

The Empiricists // Spring 2016

Handout 11

Berkeley: Sensible qualities, matter

THE QUESTION ABOUT HEAT. Heat is a sensible quality. Since Hylas has claimed a distinction between existence and perceivability for any quality, including sensible ones, he ought to say that heat can exist without the mind. This applies to any 'degree of heat'. But, as anyone would agree, great heat is painful. Now Philonous goes as far as to say that great heat *is* pain—a particular sensation of pain, to be precise. On the other hand, material object cannot be in pain. Consequently, pain exists in the mind. But then heat exists in the mind too, as it has been identified with pain. DHP 175 DHP 176

HEDONIC ARGUMENTS. This reasoning initiates a sequence of what we may call 'Hedonic arguments'. (1) Claim: every degree of heat is mind-independent. Suppose, as we must, that (2) the experience of intense heat is painful. Then (3) there is one object of experience, the same quality of heat and pain. But (4) pain is in the mind. So (5) great heat is in the mind too. (6) Hence also every other degree of heat is in the mind.

To escape this conclusion, suppose a more reasonable claim, that pain is caused by heat. Then the argument runs as follows. (1) Claim: every degree of heat is mind-independent. (2) The experience of intense heat is painful. (3) Pain is caused by heat. (4) So there are two objects of experience: pain and heat. (5) This is implausible: while in pain occasioned by intense heat, one does not have two sensations, but only one. (6) This is further confirmed by considerations of conceivability: we cannot, in imagination, separate the quality of heat from the quality of pain. DHP 176

As a last resort, Hylas attempts to deny the premiss that all degrees of heat are without the mind: perhaps some are, some aren't. Berkeley (aka Philonous) seems to treat this move as too desperate to be credible. But his reasoning seems to be based on the premiss that we are always in some hedonic state, and that the sensation of a warm blanket is as inseparable from pleasure, as the sensation of touching a hot iron from pain. DHP 177

There is, on the face of it, little incentive to believe this premiss. I can busy myself with sorting blankets into more or less warm. When asked about my pleasures, I may well reply that I have no particular pleasure in touching them. By contrast, when touching hot irons, I will likely be unable to tell which one is more hot, being totally crushed by pain.

PHENOMENAL CONFLICTS. Having completed Hedonic arguments, Philonous embarks on a rather different strategy. Reality does not contain contradictions. It cannot be that something is and is not the case. But we can perceive a vessel of water as both hot and cold if we put two hands there at once, one of which is hot and the other cold. Therefore, heat and cold are not in the bodies themselves. DHP 177 DHP 179

What are we to make of this argument? In the first place, it relies on the premiss that our perceptions are infallible. One may very well say that the conflicts in our perceptions reveal their inadequacy. We should investigate further, then, what model of perception Berkeley adopts to make the premiss plausible. Secondly, one may well agree that perceptions are relative to the perceiver's circumstances, but still insist that some perceivers, in some excellent circumstances, cannot perceive the heat and cold *in* the bodies. Berkeley seems himself to have said that much in the *Principles* when commenting on the hot-cold hands experiment. PHK 15

CAUSATION IN PERCEPTION. Next to the Hedonic and Phenomenal Conflicts arguments considered earlier, Berkeley also has the 'Causal argument'. Suppose that there are objects with the qualities of warmth, colour, or sound. Not all of these qualities are categorical: some are clearly dispositional (as is the case of sound). Can we perceive these qualities? Well, we can perceive them by virtue of a causal of which they are part. This causal process originates in the bodies themselves, or in the medium that affects these bodies, such as light. It terminates in the perceiver's sensations—i.e. colour-sensations, sound-sensations, or heat-sensations. But that is exactly what we are after: our experiences contain nothing but mind-dependent qualities. DHP 181(w), 186(c), 181(s)

The argument plainly relies on a no-action-at-a-distance principle. There are intermediate steps to be completed for the perceiver's mind to be put in contact with an external body. What the mind perceives cannot be the body itself, since the latter is screened off, so to speak, by precisely the causal process we assume to be involved.

A potential problem with this argument is its assumption that objects trigger sensations. What if we were to say instead that objects trigger certain states of the perceiver's mind (brain) that makes him aware of the qualities of these bodies? If this is how we described the causal process, then we could say that the perceiver directly perceives objects and their qualities.

