

## Berkeley (1685-1753)

Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous (1713)

Berkeley is mostly interested to refute skepticism and atheism (he's an Anglican bishop)

Hylas is the materialist, Philonous ('lover of spirit')

Broad outline:

One merit of Aristotelean scholasticism: although the details of the story are complicated and sometimes bizarre, in many ways it confirms common sense

- The apparent properties of things are really in them
  - Sugar is sweet
  - Grass is green
- Scientific theories accurately reflect objective reality
  - There really is such a thing as gold, distinct from silver and tin and whales and otters

As seen in Descartes, Leibniz, and Locke, the new mechanistic science leads to serious problems with those common sense claims:

- Apparent properties (secondary qualities) are not really in objects
  - Sugar is not sweet
  - Grass is not green
- Scientific theories are relativistic
  - Object types are interest-relative

Hence the new science supports a kind of skepticism

We've seen that the problems of the new science are more or less shared by rationalists (Descartes) and empiricists (Locke)

Locke illustrated a skeptical problem for empiricists in particular: how can we know about material substance in general?

- Locke think's it 'I know not what'
- Sounds bad

Berkeley reject Aristotelian philosophy, is an empiricist.

But, he wants to preserve common sense. How?

Big picture solution:

- skepticism comes from the gap between how we perceive things to be and how things are in the material world
  - i.e. gap between ideas in the mind and material objects
- So, get rid of the material objects: all that exists are minds and the ideas in them
  - This is called **Idealism**
  - What's being rejected is **materialism**, which in this context is the thesis that *at least some material substance exists*
    - NB: this is not the standard meaning of the term, (which is that *all that exists* is material substance)
- Why it's not totally crazy to think this would solve the problem:
  - Everyone agrees (in this context) that
    - access to the ideas in our minds is unproblematic
    - access to the qualities of material objects is problematic
  - So, if the grass is a material object, then
    - I can't know that it's green (because it really isn't) and
    - maybe I can't even know it's size and shape (depending on whether I really perceive primary qualities at all)
  - But if the grass has no existence independently of the ideas in our minds, then access is unproblematic
  - So we get ordinary knowledge back: grass really is green, sugar really is sweet, etc
    - Cost: we have to give up on a highly theoretical belief about the material nature of those things
    - Worth it?

So,

First task: show that sensible qualities aren't really in material objects themselves

- This wouldn't show that material objects don't exist; just undermines motivation to believe that they do

He starts with familiar *relativity arguments* that secondary qualities aren't in the objects:

- OJ tastes one way before you brush your teeth, another way after
  - How can taste A and taste B both be in the OJ?
- Warm/ cold water case
  - Is the water cold or warm?
- Colors are different at different levels of magnification
  - What color is it?

Possible solution: pick a privileged observational standpoint, the object has the properties perceived from that standpoint

- Taste: the real taste of OJ is the one *before* brushing your teeth
- Heat: the real temp of the water is the one sensed by your left hand
- Colors: the real color of the porphyry is the one seen as magnification X

Objection: that's arbitrary - why one standpoint over another?

This is all familiar from Locke.

Berkeley's innovation: apply relativity arguments to *primary* qualities

Size:

- Mites are very small. If we can see it at all, a mite's foot would look very small to us
  - So, our idea of the foot is an idea of a very small thing
- But, presumably a mite can see its own foot just fine: it looks relative large to the mite
  - So, the mite's idea of the foot is an idea of a large thing
- Can't both be right:
  - Size is a primary quality, so it's *in* the foot (if it's instantiated at all)
  - But, nothing is both large and not-large at the same time
- There's no non-arbitrary way to decide who is right
- So, size isn't in the object

Motion (this one isn't very good)

- Speed = distance traveled/ time
- Time is 'measured in a succession of ideas in our minds'
- It's possible for that succession to move fast for one person and slow for another
- In that case an object could appear to be traveling fast to one person and slow to another
- Can't both be right
- No non-arbitrary way to decide who is right
- So, motion isn't in the object

Solidity:

- Somethgin might seem solid to a weak person, not solid to a strong person
- Who is right?

Shape (B doesn't talk about his, but here's what he'd say):

- The coin looks round from one vantage point, oval from another
- Which is right?

