

## Berkeley's idealism<sup>1</sup>

How do we gain knowledge? If, as Linda Zagzebski suggests, knowledge involves being in 'cognitive contact' with reality, what means of being in contact with reality do we have? I don't mean how we can know what is *inside* our minds, but how we gain knowledge of what is outside our minds.

The most obvious and immediate answer to the question 'how do we gain knowledge of what is outside our minds?' is 'sense experience' - awareness of physical objects through our senses. Sense experiences are those experiences given to us by our senses - sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch, as well as bodily sensations. We can use our senses to perceive the world outside our minds. But *how* does perception by sense experience tell us about the world, and *what* do we learn about the nature of the world using perception? To answer these questions, we will need to think carefully about what sense perception involves.

Philosophers of perception divide into realists and idealists. Realists claim that what we perceive are physical objects, which exist independent of our minds and of our perceptions. Idealists argue that physical objects are not, in fact, independent of our minds. What they are, and so what we perceive, are mental things - ideas of some kind. In this handout, we will look at just one theory of perception: Berkeley's idealism.

Berkeley rejects our usual understanding of physical objects as mind-independent. He claims that reality is dependent on minds. The ordinary objects of perception - tables, chairs, trees and other physical objects - must be perceived in order to exist at all. The only things that exist are minds (that perceive) and what minds perceive. The claim that nothing exists that is independent of mind is idealism. Does it make sense, and why does Berkeley argue for it?

### **BERKELEY ON PRIMARY AND SECONDARY QUALITIES**

John Locke argued that we can distinguish the qualities that we perceive - such things as shape, size, colour, warmth, and so on - into two kinds. Primary qualities are qualities that are 'utterly inseparable' from the object whatever changes it goes through, e.g. even if it is divided into smaller and smaller pieces. The object has these properties 'in and of itself'. The primary qualities are extension (Locke also talks of size), shape, motion, number and solidity. Secondary qualities are qualities that physical objects have that are 'nothing but powers to produce various sensations in us'. Locke lists 'colours, sounds, tastes, and so on', later adding smells and temperature. (For more on primary and secondary qualities, see the handout 'Indirect realism'.)

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<sup>1</sup> This handout is based on material from Lacewing, M. (2017) *Philosophy for AS and A Level: Epistemology and Moral Philosophy* (London: Routledge), Ch. 2, pp. 66, 96-108

Berkeley begins his *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* by arguing that secondary qualities are mind-dependent. But he then uses similar arguments to show that primary qualities are also mind-dependent.

### Berkeley on secondary qualities

Berkeley, in the character of Philonous, begins by arguing that 'sensible things', i.e. things perceived by the senses, must be perceived immediately by the senses. The causes of our perceptions - the reality behind appearances - if they are not immediately perceived, we must infer. Whatever is inferred is not perceived: because what we perceive is immediately apparent to us, if we need to infer something then we aren't perceiving it. So if we need to infer the causes of our perceptions, we should not say that such causes are themselves perceived.

Philonous then argues that what we immediately perceive are the qualities of things, and nothing more. Through vision, we perceive colours, shapes, size, etc.; through hearing, sounds; through smell, odours - and so on. Each sense perceives particular types of qualities. There is nothing we perceive in addition to these qualities.

Do these qualities exist independently of being perceived? The character Hylas, who plays the role of the realist, starts off as a very simple direct realist. He claims that whatever we perceive exists independently of our minds, and in the form in which we perceive it. Thus heat, as we feel it, exists in the object.

Philonous points out that intense heat, or indeed intense cold, light, sound, pressure, can all be experienced as pain, but pain obviously doesn't exist 'in' physical objects. If we say these secondary qualities are in the object, then we have to say that at some point, it also has the quality of pain. Hylas responds that the heat (light, etc.) isn't itself pain, but causes pain. Philonous objects that we feel just one unified sensation of painful heat (painful light, etc.). In fact, all our perceptions of secondary qualities are accompanied by some form of pleasure or pain.

Since this is an empirical argument, we can challenge it on empirical grounds. Is Berkeley right to say that we can't distinguish between the sensation of heat and that of pain? If he is right for some sensations, is he right for all sensations? Can we not, for instance, distinguish between the sensation of sweetness and the sensation of pleasure we associate with it?

Berkeley's second argument for thinking secondary qualities are mind-dependent is an argument from perceptual variation. He repeats Locke's example of placing a hot and a cold hand in a bowl of tepid water. The water feels hot to the cold hand and cold to the hot hand, but the water cannot be both hot and cold. He later develops the argument in relation to colours:

- P1. A cloud from a distance looks pink, but up close, it loses its colour (or appears grey).
- P2. A solid physical object, viewed through a microscope, appears to have different colours than those it has when viewed normally.

- P3. Different animals perceive the colours of objects differently.
- P4. If colours really existed in physical objects, then to change the colour, it would be necessary to change the object itself. But, of course, different kinds of light - daylight, candlelight, etc. - change the colour of an object without changing the object.
- C1. Therefore, all colours are appearances, not properties of physical objects.

Suppose we insist that secondary qualities 'really' exist in the object as physical particles in motion (light waves, sound waves, the chemicals of smell and taste). Berkeley points out that if we say that sound is a vibration of the air, then we can't hear sound, since vibrations are something perceived by sight or touch. If we say that colour is tiny particles of matter in motion (photons with a particular energy, perhaps), then we can't see 'real' colour, since we cannot see these tiny particles moving. And that is very counter-intuitive.

