

Lecture Four: Personal Identity; Berkeley's Idealism

1. Recap

We have seen a number of elements of Locke's system and how those fit together. Our general picture is of a world containing corpuscles of matter which provoke ideas in our minds which represent those worldly objects.

Some features of our ideas really resemble features of objects (primary qualities); others do not (secondary qualities). We are also able to come by general ideas through a process of **abstraction**. By abstracting away particular details we can come to have general ideas (e.g. of **substance**).

Today we will begin by finishing our survey of Locke by thinking about what Locke has to say about **personal identity**.

Then we will move on to thinking about a philosopher who challenges almost all the elements of the Lockean system – George Berkeley.

2. Berkeley's Life and Works

Born near Kilkenny, 1685. Earned a BA from Trinity College, Dublin in 1704 (working mainly in mathematics). Between 1706-09 he worked on a preparing a philosophical response to Locke.

In 1710 he was ordained and continued publishing work based on his earlier notebook:

1709 – An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision

1710 – Principles of Human Knowledge

1712 – Passive Obedience

1713 – Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous.

1713-21: Spends time in London, Oxford, Paris, Turin, Naples, Rome, Florence, Newport, Rhode Island, Boston, London and Dublin. Writes for the Guardian. Gets recognition for his early philosophy (goes on to influence both Hume and Kant).

Later becomes bishop of Cloyne. Dies in Oxford in 1753.

3. Berkeley's view

Idealism: All that exists in the world are minds and the ideas in those minds. There are no **material objects**. This doesn't mean that tables, rivers, chairs don't exist: they do exist. They just aren't material objects. There are no corporeal substances which resemble our ideas. We just have minds and the ideas in minds.

This contrasts with the representational realist (e.g. Locke) who posits **minds, ideas, and material objects**. Berkeley will argue that there is something incoherent or impossible about the notion of a material object.

Berkeley also thinks another key Lockean doctrine – **abstraction** – is hopeless. By buying into the idea of **abstraction** we lead ourselves into unnecessary philosophical puzzles (e.g. on the nature of **substance**). Locke’s distinction between **primary** and **secondary** qualities will also come under fire; as well as Locke’s thought that our ideas **resemble** qualities.

4. Berkeley’s Basic Motivation

Berkeley wants to argue that idealism is actually part of common sense. Materialism is a confused philosophical error that we can be tutored out of. The basic idea is as follows: I only have **direct awareness** of two sorts of entities. I can introspect my mind (so I know I am a thinking substance, what Berkeley calls a ‘**spirit**’). I also am directly aware of **perceptions (ideas)** in my mind.

What of entities I’m not directly aware of? Either they are also **ideas**; or they are **minds**; or they are some other thing which we are never directly aware of. But what is this other thing that is unlike anything we are directly aware of? It’s not something we **experience**, so it’s a meaningless and unintelligible hypothesis.

Here he is linking **experience** and **meaningfulness** very closely – the meaning of terms in a language is given by what you would need to experience in order to check that terms application. In effect Berkeley is taking Locke’s **concept** empiricism and pushing it to its logical extreme.

We don’t directly experience **material objects**, so the very idea of them is nonsensical. Our account of **metaphysics** (what we think exists) is driven here by our **epistemology** (what we can know about the world). This notion of linking the two disciplines closely together is a notion that has had a huge effect on the development of philosophy (e.g. in Kant and later). Berkeley is trying to use **empiricism** to reign in the metaphysical speculations of earlier philosophers.

5. Main Argument for the Idealism

The **idealist** says there are no **material** objects. Why? Why is this hypothesis unintelligible? One way to argue for **idealism** is to exclude other, possible alternative views. This is what Berkeley seems to be up to.

He sees the choice as between **direct realism**, **representational realism**, and **idealism**. If we argue against the first two then the only choice we are left to accept is idealism.

Direct realism is the view that we are directly aware of mind-independent **material objects** that continue to exist even when not perceived.

Representational realists say that the immediate objects of perception are sensations (**ideas**) which are mind dependent (they cannot exist unperceived). Their causes are **material objects** that the sensations represent.

Idealism says that the objects of perception are mind dependent **ideas**, and that's it.

6. Against Representational Realism

Principle 3 is then the crucial passage:

“That neither our thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by the imagination, exist **without** the mind, is what *everybody will allow* [1?]. And it seems no less evident that the various sensations or ideas imprinted on the sense, however blended or combined together (that is, whatever objects they compose), **cannot exist otherwise than in a mind** perceiving them. I think an intuitive knowledge may be obtained of this by any one that shall attend to *what is meant by the term exists*, when applied to sensible things. The table I write on I say exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed- meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. There was an odour, that is, it was smelt; there was a sound, that is, it was heard; a colour or figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch [2?]. 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 **percepi**, nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.”

What is going on here? When it comes to sensible (perceptible qualities) to say they exist just is to say they are perceived or could be perceived. Why?

1. Ideas of sensible qualities cannot exist outside the mind (as the representationalist agrees).
2. If we thus focus on ideas of sensible qualities, we should realise that their qualities cannot exist unperceived.
3. The being of sensible qualities is thus exhausted by their being perceived.
4. The nature of sensible things is fully exhausted by their sensible qualities.
5. Therefore the being of sensible things is to be perceived.

The general move is this – our ideas of sensible qualities are mental items. And we can tell that the nature of the quality itself is exhausted by this mentality. So the qualities must be mental items too. Objects just are collections of qualities (principle 1). So objects are fully mental.

