

**Philosophy 203**  
***History of Modern Western Philosophy***

**Russell Marcus**  
**Hamilton College**  
**Spring 2014**



Class #17  
Three Arguments for Idealism  
Berkeley's *Principles* and *Three Dialogues* (First Dialogue)

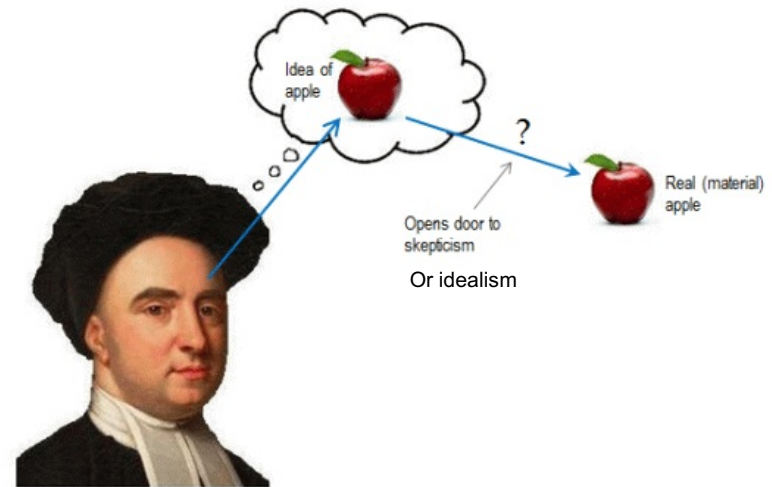
**Welcome Back!**

# Business

- Return Midterms
  - The final will be similar
- Panel Presentation #3 this Thursday
  - Helen, Ryan M., Etan
  - Presentations #4-#11 all come after Hume
  - Remember: assimilate; compare and contrast
- Paper #2 is due on May 1, after the panel presentations
- Then Kant and then the final
- Today: Philosophy Talk at Noon:
  - Austin Heath '15
  - "Mathematical Infinity and Presocratic Apeiron"

# An Empiricist's Problem

- The empiricist claims that all knowledge comes from experience.
- But we experience our sensations, not the causes of our sensations.
- If all knowledge is of our perceptions, it follows that we have no knowledge of what causes our sensations.
- “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).

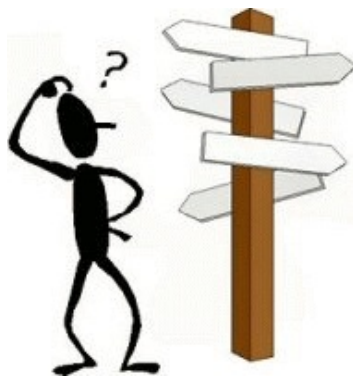


# Beyond the Veil?

- Descartes: we judge the existence and nature of an external world with our minds.
  - Such judgment extends beyond experience.
- Locke: our ideas of primary qualities of objects resemble qualities of those objects.
  - To assert a resemblance, we have to be able to perceive both objects.
  - We seem to be stuck with only our sensations.
- Berkeley: there are no material objects.
  - “It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing among men that houses, mountains, rivers, and, in a word, sensible objects have an existence, natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding... What are the aforementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense? And what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations?” (*Principles*, §4)
  - “By matter...we are to understand an inert, senseless substance, in which extension, figure, and motion do actually subsist. But it is evident from what we have already shown that extension, figure, and motion are only ideas existing in the mind, and that an idea can be like nothing but another idea, and that consequently neither they nor their archetypes can exist in an unperceiving substance. Hence it is plain that the very notion of what is called matter, or corporeal substance, involves a contradiction in it” (*Principles*, §9).

