop Berkeley said "there was no
matter,
And proved it -- 't was no matter what he said:
They say his system 't is in vain to batter,
Too subtle for the airiest human head;

And yet who can believe it? I would shatter
Gladly all matters down to stone or lead:
Or adamant, to find the world a spirit,
And wear my head, denying that I wear it.

-Lord Byron "Don Juan," canto 11



Background

- Anti-materialism: one cannot positively know of the existence of matter itself (distinct from perception)
- “the universe consists wholly of particular spirits receiving particular perceptions” (Tlumak 175)
 - Nominalism: all things in the universe exist in particular
 - Idealism: all the particular things in the universe are active thinking beings

Three Dialogues

- Dialogue in which Berkeley articulates the errors intrinsic to materialism
- Philonous: ‘lover of mind’
 - Serves as a mouthpiece for Berkeley’s own idealist position
 - Eschews esoteric metaphysical explanations in favor of conclusions drawn from common sense
- Hylas: derived from the ancient Greek word ὕλη meaning ‘matter’
 - Argues for a naïve materialist position, similar to Locke

Sensible Objects

- “sensible things are only those which are immediately perceived by the senses” (AW 457)
- “sensible things...are...so many sensible qualities or combinations of sensible qualities” (AW 458)
- From this definition, Berkeley will attempt to argue that sensible qualities are secondary qualities that exist only to the mind.
 - Berkeley must convince the reader that sensible things are not only things with sensible qualities but have no other properties except for sensible qualities

- Locke's primary/secondary distinction
- “And yet he who will consider that the same fire that, at one distance produces in us the sensation of warmth, does at a nearer approach produce in us the far different sensation of pain, ought to consider himself what reason he has to say that his idea of warmth, which was produced in him by the fire, is actually in the fire; and his idea of pain, which the same fire produced in him the same way is not in the fire” (AW 334)

Sound familiar?



The Fire Example

- Philonous introduces the example of a fire as a means to question Hylas' belief that secondary qualities belong to objects themselves
 - -Hylas argues that the heat of the fire does not depend on it being perceived but is contained within the fire itself
 - Philonous then poses the question: "is this real existence compatible to all degrees of heat which we perceive?"
 - A. If Hylas answers "no," he admits that heat is not a property of the fire but depends on being perceived
 - B. If "yes," he implicitly claims that every possible degree of heat exists within the single existence of the fire
- Sensory qualities are relative to the perceiver
 - Relative qualities such as heat cannot belong to mind-independent material objects; if they did those objects could not contain contradictory qualities
- So far, Berkeley has merely re-established what Locke has already asserted

Berkeley's Divergence from Locke

- Berkeley extends Locke's argument against the actual existence of secondary qualities of matter against the existence of matter itself
- Primary qualities are no more inherent to objects themselves than secondary qualities
- Philonous' argument can be split in two
 - A. the relativity of perceptions that undermine secondary qualities can comparably undermine primary qualities
 - B. primary qualities (ie. shape) cannot be abstracted from secondary qualities (ie. color)

-We shall focus primarily on the first argument

Relativity of Primary Qualities

- “But what if the same arguments which are brought against secondary qualities will hold proof against these [primary qualities] also?” (AW 465)
- Of Mites and Men
 - Animals, like men, are capable of perceiving extension and figure that Locke sets apart as primary qualities
 - “A mite therefore must be supposed to see his own foot, and things equal or less than it, as bodies of some comparable dimension, though at the same time they appear to you scarce discernible...” (AW 465)
 - No absolute position exists from which to judge extension
 - “But as we approach to or recede from an object, the visible extension varies...does it not follow...that it is not really inherent to the object?”

Problems with the Extension Argument

- Measurement
 - Berkeley implicitly rejects an absolute standard of measurement by which to determine extension
 - Although what appears tiny to the man might appear enormous to the mite, the man stands at 6 feet regardless of how the mite perceives his size (Marcus 6)
 - When quantified by a scale of measurement, extension is not relative to the perceiver
 - A scale of measurement alone, however, is relative to the perceiver

Relativity of Primary Qualities

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- Philonous is not content to disprove extension as intrinsic to an object itself
- Shape
 - The shape of an object changes in relation to the angle at which one perceives it
- Solidity
 - What appears to one creature as firm and resilient, may to another with stronger limbs be pliable and yielding
- Motion
 - Time is measured as “the succession of ideas in our mind”
 - An object, to one perceiver, may appear to move faster than to another

Challenges to Berkeley

- Newtonian absolutism
 - How might Newton respond to Berkeley's contention that primary qualities (namely extension and motion) are not absolute properties of objects but rather dependent on perception?
 - Would Berkeley's conception of space and time square with Leibniz's?
- Divine Author
 - Does an omnipotent, omniscient and otherwise perfect God have an absolute perspective on objects?