

Class #17 - Three Arguments for Idealism
Berkeley's *Principles*, §1-§33 (AW 447-453)
Three Dialogues, First Dialogue (AW 454-474)

I. Empiricism and the External World

We begin the second half of the course in the middle of our study of the British Empiricists.

We're focusing on the work of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume.

The empiricists try to avoid grandiose metaphysical speculation by restricting their accounts of our abilities to acquire and justify our beliefs.

We have seen that Hobbes and Locke claim that all knowledge comes from sense experience and our reflections on it, rejecting the innate ideas central to the works of Descartes and Leibniz.

Instead, the empiricists depict humans as born with just a blank mental slate and some naturally developing capacities to acquire and create ideas.

In evaluating their views, it will be important to look carefully at their conception of sense experience and reflection.

As we do, we will notice that Locke's optimism about accounting for our knowledge with these limited tools runs into some severe limitations developed, in different ways, by Berkeley and Hume.

We will start by thinking about the fundamental concept of perception, at the center of sense experience.

When we discussed Hobbes, we called his view the stamp theory of perception.

It is as if the external world stamps a copy of itself on our minds.

Like Hobbes, Locke believes that perception is the creation of ideas as internal representations of an external world.

We have direct and certain knowledge of these internal representations.

Locke believes that we can also have certainty of the consequences of our reflections on our internal representations, as of mathematics and morality.

A problem arises for such empiricists when we notice that on their view, we experience only our sensations, not the causes of those sensations.

Our experience is of our perceptions of objects, not of the objects as they are in themselves.

We perceive the lemon as yellow, not as colorless molecules in motion.

But we believe that the lemon itself is not yellow; it is just molecules in motion.

If all knowledge is of our perceptions, it follows that we have no knowledge of what causes our sensations.

We have no knowledge of external objects in the (presumably) material world.

We seem to be isolated from the external world behind a veil of ideas.

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? (Berkeley, *Principles*, §86).

Descartes, recognizing the limitations of sense experience in this crude form, argues that we can judge that there is an external world, and what it is like, with our minds.

We can appeal to our innate ideas of mathematics and physics.

Such judgments extend beyond experience and so are unavailable to the empiricist.

Locke argues that our ideas of primary qualities of objects resemble real qualities of those objects.

So we have some knowledge of the external world in that way.

But, as Berkeley observes, to assert that there is a resemblance between two things, we have to be able to perceive both of them and compare those perceptions.

On Locke's view, we are stuck on one side of the comparison.

Furthermore, Locke admits that the real objects are not available to our senses, that the secondary qualities are mere artefacts of the interaction between our sensory apparatus and the insensible portions of matter.

[The secondary qualities] are, in the bodies we denominate from them, only a power to produce those sensations in us (Locke, *Essay*, §II.VIII.15, AW 334a).

If we are going to adhere to the strict principle that all knowledge arises from sense experience, then both Descartes's argument for knowledge of the external world and Locke's argument are fruitless attempts to justify our beliefs.

The empiricist is stuck with our mere sensations, our perceptions and not their causes.

In response to this problem, Berkeley, taking a metaphysical cue from Leibniz, argues that there are no material objects.

He starts with a commitment to empiricist principles.

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, AW 447a)

He concludes, a mere five sections later, that there is no material world.

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, AW 448b).

For Berkeley, there are only ideas and their perceivers.

II. Three Main Topics for Our Study of Berkeley's Work

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

Berkeley's work is mainly found in his *Principles* (i.e. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*), which was not well-received at the time (1710), and his *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713), which was Berkeley's attempt to present a popular version of his work.

In the *Three Dialogues*, Hylas (man of matter) presents Locke's materialism and Philonous (lover of mind) is Berkeley's mouthpiece.

We will read the first two dialogues, but I prefer the earlier exposition in the *Principles*.

Ariew and Watkins present only the Introduction and the first thirty-four (of 156) sections of the *Principles*.

In addition to the sections printed in AW, I have assigned §86 to the end of the *Principles*, and made copies [available on the course website](#).

I have also posted §34-§84, in which Berkeley presents objections and replies and which is an excellent source of paper topics.

The *Three Dialogues* are fun and contain more useful exposition of a few points, but both works cover the same material.