BRIEF REVIEW. What have we, *qua* Berkeley, achieved so far? (1) What we have in our experiences is sensible qualities, such as colours, sounds, and tastes. (2) These qualities are all mind-dependent, not being in the bodies themselves. In other words, they are our *ideas*. So, (3) what we have in our experiences, what we immediately perceive, is nothing but ideas. Observe that, even if Berkeley's arguments to this effect are inconclusive, this is not a major fault at all. For Locke and 'Lockean materialists' in fact make the very same claim—evidently without, in the *Essay*, trying to defend it, at least not in any detail, on philosophical grounds. E II.i.5

PRIMARY QUALITIES. We can challenge claim (2). Some qualities are mind-dependent, but some aren't. What are they? Of course the familiar primary qualities. Shape and motion, for example, we are able to perceive, but those are in the bodies themselves. DHP 187

Berkeley's response seems to be twofold. First, the Phenomenal Conflicts argument is deployed in the cases of size, shape, motion, solidity, and gravity. The second response ventures into the debate over abstract ideas. Hylas suggests distinguishing between absolute and relative motion (similarly for other qualities). Relative motion can be faster or slower, but absolute motion not so. Thus absolute motion becomes an 'abstract idea'. But not such idea can be conceived in our DHP 188ff DHP 192ff

minds. If so, it loses all legitimacy. In short, for the idea of motion to be legitimate, it must not be separated from an idea of some secondary quality. Since the latter is mind-dependent, so should be the former.

One might complain that this holds of the *ideas* of primary qualities. But could not the qualities themselves be legitimate? That is, could not there be a primary quality, such as motion, of which we cannot frame any idea, but which is still out there? This possibility, I think, is not addressed at this stage in the discussion (we are still concerned with the contents of our experiences), but it is easy to see why it is unwelcome for Hylas: it would entail unknowability of real properties, and hence entail the dreaded scepticism.

OUTLINE OF THE REJECTION OF MATTER. By ‘matter’ we understand entities that exist whether or not anyone perceives them. Given this definition, Berkeley’s argument is, in a nutshell, simply this: if we perceive nothing but ideas, then the notion of matter is unintelligible. To understand the argument, ask first what qualities a material object might have. It seems there are two options: sensible qualities and non-sensible qualities. Since sensible qualities have been assimilated to ideas, the first option is a non-starter. Choosing it would imply the mental nature of material objects which, for Berkeley, is an absurdity. Suppose, then, they have non-sensible qualities. These qualities can exist (can be ascribed to the existing object) unperceived. Now unperceived existence, according to Berkeley, is unintelligible.

TREE IN A QUAD. The argument for the preceding proposition is presumably this. (1) You can conceive a tree unperceived, but (2) this requires you to have conceived a tree. Then (3) the tree you conceived is just an idea. (4) As such, it cannot exist without the mind. (5) Therefore, you have failed to conceive an object without the mind.

DHP 200,
PHK 23, 45

Remark 1. In PHK 23 the argument is slightly different, with the explicit mention of attention (‘taking no notice etc.’): (1) You can indeed imagine a tree unperceived, but (2) this means nothing more than paying attention, in your imagination, to the idea of a tree and no attention to the idea of a perceiver. Then (3) the opponent has not shown that a tree could exist unperceived, so far as he simply ignored the idea of a perceiver.

The form this argument takes seems to be that from the impossibility of imagining a tree unperceived we infer the impossibility its existence. Two lines of objection against this move should be mentioned. One is that Berkeley may be accused of conflating ‘imagining’ and ‘conceiving’. In imagining I form mental images. So, indeed, one cannot imagine a tree unperceived. One can, however, conceive a tree unperceived. To conceive such a tree it is enough to discourse about such a tree—say, write a poem about a lonely tree in the quad.

Another objection is that Berkeley should not be granted even his claim about imagining. We distinguish between two modes of imagining. In one of them we imagine the scene from the inside. In such a case we adopt the visual perspective of one of the participants. If you ask me to imagine what it feels like to be a skier, there is no way for me to complete the task, unless I ‘step into his shoes’. I imagine his experiences from the inside. By contrast, you might ask me to imagine a skier descending from a mountain. Then I am not required to adopt a perspective of any particular observer. If this distinction is granted, then Berkeley may be accused of restricting himself to the first type of imagining only.

Question 2. How persuasive are these two objections?

Leaving these objections aside, what is the import of Berkeley’s argument? What he says, in effect, is that we cannot detach the conception of material objects from our perceptions of them, but these perceptions do not warrant the existence of mind-independent objects. To paraphrase once more: we draw concepts of ordinary objects from experience, yet experience does not yield any notion of mind-independent objects. Observe that Locke might concur, but then argue that experience yields ideas resembling the qualities of the objects themselves.

Question 3. Should this argument apply also to *theoretical* objects?

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