7. Against Direct Realism

We find in principle 4, the common opinion: ‘houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects, have an existence, natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding’.

But:

'For, what are the fore-mentioned objects but the things we perceive by sense? and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations? and is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these, or any combination of them, should exist unperceived?'

So, if we reflect on the objects of experience, we notice that they are mind-dependent. Maybe the argument is this:

- 1) Physical objects are the things we perceive by sense
- 2) Ideas and sensations are the things we perceive by sense
- 3) Therefore, physical objects are collections of ideas and sensations.

However, the direct realist will not accept 2. What else could Berkeley say? Well, perhaps he could use the **argument from hallucination** we saw in earlier weeks:

1. All experiences have an object.
2. Hallucinatory experiences do not have objects that are external to the mind.
3. Hallucinatory experiences have objects which are internal to the mind (from 1 and 2).
4. The objects of experience are the same in the case of hallucinatory and veridical experiences.
5. Therefore, the objects of all experiences, whether hallucinatory or veridical, are internal to the mind (from 3 and 4).

Recall, the idea is that the realist must admit that you can have a similar experience even when the material object is lacking (in cases of hallucinations). This experience has the same objects as a veridical experience. So in the case of veridical experience there must be some intermediate mental item between you and the object.

So the argument from exclusion says that direct realist fails (because we need to buy the idea idea). Representational realism fails because we can tell through reflection that sensible qualities cannot exist unperceived. So we must conclude idealism.

Summary:

1. At least one spiritual substance exists (principle 2).
 2. Objects of perception are collections of ideas (principle 1).
 3. They cannot thus exist otherwise than by being perceived – not independent substances (principles 4 and 6).
 4. Given the essential mental character of sensible qualities, like qualities cannot reside in non-thinking substance (principle 3 – the Crucial Step).
 5. Unintelligible to assume that there would be some other sort of substance with non-sensible qualities (principle 4).
 6. It follows that mind is the only substance; everything else is made up of ideas in minds (principle 7).
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8. Against the Primary/Secondary Distinction

One way out of the above would be to deny (4) above.

We could do this by claiming that although the things we directly perceive are ideas, there are also qualities out in the world that resemble those ideas in some way – as in the case of **primary qualities**. These are special in that our **ideas of primary qualities** really **resemble** genuine features of objects.

Berkeley's response: only an idea can resemble an idea. Ideas cannot resemble real features of material objects.

Principle 8:

“But, say you, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them, whereof 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 colour or figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure. If we look but never so little into our thoughts, we shall find it impossible for us to conceive a likeness except only between our ideas.”

9. Arguments against the Distinction

First argument, principle 9:

Extension, figure, motion as they are in perception are ideas in the mind. But ideas cannot resemble anything but other ideas. Therefore extension, figure and motion must be ideas also. So how can they exist in unperceiving material substance?

If they could, perceptions could exist unperceived, and this is a contradiction.

Second argument, principle 10

1. We recognise that primary qualities are inseparably united with secondary qualities. We cannot conceive of them existing separately.
2. Secondary qualities exist in the mind.
3. Therefore primary qualities must exist in the mind too.

This argument would work against people who think that secondary qualities exist only in the mind. But this is probably a misunderstanding of Locke. Also, why should we believe 1? That primary qualities cannot be conceived independently of secondary qualities? Berkeley asks us to try it.

The secondary qualities are so central to our way of thinking about the world we cannot split them apart from our understanding of an object.

Third Argument, Principle 14

The representative realist used certain arguments to show that **secondary qualities** exist only in the mind. We can use those exact same arguments to show that **primary qualities** exist only in the mind too. This is sometimes known as the argument from **relativity**.

Fourth Argument, Principle 14

This argument consists in an epistemic challenge offered by Berkeley:

But, though it were possible that solid, figured, movable substances may exist without the mind, corresponding to the ideas we have of bodies, yet how is it possible for us to know this?

Representational realists claim that all we **directly** know about are our ideas. How, then, could we ever know about the existence of material objects? If we are representational realists then we are in danger of falling into **scepticism**.

Having the perception doesn't **require** the object – you can have a perception without the relevant object (e.g. a hallucination).

Ok, so perception doesn't really require an object out there. But isn't positing material objects a **good explanation** of why we perceive things as we do? In fact, isn't it the best explanation for, e.g. the regularities in our experience of the world?

Berkeley's response: how could this be the best explanation? The representationalist offers no account of how a material body can cause an idea in the mind.

To sum up: the primary/secondary quality distinction that supports representational realism, according to Berkeley, doesn't work out. We can't make sense of our ideas resembling qualities in material objects, and we have no good reason to posit material mind-independent objects.

10. The Intuitive Force of Idealism

The main support for **idealism** is supposed to come from intuition, it's supposed to be intuitively clear that the notion of an unperceived object or quality doesn't make sense.

The most famous statement of this is found in principle 23. Here Berkeley is taking on a critic who says 'There is nothing easier than to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them.'

Berkeley's response is that when you imagine an unperceived tree you are really imagining yourself perceiving it! Trying to imagine an unperceived tree is impossible

Problem: The **realist** can admit that it is contradictory to say that one conceives a tree which exists unconceived. The realist is claiming that he can conceive a tree which *could* exist unconceived – and not one that *does* exist unconceived.

Also, the analogy between seeing and conceiving Berkeley uses is suspicious. It is not contradictory to say that one conceives something existing unconceived (but it is contradictory to say that one sees something existing unseen).