III. Metaphysics, Epistemology, and Methods

Putting Spinoza's pantheist weirdo-monism aside, there are three positions concerning the existence of minds and bodies: materialism, dualism, and idealism.

For the materialist, like Hobbes, everything, including minds, is material.

Even ideas are merely motions of matter in the brain.

For the dualist, some things are mental and some things are physical.

Descartes and Locke are both dualists.

For idealists like Leibniz and Berkeley, everything is mental.

Note that these metaphysical positions are independent of epistemology.

Locke and Descartes agree on dualism despite their disagreement over epistemology.

Berkeley disagrees utterly with Hobbes about metaphysics though he mainly agrees about epistemology.

The beginning of Berkeley's introduction to the *Principles* may be taken as criticism of Descartes's work (and that of other rationalists) in the spirit of Locke's criticism of innate ideas.

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).

Berkeley and Locke agree on methodology: one should avoid innate ideas and account for all knowledge on the basis of sense experience.

Compare the following quotes from Locke and Berkeley:

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 (Locke, *Essay*, Introduction §4-§5, AW 317a-318a).

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 (Berkeley, *Principles*, Introduction §2-3, AW 439a-b).

While both Locke and Berkeley believe that we can gain a great deal of knowledge on the basis of sense experience, Locke accepts that certain questions are unanswerable.

Berkeley believes that Locke's limitations arise from his materialism.

Materialism and the materialist element of dualism lead to skepticism.

But this skepticism is unjustified and, he says, avoidable if one abandons materialism for idealism.

IV. Three Arguments for Idealism

Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley all agree that secondary properties, like color, exist only in the mind.

Berkeley extends the point, arguing that even the primary qualities are only in the mind.

Berkeley wants to show that they too are only perceptions, that they are essentially mental.

Berkeley's idealism is often summarized, as he writes in §3 of the *Principles*, that for objects, their *esse* is *percipi*.

'*Esse is percipi*' means 'being is being perceived'.

In fact, for Berkeley, there are both perceptions and perceivers.

But we perceive only our perceptions, not what is behind them, under them, or causing them.

Since we can have no perception of a material world, Berkeley concludes that there is no reason to believe in one.

There is no extra-mental reality.

Berkeley provides three arguments to show that the world is fully ideal and that primary qualities are not characteristics of material objects but are, like the secondary qualities, mental properties.

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

V. The Argument from the Sensibility of Objects

Berkeley's argument for idealism from the sensibility of objects is an argument from the concept of a sensible object, an argument from definition.

- 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.

Notice that BD, as it stands, is not valid.

To conclude that objects are strictly mental, we need a stronger premise than D2.

Replacing BD2 with BD2* would make the argument valid.

BD2*. Sensible things are things that have no properties other than their sensible qualities.

The dispute between Hylas and Philonous in the *Three Dialogues* seems, at times, to rely on Berkeley's insistence on BD2*, when Hylas has agreed only to BD2.

It seems a little unfair for Berkeley to put BD2* into Hylas's mouth since Locke and other materialists would not, strictly speaking, ascribe secondary qualities to objects.

The lemon appears yellow, but the yellowness is really a property of my experience.

We say that lemons are yellow only as a loose and casual way of speaking.

That casual way of speaking should of course carry no implication that the secondary qualities exhaust the constitution of external objects, as BD2* says.

Still, BD2* seems to be the claim on which Berkeley relies for the argument BD.

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).

Berkeley makes the definition more explicit in the *Three Dialogues*.

This point then is agreed between us - that *sensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense* (First Dialogue, AW 457b).

While ascribing BD2* to Hylas or Locke appears to be unfair, it does represent accurately the letter of the empiricists' principles that all knowledge comes from experience.

Remember, the empiricists' claim is that all we know must originally come to us through the senses.

Berkeley's claim is that to impute further qualities to the sensible objects, qualities beyond their sense properties, is to claim that our knowledge extends beyond what we can perceive.

Such an extension would be an unjustifiable inference.

VI. Berkeley's Arguments from the Relativity of Perceptions

Berkeley's arguments from the relativity of perceptions are echoes and extensions of Locke's defense of the primary/secondary distinction.

I attributed two general principles, with some corollaries, to Locke.

- 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.

