

Philosophy 203

History of Modern Western Philosophy

**Russell Marcus
Hamilton College
Spring 2011**



**Class 19 - April 5
Finishing Berkeley**

Three Main Berkeley Topics

1. Arguments for idealism and against materialism
2. Arguments against abstract ideas
3. Accounts of mathematics and science
 - Pragmatic, anti-necessitarian

Locke's Problem

- All knowledge comes from experience.
- But we experience our sensations, not the causes of our sensations.
- So, if there is a world beyond our sensations, causing them, we can have no knowledge of it.

Skepticism and Atheism

- Locke accepts that certain questions are unanswerable.
- Berkeley believes that Locke's limitations arise from his materialism.
- Materialism, and the materialist element of dualism, leads to skepticism.
- Such skepticism extends to one's belief in the existence of God.
- But this skepticism is unjustified, and avoidable if one abandons materialism for idealism.
 - For objects, their *esse* is *percipi*.
 - We perceive only our perceptions, not what is behind them, under them, or causing them.
 - Since we can have no knowledge of any material world, Berkeley concludes, there can be none.
 - There is no extra-mental reality.

Berkeley is a Hater of Skeptics and Atheists

As we have shown the doctrine of matter or corporeal substance to have been the main pillar and support of *skepticism*, so likewise upon the same foundation have been raised all the impious schemes of *atheism* and irreligion... How great a friend material substance has been to *atheists* in all ages were needless to relate. All their monstrous systems have so visible and necessary a dependence on it that, when this corner-stone is once removed, the whole fabric cannot choose but fall to the ground, insomuch that it is no longer worth while to bestow a particular consideration on the absurdities of every wretched sect of *atheists* (*Principles*, §92).

On Atheism and Skepticism

- Materialism posits a world which is independent of God.
 - If our sensations depend on a world of objects, we push God out of our explanations.
 - Berkeley thus sees natural scientific explanations as evidence of atheism.
- Materialism entails that we do not experience the objects in themselves.
 - We can not get out of our minds into those objects, so we are forced into skepticism.
 - All the properties we experience are sensible, and so in us.
 - If we posit matter in addition, we can have no knowledge of it.
- “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).

Three Arguments for Idealism

independent of Berkeley's anti-atheism and anti-skepticism

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

The Argument from the Sensibility of Objects

- D1. Objects are sensible things.
- D2. Sensible things 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.

The Argument from the Relativity of Perceptions

- Using Locke's principles against him
- “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, AW 449b).
- Number
- Extension
- Shape
- Motion
- Solidity

The 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.

An Intermediate Cause of Our Perceptions?

“*Hylas*: Qualities cannot be conceived to exist without a support”
(First Dialogue, AW 469b).

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) (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)

- In all cases, such causes are not perceived, and thus are not sensible objects.
Berkeley's rejection of skepticism is always in the background.
Compare to Spinoza and Leibniz on explanatory completeness.

Berkeley on the Functional Definition of Matter

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).

Berkeley, Against Descartes's Argument for the Material World

- 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.
- “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).

Materialism and Abstract Ideas

accounting for the error

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. I may, indeed, divide in my thoughts, or conceive apart from each other, those things which, perhaps I never perceived by sense so divided. Thus, I imagine the trunk of a human body without the limbs, or conceive the smell of a rose without thinking on the rose itself. So far, I will not deny, I can abstract, if that may properly be called *abstraction* which extends only to the conceiving separately such objects as it is possible may really exist or be actually perceived asunder. But my conceiving or imagining power does not extend beyond the possibility of real existence or perception. Hence, as it is impossible for me to see or feel anything without an actual sensation of that thing, so is it impossible for me to conceive in my thoughts any sensible thing or object distinct from the sensation or perception of it. In truth, the object and the sensation are the same thing and cannot therefore be abstracted from each other (*Principles* §5, AW 447b-445a).

The Master Argument

- *Philonous*: It is a universally received maxim that *everything which exists is particular*. How then can motion in general, or extension in general, exist in any corporeal substance?
- *Hylas*: I will take time to solve your difficulty.
- *Philonous*: But I think the point may be speedily decided. Without doubt you can tell whether you are able to frame this or that idea. Now I am content to put our dispute on this issue. If you can frame in your thoughts a distinct abstract idea of motion or extension, divested of all those sensible modes, as swift and slow, great and small, round and square, and the like, which are acknowledged to exist only in the mind, I will then yield the point you contend for. But if you cannot, it will be unreasonable on your side to insist any longer upon what you have no notion of.
- *Hylas*: To confess ingenuously, I cannot (First Dialogue, AW 467a-b)

Berkeley's Nominalism

- We can use general terms, if we wish.
 - We should not be misled into thinking that they correspond to some thing.
 - Only particulars, *single discrete sensations*, and their perceivers exist.
- Berkeley thus extends Locke's nominalism to all general properties, and even to terms which collect several sensations into an object.
 - We have a bundle of sensations which form an experience which we call a red chair, say, or apple.
 - We use the term 'apple' to refer to a collection of sensory ideas.
 - It does not correspond to any abstract idea of apple, or of red, or of sweet.
 - The names 'apple' and 'chair' and 'red' are just convenient labels, and should not indicate any existence of the apple or chair or color beyond my current experience of it.
- We can give a name to commonalities among particular sensations, but this is just a name.
 - "In such things we ought to *think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar*" (*Principles* §51).

On Locke's 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).
- There appears to be a 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, 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.
 - a psychological capacity
- Since we have such an ability, it is unclear why an inference to material objects is illegitimate.

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?

The Self

- Even our own existence, for the strict, Berkeleian empiricist, should be an illegitimate inference.
- “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, 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).

Ideas and Notions

- 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).

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

an inference, not a presumption

- “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).
- “*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).
- “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).

Uniformity and Blemishes

- If we attentively consider the constant regularity, order, and concatenation of natural things, the surprising magnificence, beauty, and perfection of the larger, and the exquisite contrivance of the smaller parts of creation, together with the exact harmony and correspondence of the whole, but above all the never-enough-admired laws of pain and pleasure, and the instincts or natural inclinations, appetites, and passions of animals; I say if we consider all these things, and at the same time attend to the meaning and import of the attributes One, Eternal, Infinitely Wise, Good, and Perfect, we shall clearly perceive that they belong to the aforesaid spirit, *who works all in all, and by whom all things consist* (*Principles*, §146).
- We should further consider that the very blemishes and defects of nature are not without their use, in that they make an agreeable sort of variety, and augment the beauty of the rest of the creation, as shades in a picture serve to set off the brighter and more enlightened parts... It is plain that the splendid profusion of natural things should not be interpreted weakness or prodigality in the agent who produces them, but rather be looked on as an argument of the riches of His power (*Principles*, §152).

The Defender of Common Sense

advantages of Berkeley's idealism

- On the materialist view, secondary qualities are denigrated.
 - no yellow lemons
 - no sweet maple syrup
 - 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.
 - Descartes's wax example
 - Locke's water experiment
 - All ideas are independent.



Intersubjectivity and Persistence

disadvantages of Berkeley's idealism

- 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 is a real 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).
- It's a purely psychological world.



On To Hume

- The big question for Berkeley is whether we can transcend our mental states to refer to, or understand, a world external to us, even if it is not a physical world.
- Berkeley could appeal, like Descartes, to the benevolence of God to ensure persistence and intersubjectivity, but such an appeal would amount to an abandonment of empiricism.
- The solipsistic picture of Descartes returns.
- Hume shows that the prospects are even worse for empiricism, even if we reject Berkeley's idealism.