# Materialism, Dualism, and Idealism

- For the materialist, like Hobbes, all reality is made of matter.
  - Even ideas are material, motions in the brain.
- For the dualist, some reality is mental and some is physical.
  - Descartes and Locke are both dualists.
- For the idealist, all reality is mental.
  - Leibniz and now Berkeley



# Metaphysics and Its Independence from Epistemology

- Locke and Descartes agree on dualism despite their disagreement over epistemology.
- Berkeley disagrees with Locke about metaphysics, though he mainly agrees about epistemology.
- Here's Berkeley, with Locke, against rationalist epistemology:
  - “No sooner do we depart from sense and instinct to follow the light of a superior principle, to reason, meditate, and reflect on the nature of things, but a thousand scruples spring up in our minds concerning those things which before we seemed fully to comprehend. Prejudices and errors of sense do from all parts discover themselves to our view; and, endeavoring to correct these by reason, we are insensibly drawn into uncouth paradoxes, difficulties, and inconsistencies, which multiply and grow upon us as we advance in speculation, till at length, having wandered through many intricate mazes, we find ourselves just where we were, or, which is worse, sit down in a forlorn skepticism” (*Principles*, Introduction §1).

# Locke and Berkeley on Method

- Locke:
  - ▶ If by this inquiry into the nature of the understanding, I can discover the powers thereof; how far they reach; to what things they are in any degree proportionate; and where they fail us, I suppose it may be of use to prevail with the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its comprehension; to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether; and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things which, upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities...The discoveries we can make with this ought to satisfy us; and we shall then use our understandings right, when we entertain all objects in that way and proportion that they are suited to our faculties, and upon those grounds they are capable of being proposed to us; and not peremptorily or intemperately require demonstration, and demand certainty, where probability only is to be had, and which is sufficient to govern all our concernments. If we will disbelieve everything, because we cannot certainly know all things, we shall do much as wisely as he who would not use his legs, but sit still and perish, because he had no wings to fly (*Essay*, Introduction §4-§5, AW 317a-318a).
- Berkeley:
  - ▶ It is said the faculties we have are few, and those designed by nature for the support and comfort of life, and not to penetrate into the inward essence and constitution of things...But, perhaps, we may be too partial to ourselves in placing the fault originally in our faculties, and not rather in the wrong use we make of them...We should believe that God has dealt more bountifully with the sons of men than to give them a strong desire for that knowledge which he had placed quite out of their reach...I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to ourselves - that we have first raised a dust and then complain we cannot see (*Principles*, Introduction §2-3, AW 439a-b).
- Similarities and Differences?



# Skepticism and Atheism

## Locke and Berkeley Disagreeing on Content

- Locke accepts that certain questions are unanswerable.
- Berkeley believes that Locke's limitations arise from his materialism.
- Materialism and the materialist aspect of dualism lead 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 is none.
  - ▶ There is no extra-mental reality.

# Three Main Berkeley Topics

- ⇒ **1. Three arguments for idealism against the reality of primary qualities**
- 2. Arguments against abstract ideas
- 3. Accounts of mathematics and science
  - ▶ *Principles* (handouts)
  - ▶ *Three Dialogues*

# Three Arguments for Idealism

→I1. From the sensibility of objects

I2. From the relativity of perceptions

I3. A reductive argument

# The Argument from the Sensibility of Objects

By Definition

BD1. Objects are sensible things.

BD2. Sensible things are things with sensible qualities.

BD3. The sensible qualities are the secondary qualities.

BD4. Those secondary qualities are strictly mental properties.

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

# Problems with BD

BD1. Objects are sensible things.  
BD2. Sensible things are things with sensible qualities.  
BD3. The sensible qualities are the secondary qualities.  
BD4. Those secondary qualities are strictly mental properties.  
BDC. So, objects are strictly mental, i.e. there is no physical world.

- BD, as it stands, is not valid.
- To conclude that objects are strictly mental, we need a stronger premise than BD2, something like BD2\*:
  - ▶ BD2\*. Sensible things are things which have no properties other than their sensible qualities.
- Berkeley seems to slide from the unobjectionable BD2 to the contentious BD2\*.
  - ▶ “The table I write on, I say, exists; that is, I see it and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed - meaning by that that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. 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. 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. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible that they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them” (*Principles* §3, AW 447a).
  - ▶ “This point then is agreed between us - that *sensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense*” (First Dialogue, AW 457b).

# Three Arguments for Idealism

✓I1. From the sensibility of objects

→I2. **From the relativity of perceptions**

I3. A reductive argument

# Lockean Principles

LP1: If one perceives an object as having two (or more) incompatible ideas, then those ideas do not represent real properties of the object.

LP1C1: Even if a change in us entails the change in the perceived quality, the ideas which change can not be veridical.