So, primary qualities fail the relativity test just like secondary qualities.

Since that's enough to prove that secondary qualities aren't 'material' objects, it's also enough to show that primary qualities aren't in them

### **The Master Argument:**

Berkeley says he's willing to stake the whole question on the following argument:

**Phil:** ...if you like we can set aside our whole conversation up to here, counting it as nothing. I am willing to let our whole debate be settled as follows:- If you can conceive it to be possible for any mixture or combination of qualities, or any sensible object whatever, to exist outside the mind, then I will grant it actually to be so.

**Hyl:** By that test, the point will soon be decided. What is easier than to conceive a tree or house existing by itself, independently of and unperceived by any mind whatsoever? I conceive them existing in that way right now.

**Phil:** Tell me, Hylas, can you see a thing which is at the same time unseen?

**Hyl:** No, that would be a contradiction.

**Phil:** Is it not as great a contradiction to talk of conceiving a thing which is unconceived?

**Hyl:** It is.

**Phil:** The tree or house therefore which you think of is conceived by you.

**Hyl:** How could it be otherwise?

**Phil:** And what is conceived is surely in the mind.

**Hyl:** Without question, what is conceived is in the mind.

That is:

1. We only conceive of ideas
2. Ideas exist only in the mind
3. So, everything we conceive of exists only in the mind
  - a. i.e., we can't even conceive of mind-independent material objects

Problem:

- on the indirect realist picture, we conceive of a tree by conceiving of the idea of a tree
  - ideas are the vehicle of representation, not the thing being represented
- Berkeley conflates the representation with the thing represented

But wait: if there's no material substance, then where do our ideas come from?

Materialist has a story: material objects bump into things, cause a chain reaction of motion that leads to our sense organs, which stimulates the brain, which causes ideas in our minds.

This provides a reason to reject idealism: material substance serves an explanatory function, and that gives us a reason to accept its existence

[NB: this is essentially a reaction to Boyle's argument for primary qualities being in objects - see the notes on Locke]

Problem: it does a really crappy job of serving that explanatory function

“...this way of explaining things, as you called it, could never have satisfied **any reasonable man**. What connection is there between a motion in the nerves [or brain], and the sensations of sound or color in the mind? How how is it possible that these should be the effect of that?” (45)

NB: this is just the traditional mind-body problem faced by all substance dualists (including Descartes and Locke)

The problem goes away if you're a substance *monist*:

- Mind-body problem is a problem of interaction between different kinds of substances
- If all substances are of the same type (material, immaterial/ mental) then there's no problem of interaction
  - So, no problem if everything is material, or everything is mental/ immaterial
- And that's exactly what Berkeley things: objects are bundles of ideas in minds

**Problem:** ideas only exist in minds, and only when they're being conceived. If the pen is just a bundle of ideas, then when no one is conceiving of it, doesn't it cease to exist?

**Berkeley's solution:** God sees everything, all the time. So there's always a mind in which the pen is being conceived, so the pen doesn't pop out of existence when we leave the room.

**Objection 1:**

- objects pop in and out of existence
- so that means that the idea of the pen must sometimes be conceived by God and sometimes not
- But that's inconsistent with traditional understanding of God as unchanging
  - Possible response: god isn't unchanging

**NB:**

- Berkeley's argument isn't 'God exists, so objects persist (even though there are not material substances)'
- Other way around: objects persist, and there are no material substances, so God exists

**Problem:** how to explain perceptual errors?

Materialist has an answer: I have ideas in my mind that don't reflect the qualities of the material object

Idealist doesn't seem to:

- the ideas in my mind, taken together, *just is* the object
- So, it's impossible for the object to have some sensible quality without actually having that quality

Irony: Berkeley was originally motivated by the fact that materialism leads to so much error

- He's overcorrected: now error looks to be impossible

NB what's missing is some standard of truth independent of my ideas  
That's one function that the material object serves

**Objection:**

Related to the previous two objections:

- Isn't it possible to conceive of non-actual possibilities? Don't we do that all the time
  - When I imagine a unicorn, there isn't really a unicorn there, right?
- *Real* objects are those in God's mind. If
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