

Introduction to Philosophy II // Spring 2017

Handout 1

Idealism: Berkeley I

A THEORY OF SENSE PERCEPTION. The Dialogues begin in a playful manner, reminiscent of Plato, but without the added value of historical characters and Plato's singular magic. Hylas (the name's meaning comes from 'matter', or *hyle*, in Greek) acts as Berkeley's materialist opponent, whilst Philonous (the name's meaning comes from 'love of mind' in Greek) acts as Berkeley's mouthpiece. The First dialogue begins with a squabble over who is a sceptic. Neither wants to be one. Hylas accuses Philonous of being a sceptic on account of denying matter. Philonous in turn accuses Hylas of being a sceptic himself, on account of his own views. He also promises to show that Hylas's view would lead to the denial of common sense.

DHP 172

And soon enough Philonous claims that all sense perception is immediate. All that can be properly said to be perceived is perceived immediately. We perceive immediately shapes (or rather, visual shapes by sight, tactile shapes by touch), colours, sounds, odours.

DHP 174

Once we 'take away' sensible qualities, nothing is left. Therefore, to be perceived is the essence of sensible things. Hylas nevertheless insists that beside objects of our perception, contents of our experience, there are things that cause perceptions and experiences. Those cannot be perceived, but must be inferred by reason. Furthermore, a potentially important distinction is drawn that the concept of existence and the concept of being perceived are different.

DHP 175

HEAT AND PAIN. 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 178

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, can perceive the heat and cold *in* the bodies.

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 process 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.

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

DHP 187

Remark 1. Locke called those qualities 'primary qualities'—or at least that is how Berkeley reads Locke.

Berkeley's response is to deploy the Phenomenal Conflicts argument for the cases of size, shape, motion, solidity, and gravity (only the case of size is in our selection). Consider size. As I come closer to the object, or further from it, my size perception changes. A mouse perceives a rabbit as a giant, but we don't. Hence the quality of size cannot be in the external object itself. The reasoning is parallel to the case of sounds and tastes earlier on.

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 only 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.

YSB