LP1C2: Qualities that appear different to different observers are not veridical.

LP2: If an idea of an object is the same under all conditions, that idea is veridical.

LP2C: If every observer receives the same idea from an object, then that idea is veridical.



# Two Stages of Berkeley's Argument

- In the first stage, Berkeley echoes Locke's arguments against the veridicality of the secondary qualities.
  - ▶ There is nothing particularly new in this portion of the dialogue.
  - ▶ At the end of that section, Hylas is espousing precisely Locke's view.
  - ▶ "Colors, sounds, tastes, in a word all those termed *secondary qualities*, have certainly no existence without the mind. But by this acknowledgment I must not be supposed to derogate anything from the reality of matter or external objects..." (First Dialogue, AW 464b).
- In the second stage of his argument against the primary/secondary distinction, Berkeley shows that, for each supposedly primary quality, it is really a secondary quality.
  - ▶ "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



- For the argument for the relativity of number, consider what number we might give to a deck of cards.
- It is 52 cards, 4 suits, 13 ranks, 1 deck.
- “The same thing bears a different denomination of number as the mind views it with different respects. Thus, the same extension is one, or three, or thirty-six, according as the mind considers it with reference to a yard, a foot, or an inch. Number is so visibly relative and dependent on men’s understanding that it is strange to think how anyone should give it an absolute existence without the mind” (*Principles* §12, AW 449b).
- 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.

# Extension

- To show that extension is relative to the perceiver, consider the mite (a tiny insect) and a giant.
- What appears large to the mite can appear tiny to us, and minuscule to the giant.
- 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.



# Extension: An Objection

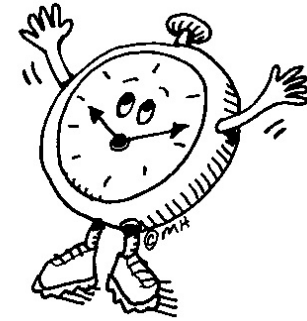
- If there is an objective fact about my extension which is not relative to the perceiver, then Berkeley's argument fails.
- The mite, the giant, and I can all agree that I am six feet tall.
- The correspondence between a scale of measurement and an object is not relative to the perceiver.
- But the scale of measurement itself is relative to a perceiver.
  - ▶ A yard: the distance between the end of the king's finger and the tip of his nose.
  - ▶ Standard meter bar
  - ▶ Meter as 1,650,763.73 wavelengths of orange-red light emitted from a krypton-86 lamp
  - ▶ Since 1983, the meter has been defined as the distance traveled by light in a vacuum in  $1/299,792,458$  of a second.
- What if everything were to double in size?
  - ▶ *Phineas and Ferb*
  - ▶ Dilations and restrictions could happen all of the time, without us knowing!
  - ▶ We settle our scales relative to useful sizes and distances.

# Shape



- To show that shape is relative to a perceiver, consider what we see under a microscope.
  - ▶ *Philonous*: Is it not the very same reasoning to conclude there is no extension or figure in an object because to one eye it shall seem little, smooth, and round, when at the same time it appears to the other, great, uneven, and angular?
  - ▶ *Hylas*: The very same. But does this latter fact ever happen?
  - ▶ *Philonous*: You may at any time make the experiment by looking with one eye bare and with the other through a microscope (First Dialogue, AW 465b).
- Edges that appear straight to the naked eye will appear jagged when magnified.
- Consider our perception of a rectangular object, like a table.
  - ▶ The shape is never really seen as a rectangle, although we all infer that it is that shape.
  - ▶ What we really get from the senses about the shape is relative to the perceiver.

