

The Empiricists // Spring 2016

Handout 14

Berkeley: Objections and replies

THE SEQUENCE OF OBJECTIONS. Beginning with DHP 231 Hylas raises a number of objections to Philonous's positive doctrine. Here is a (possibly incomplete) list:

Metaphysical objections (M1) Do we have an idea of God's mind or even of finite minds? (231) (M2) Should we not accept material objects for the same reasons as we accept minds? (233) (M3) Should the reality of sensible things consist in them being actually perceived? (234) (M4) How to distinguish between things imagined and things perceived? (235) (M5) Since two people cannot have the same idea, they cannot perceive the same (sensible) thing. (247) (M6) Since ideas are extended and minds aren't, can ideas be *in* the mind? (249)

Epistemic objections (E1) We can only distinguish between adequate and inadequate perceptions by their correspondence to real things. (238) (E2) How do we explain phenomenal conflicts? (245)

Common sense objections (CS1) Immaterialism is simply repugnant. (237) (CS2) Immaterialism is politically dangerous. (244) (CS3) Immaterialism is at least controversial in claiming things to be mere ideas. (244)

Scientific objections (S1) The existence of matter has been demonstrated by Newtonian mechanics. (241) (S2) Scientific explanations in general appeal to matter. (242) (S3) Immaterialism leaves us with 'empty forms' of things. (244) (S4) How can we explain knowledge gained through microscopes? (245)

Theological objections (T1) Immaterialism makes God responsible for evil. (236) (T2) Immaterialism makes God feel pain. (240) (T3) Since most people believe in matter, God is a deceiver. (243)

Given the results of our discussion of the Design argument, I do not think we should worry about Theological objections. Berkeley is in any case not entitled to conclude that God, and no other mind, causes ideas in our minds. Nor should we worry too much about Common Sense, whatever Berkeley's own preoccupation with it. Let us then briefly elaborate on some especially thorny issues.

OTHER FINITE MINDS. We are supposed to have confidence in the existence of our own mind, of our ideas, and of the existence of God and His ideas. What about other finite minds? Berkeley appeals to the inference to the best explanation. The tone of the passage shows that we are not supposed to be too convinced in the existence of other minds.

But there is a difficulty here. What happens when I wave my hand? Some ideas are generated in my mind, the 'hand-waving' ideas. But how can you and she perceive my hand being waved? I have to be able to generate corresponding ideas in both of your minds, but I cannot do so: I am only in control of my own ideas. So there must be an intermediate intervention by God placing relevant ideas in different minds.

So far as we are keen to prove the existence of other minds, we are in a bad company here: we have to assume a world requiring incessant Divine interventions. Alternatively, we can go Leibniz's way and postulate pre-established harmony. That is not a very palatable solution either.

MY OWN MIND. Can I know properties of *my own* mind? Apparently all I know about my mind comes from introspection—that only reveals ideas. However, ideas are not properties of the mind: they are passive, whereas the mind's essence is to be active. In my investigations I will always be limited to having ideas, which are not ideas of my mind. So it is not clear on what basis we should say that I have immediate knowledge of my own mind.

IDENTITY. The regularities in our sense perceptions, as opposed to chaos in our imagination, are to be explained by the ideas of God. But the question is: do we *perceive* God's ideas, or are these ideas directly implanted in our minds? I do not think that the latter answer is really an option. Of course, one is at liberty to say what one pleases about the workings of Divine ideas, but to suppose that as soon as I open my eyes God implants certain ideas in me would not do any good to any philosophical account.

So we have to go with the first option. But then the following problem arises. Suppose you and I are looking at the tree. I shut my eyes. I no longer see the tree. You are still seeing the tree. What this should mean, in Berkeley's terms, is that you perceive a tree-like combination of ideas. My tree-like combination of ideas is gone. Thus it follows that what you perceive is not the same as what I perceive. In plain words, we do not see the *same* thing—the *same* tree. Similarly, when I open my eyes again, I do not see the same tree, only a very similar tree. Common sense, on the other hand, tells us that two of us are able to see the same things, and also that we are able to identify same objects on different occasions.

Berkeley confronts this problem head on. His response is that experience furnishes us with no concept of identity. When we learn the use of the word 'same', all we have is the similarity in our perceptions. Only that much, he claims, is accepted by common folk. It is the philosophers who invent the concept of identity. But their distinctions are verbal and arbitrary (see the discussion of the house).

THE RETURN OF THE SCEPTIC? Locke recognises the non-transparency of the world. We are on a trip abroad, in a foreign country, whose workings remain unfamiliar, indeed unfathomable, to us. Berkeley rebels against the ensuing scepticism. Yet he never seems to be bothered about a different kind of scepticism implied by the theological machinery underwriting the reality of the mental world.

For consider: according to the response to S2, we can never explain the production of ideas by material objects. But we can no more explain the production of ideas by spirits. So the workings of the world are no less obscure in Berkeley's system than they are in Locke's.

DHP 232
PHK 145

DHP 248

DHP 242