

Introduction to Philosophy II // Spring 2017

Handout 2

Idealism: Berkeley II

OUTLINE OF THE REJECTION OF MATTER. By ‘material objects’ 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

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 1. How persuasive are these two objections?

MATTER AND EXPERIENCE. 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.

IDEAS AS REPRESENTATIONS OF OBJECTS. A material object may be thought to possess two characteristics: it can exist unperceived, and its properties, at least some of them, can be represented in our perception. Upon attacking the first characteristic in the Tree in a Quad argument, Berkeley proceeds to deal with the second. This second characteristic is interpreted to the effect that ideas in our mind resemble the objects they are said to represent. That is the justification for saying that some of our ideas are ideas *of* material objects. Sensible qualities, accordingly, are representations of the qualities of material objects by virtue of the resemblance between the two.

DHP 203ff

THE JULIUS CAESAR ARGUMENT. The example Berkeley uses is of Julius Caesar’s portrait. JC is himself invisible, but the portrait represents him. By the same token, material objects are themselves invisible, but ideas represent them.

Question 2. Why should material objects be deemed invisible at this point of the discussion?

There is some troubling unclarity in the example. In the first place, the analogy is suspect. The portrait might not, on its own, be able to represent JC. For suppose JC had a twin brother. Which of the brothers does the portrait represent? The painter’s intentions are evidently a factor in settling the fact of representation.

Secondly, Philonous claims that, while looking at the portrait, I see nothing more than colours and figures. Is this not too strong a claim? If this were true, then I could not even see the image of JC. In the light of the discussions earlier, it is likely, I think, that Berkeley held discrete sensible qualities alone immediately perceivable. But it is no less clear that, for Berkeley, the talk of perception by association is also legitimate. I can be trained to recognise, thus perceive, JC among the colours of the canvas.

All of this, however, is not really damaging to Berkeley's argument. As far as I can see, the argument develops in three stages. In the first stage we are told that resemblance is never directly (immediately) perceived. This leaves open the possibility of indirect perception. So in the second stage we are told that this is possible either through association of ideas or through inference. However, in the case of ideas and material objects this possibility is ruled out. This leaves open the logical possibility of an existent resemblance between x and y —that is imperceivable, unknowable, unjustifiable, but merely assumed without contradiction. Thus in the third stage we are told that, in our case of ideas and objects, such resemblance should fail to be a logical possibility anyway.

The first stage of the argument is completed with the JC portrait analogy. One might protest that the proof is inconclusive, since there may be some cases other than artistic depiction where resemblance does hold. The second stage of the argument so understood is nearly trivial. For since *ex hypothesi* material objects are never perceived, we cannot know the resemblance between ideas and objects. Being presented with the idea of a table I cannot know whether it resembles its prototype the material table—that is, before I see the material table. And that latter task I cannot fulfil.

Question 3. Can testimony help in determining the resemblance between x and y ?

So perhaps the resemblance is still a logical possibility, though unknown. Here the final objection is that nothing can be like an idea—except another idea.

Question 4. Assess the last claim.

THE MATERIALIST COMEBACK. Facing ruin with the idea of matter, a materialist might change his tack. What exactly is the origin of ideas whose existence was assumed from the start? According to a materialist causal explanation, ideas are generated by external objects acting on the senses that convey certain motions to the brain. The brain then transmits 'impressions' to the mind.

Berkeley's response should be that the brain itself is an idea in the mind. So how can one idea cause another idea? Here we are given two doctrines: that ideas are inert, not 'active', and that causality requires activity. These can be evaluated separately. The argument before us, however, looks trivial, because its main premiss—that brain, being a sensible object, is contained in the mind—follows from the preceding discussion.

A materialist need not despair. He may argue *right at the start of the enquiry* that brain is part of the material world, that it should be investigated with the methods continuous with the methods of natural science, and that ideas are to be explained by those methods alone. Ideas, on this account, arise out of the brain's physical interactions with the environment.

Now this *picture* seems at least no less compelling than the picture offered by Berkeley, according to which we begin the enquiry by investigating the workings of the unspecified, unobserved, and rather opaque mind from within, while making no assumptions whatever about the external world. The alternative picture, of course, rejects the implied dualism of Berkeley's initial picture. Some matter, in some state, according to that picture, can think.