From these principles, Locke argues that some ideas are of primary qualities and resemble real properties of external objects, while other ideas are secondary qualities and do not resemble anything in external objects.

Berkeley uses the same Lockean principles against the primary/secondary distinction in *Principles* §14-§15, and, more explicitly, in the first of the *Three Dialogues*.

Philonous: Have you not acknowledged that no real inherent property of any object can be changed without some change in the thing itself?

Hylas: I have (First Dialogue, AW 465b).

The disagreement between Berkeley and Locke is over metaphysics, not methodology.

Berkeley's argument against the primary/secondary distinction from the relativity of perception comes in two stages in the *Three Dialogues*.

In the first stage, Berkeley repeats Locke's arguments against the veridicality of the secondary qualities.

There is nothing particularly new in this portion of the dialogue, AW 458a to AW 464b.

At the end of the first stage, 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 each supposedly primary quality 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).

Each of Berkeley's relativity arguments against the primary qualities attempts to show that LP2 and LP2C are never fulfilled.

There are no properties that do not vary with the perceiver.

He proceeds by example for all the primary properties: number, extension, shape, motion, and solidity.

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 any object varies as we think of the object in different ways. It seems to be a property of a concept, rather than of an object.

To show that extension is relative to the perceiver, consider a tiny insect (the mite) 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.

The argument against extension is most important because extension is the most plausible primary quality.

For Descartes, it's the only primary quality.

Let's take a moment to consider a possible objection to the argument.

If there were objective facts about extension, ones which were not relative to the perceiver, then Berkeley's argument fails.

Thus, one response to Berkeley's argument about extension is that there is something on which the mite, the giant, and I can agree: I am six feet tall.

The correspondence between a scale of measurement and an object is not relative to the perceiver. But appeals to measuring tools to provide objective facts about primary qualities like extension are insufficient.

Scales of measurement themselves are relative to a perceiver.

A yard was [once defined](#) as the distance between the end of the king's finger and the tip of his nose.

We have more objective measures now, but even these do not solve the problem.

A [standard meter](#) bar, against which all other meters can be measured, has been maintained by the International Bureau of Weights and Measures at Sevres, outside of Paris, France, since the 1790s. Problems with changes in temperature and pressure, which lead to expansion and contraction, motivated people to develop standards which vary less.

For a while, the meter was defined as 1,650,763.73 wavelengths of orange-red light emitted from a krypton-86 lamp.

Even more precisely, since 1983, the meter has been defined as the distance traveled by light in a vacuum in $1/299,792,458$ of a second.

The speed of light is, according to our best scientific theories, a constant.

So pinning our measures of extension to the speed of light prevents actual fluctuation in our standard. Still, there are (metaphysically) possible fluctuations.

If we awoke tomorrow and found that everything had doubled in size, including the speed of light, we would have no way of discovering the change.

Dilations and restrictions could happen all of the time without us knowing!

We settle our scales relative to useful sizes and distances because that's the best, most objective way that we can proceed.

Extensions, as perceived by creatures (real or fantastic) of diverse sizes, may vary.

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 can appear jagged when magnified.

Here is another consideration for the relativity of our perceptions of shape that I think works in Berkeley's favor.

Consider our perception of a rectangular object like a book.

If we were to stand directly over the book, we could receive a rectangular image in our field of vision.

But, ordinarily, we are not placed in such a way as to receive a rectangular image, even if we perceive the book as rectangular.

Everyone in our classroom perceives the screen at the front of the room as rectangular, even though we all have different retinal images of its shape, different curvy trapezoidal impressions.

The shape is never received on our retinae as a rectangle but we all see it that way.

What we get from the senses about the shape, strictly speaking, is relative to the perceiver.

The argument for the relativity of our perceptions of motion relies on an argument for the relativity of our perceptions of time, since 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 slower.

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 like a clock.

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 thus 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 perceivable qualities are secondary qualities.

If all knowledge comes from sense experience, we have no veridical ideas of primary qualities of a material world.

VII. Berkeley's Reductive Argument Against the Primary Qualities

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, which I will call BR.

- BR BR1. We can not have an idea of a primary quality without ideas of secondary qualities which accompany it.
 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.

To repeat, Berkeley take objects to be 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.

Thus Berkeley claims that there is no reason to posit anything beyond such objects and 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.