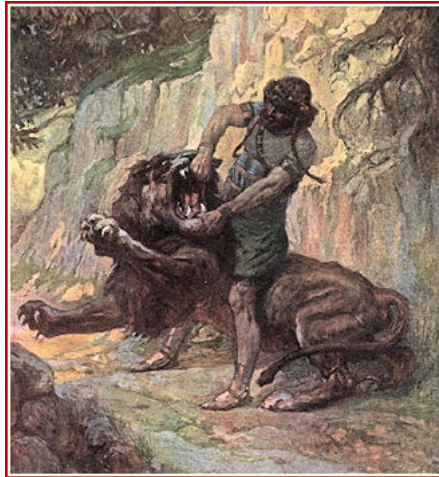
# Motion



- The argument for the relativity of our perceptions of motion relies on an argument for the relativity of our perceptions of time.
  - Motion is change in place over time.
- Our perception of time varies with the succession of our ideas.
- If our ideas proceed more quickly, a motion will appear more slow.
  - *Philonous*: Is it not possible ideas should succeed one another twice as fast in your mind as they do in mine or in that of some spirit of another kind?
  - *Hylas*: I admit it.
  - *Philonous*: Consequently, the same body may to another seem to perform its motion over any space in half the time that it does to you. And...it is possible one and the same body shall be really moved the same way at once, both very swift and very slow (First Dialogue, AW 466a).
- Note that just as we can not rely on an external measurement of extension, since we have to agree on a standard unit measure, we can not rely on an external measurement of time.

# Solidity

- Berkeley's argument for the relativity of solidity to the perceiver takes solidity to be resistance to touch.
- 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.

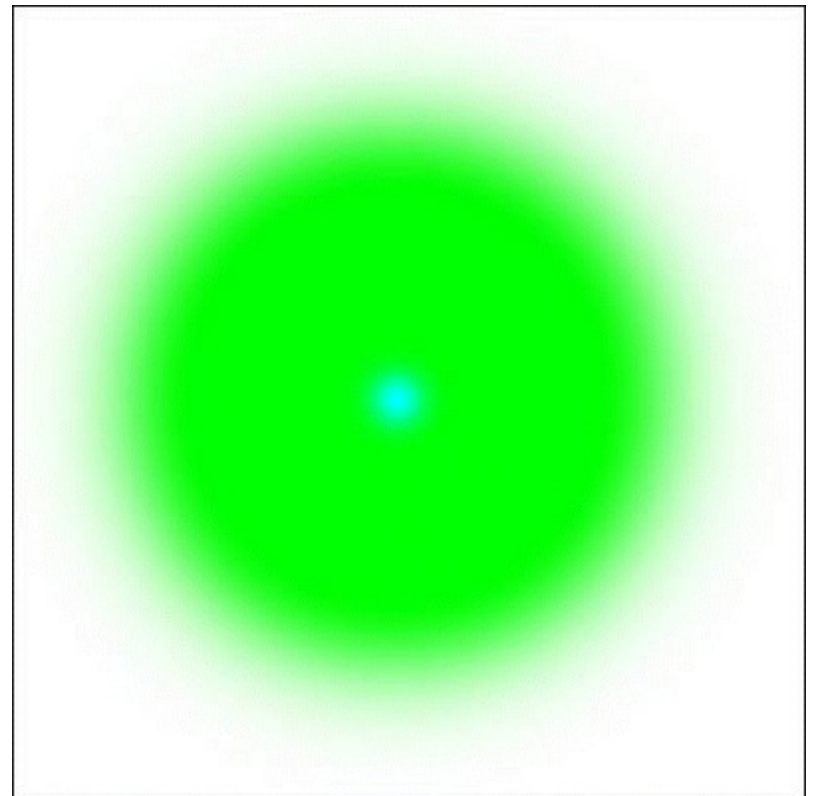


# Berkeley's Arguments From the Relativity of Perceptions: Summary

- Berkeley has considered 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.
- All qualities are secondary qualities.
- We have no veridical primary qualities, representing a material world.

# Three Arguments for Idealism

- ✓I1. From the sensibility of objects
- ✓I2. From the relativity of perceptions
- I3. **A reductive argument**





# Berkeley's Reductive Argument Against the Primary Qualities

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).

# Berkeley's Reductive Argument

BR1. You can not have an idea of a primary quality without secondary qualities.

BR2. So, wherever the secondary qualities are, the primary are.

BR3. Secondary qualities are only in the mind.

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

*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).

# Berkeley's Idealistic World

- The *esse* of 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 believes 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.

# Where We Are

## Three Arguments for Idealism

- ✓I1. From the sensibility of objects
- ✓I2. From the relativity of perceptions
- ✓I3. A reductive argument

## Berkeley Topics

- ✓1. Three arguments for idealism against the reality of the primary qualities
- 2. Arguments against abstract ideas
- 3. Accounts of mathematics and science