

Metaphysics // Fall 2024

Handout 1

Berkeley: Idealism

Remark 1. Berkeley references are to paragraphs, rather than page numbers.

OUTLINE OF IDEALISM. What we can ever perceive and know is ideas. They come from different sources: senses, imagination, emotions, memory. When, for example, I see something, I necessarily see an idea. When I say:

I.1

(1-1) I see a tree,

what I mean or should mean is:

(1-2) I see a tree-idea.

Next to ideas, there is mind. Berkeley is initially mute on how we come to this conclusion, or whether we distinguish between our mind and other minds. Ideas, in any case, can't exist without the mind: their *esse* is *percipi*.

I.2

I.3

But what of material objects like houses, mountains, rivers? Surely they exist without the mind? Berkeley now draws this equivalence:

I.4

(1-3) Material things = things we perceive by sense = things existing within the mind (i.e. ideas only existing whilst perceived by a mind).

Berkeley now considers the claim that things might exist *unperceived*. He examines, more exactly, the reason why any one might hold such a view. One explanation is the theory of abstraction: when I say, 'This fig is sweet,' I should only mean that this fig tastes sweet to me, perhaps also to others. In itself, the fig is not sweet. I can think, that is, of the fig and abstract from its sweetness.

I.5

But even after the abstraction procedure is accomplished, I am still left with conceiving a sensible object, that is, an object having sensible qualities. In a preview of the Master Argument (to be discussed later), Berkeley concludes that I can't conceive an object without a perception of it.

Spirits (=minds) are, therefore, the only substances having independent existence. For, as we have just argued, sensible things are simply collections of sensible qualities (=ideas).

I.7

Suppose, now, we have accepted that sensible things are collections of ideas, and that what we perceive is nothing more than that. Mightn't there be, however, yet another set of qualities external to the mind that can exist unperceived and merely resemble the sensible qualities (=ideas) that we perceive? Berkeley insists, first, that no such resemblance is possible: ideas can only resemble other ideas. Second, suppose that a sensible colour within the mind resembles the 'external' colour without the mind. But how can there be a colour that is unperceived?

I.8

REFUTATION OF MATERIALISM. Berkeley now aims to shew that the very notion of matter is contradictory. He does this by examining the doctrine of primary and secondary qualities. As he understands this doctrine, we have the ideas of primary qualities like shape, size, and number that are adequate images of the corresponding qualities themselves. By contrast, our ideas of secondary qualities like colour and taste are not images of the corresponding qualities in the material bodies.

I.9

Example 2 (1- and 2-qualities). I see my two hands, and my hands are really two in number. If only my hands are left in the universe, there will still be two of them. On the other hand, the bitter taste of my left hand is not really in the hand itself. Instead, there is a certain motion of particles (not at all 'resembling' the taste of bitterness) that generates the idea of bitterness. If only my left hand is left in the universe, the question 'Is it bitter or sweet?' should have no answer.

Remark 3. It is not always clear how Berkeley understands the distinction. Is colour, for example, a quality of the material thing reducible to certain primary qualities, or is it just an idea in the mind, so that the 'quality of colour' is a misnomer? I think that Berkeley prefers the latter reading: in I.10 he identifies 2-qualities as 'sensations existing in the mind alone'. There are good reasons not to choose former reading, because colour is observer-relative while primary qualities are observer-independent, so that there is no reduction of one to the other.

The realist understands material things as objects characterised in themselves irreducibly by primary qualities. These qualities are matched by the ideas in the mind that resemble them...

Remark 4. Another way of putting this claim is to say that primary qualities are ‘represented’ in the mind by the ideas resembling them. Hence this view is sometimes called ‘representational realism’.

... However, since ideas can only resemble other ideas, the notion of material thing contains a contradiction. Furthermore, since the realist maintains that the material thing in itself is devoid of 2-qualities like taste or colour, such a thing would not be conceivable. I.10

Further, consider any 1-quality, like size, motion, or number. Whether a body is great or small, swift or slow, entirely depends on the observer. Let’s assume, therefore, that a particular quality ϕ is in the body itself. But you can’t say ‘how much’ of that quality is in the body. You can’t say whether the body has many or few units of ϕ . So we have a violation of the law of bivalence, and therefore, the whole talk of the body being ϕ is meaningless (‘nothing at all’). I.11,12

Remark 5 (Motion). Note also an interesting passage on motion that could have been written by Mach or Einstein. I.14

Philosophical meanings attached to ‘material substance’ are all baseless. But suppose we grant that there *is* such a meaning. Namely, let’s assume that there are material things existing unperceived. How do we ever come to this conclusion? Two possibilities: by perception (senses) or by reason. But perception can’t ‘inform’ us of the existence of unperceived objects. Perception, that is, doesn’t deliver us concepts of material things existing unperceived. I.17

Alternatively, we receive these concepts from reason—that is, independent of experience. Then, Berkeley argues, there must be a necessary connection discoverable by reason between things and our ideas of them. But no such connection can be found. For example, we can imagine with Descartes that the material world is a total illusion, but that won’t disturb our ideas which, in that case, are merely dreams or hallucinations. There is, as Berkeley himself says in I.28ff, a difference between sensory ideas and hallucinatory ideas. What matters here for him is to insist that no such difference can be discovered by reason. In fact, we can also imagine a mind that has ideas of the same vividness as ours, though with no material bodies around. I.18

Yet there is still another rationalist move, which is to say:

(1-4) The supposition of material things provides the best explanation of our perceptions. I.19

We no longer insist on the necessary existence of material things, only on its probable existence that has explanatory value. Berkeley has a clever response: there is, as of today, no such explanation. Materialists (that include Descartes who is no card-carrying ‘materialist’, of course) admit that they can’t explain the mind-body interaction. Hence, the assumption of bodies has no added value.

Remark 6. As we’ll see later on, this last move was explored by Russell.

MASTER ARGUMENT. But now, there is yet another powerful objection by the materialist. According to Berkeley, material bodies are unintelligible. How come? Isn’t obviously easy to imagine an unperceived tree somewhere in the garden? Because we can imagine such a tree, unperceived objects are ‘conceivable’. Hence, material bodies distinguished by their unperceivability, are conceivable, too. Let us, however, focus on what’s going on when you imagine an unperceived tree (call it ‘Jack’). Your mind ‘takes no notice of itself’. When you conceive Jack, you are, at the same, thinking about Jack. You put yourself in some mental relation to Jack. Thus what you ask to do is to conceive an unconceived tree, which is a contradiction, QED. What is true of Jack is true of any other putative material thing. We have proven, that is, that we can’t have a coherent conception of a ‘thing without the mind’. You can coherently think or talk about any x so far as x stands in a mental relation—of thinking or perceiving—to some mind. I.23

MINDS. It is a fact with which we begin, that we have ideas. What, however, is their origin? It can’t be other ideas. All ideas, Berkeley insists, are inert: they have no causal ‘powers’ themselves. We know that because there *esse* is *percipi*: all that there is in them is to be perceived. But it is impossible that this succession of ideas had no origin. Since other ideas and material bodies (whose conception is incoherent, anyway) can be such origin, the only alternative is minds. I.19



I.25

I.26