#### Berkeley's attack on the primary/secondary quality distinction

Having persuaded Hylas to agree that secondary qualities are mind-dependent, Philonous (Berkeley) argues that the argument from perceptual variation applies equally well to primary qualities.

- P1. What looks small to me may look huge to a small animal.
- P2. What looks small from a distance looks large when viewed close up.
- P3. What looks smooth to the naked eye appears craggy and uneven under a microscope.
- P4. If you look at a circle straight on, it looks circular. But if I'm looking at it from an angle, it looks elliptical. We see it differently, but it doesn't change.
- P5. Even motion isn't constant. We measure the speed of motion by how quickly our minds work - to a creature that thinks much faster than us, e.g. a housefly, our fastest movements appear leisurely.
- P6. In the case of colour, when an object appears to have many colours, depending on how it is perceived, we can't say that it has one real colour which is independent of how we perceive it.
- C1. Therefore, P1-P5 show that we can't say that an object has one real shape or size or motion, independent of how it is perceived.
- C2. Therefore, the primary qualities of objects are just as mind-dependent as secondary qualities.

Primary qualities vary just as much as secondary qualities, and so we have no reason to attribute either kind of property to something that exists independent of our perceptual experiences.

### **THE IMMEDIATE OBJECTS OF PERCEPTION ARE MIND-DEPENDENT OBJECTS**

We have seen that Berkeley argues that both primary and secondary qualities are mind-dependent. He has also argued that when we perceive physical objects, we don't perceive anything in addition to its primary and secondary qualities. This gives us the following simple argument:

- P1. Everything we perceive is either a primary or a secondary quality.
- P2. Both primary and secondary qualities are mind-dependent.
- C1. Therefore, nothing that we perceive exists independently of the mind: the objects of perception are entirely mind-dependent.

This doesn't show that there aren't any mind-independent physical objects, because they could exist unperceived. But as we shall see, Berkeley goes on to argue that the idea of a physical object as something that exists independently of our perception of it is an idea so problematic that we should reject it entirely.

Once we grant Berkeley's claim that all we perceive are primary and secondary qualities, it becomes more difficult to reject his later arguments for idealism. One way to challenge his idealism, therefore, is to argue that we can be said to perceive physical objects themselves, and not just their qualities.

### Three arguments against mind-independent objects

#### 1. 'A material substratum'

Suppose we perceive only primary and secondary qualities. If there were no mind-independent objects, what would 'have' the qualities we experience? Hylas argues that we need the idea of 'a material substratum' - the stuff or substance that possesses primary and secondary qualities and holds them together to make one thing, one physical object. This 'material substratum' can exist unperceived.

Berkeley responds that this idea is, in fact, incoherent. The 'material substratum' is never perceived, since it is distinct from its primary and secondary qualities, and we have said that all we perceive are primary and secondary qualities. So what can we say about it? Once you list all the qualities of a table, what is left of the table? For instance, size is a quality - if the matter of the table is distinct from its qualities, then in itself, it has no size! If substance exists unperceived, it exists without any qualities at all.

Locke saw the point, and accepted that the idea of substance was the idea of something unknown. A realist view of physical objects involves a mystery. Worse, Berkeley argues, physical substance is quite literally inconceivable - we can say nothing about how it exists at all.

#### 2. 'We perceive physical objects'

Don't we just see that physical objects exist? Berkeley argues that neither our senses nor reason supports such a claim.

- P1. As argued previously, all we perceive are primary and secondary qualities, not mind-independent physical objects.
- C1. Therefore, our experience cannot verify the hypothesis that there is a mind-independent physical world.
- P2. Worse still, the hypothesis of 'physical substance' is not one that is even suggested by experience.
- C2. So close attention to experience supports the claim that all there is (all we can say there is) is what we can experience.
- P3. What we experience are ideas.
- C3. Therefore, our experience supports idealism, not realism.

### 3. *Scepticism*

Berkeley's next argument is that supposing that the objects of perception can and do exist independently of being perceived leads to scepticism. How can we connect up our experiences to something 'beyond' them - which, following the objection just made, we can't even describe or understand? How can we know that ideas really do represent (and represent accurately) something that exists completely independently of them? If there were mind-independent physical objects, we can know nothing about them. By contrast, if there is no mind-independent reality, then what we perceive is what there is, viz. ideas, and so perception can give us knowledge of what there is.

#### Berkeley's 'master' argument

Berkeley provides another argument against the possibility of the objects of perception being mind-independent. It has come to be known as his 'master' argument, since he appears to set great weight upon it. Thus, Philonous says, 'I am willing to let our whole debate be settled as follows: If you can conceive it to be possible for any mixture or combination of qualities, or any sensible object whatever, to exist outside the mind, then I will grant it actually to be so'. Hylas responds that he is thinking of a tree existing unperceived by anyone. Philonous objects that what Hylas is thinking depends on his mind. He isn't actually thinking of a tree that exists independently of any mind; he is imagining a tree standing 'in some solitary place' where no one perceives it. But all the time, he is thinking of such a tree. We cannot think of a tree that is neither perceived nor conceived of. We can think of the idea of a tree, but not of a tree that exists independently of the mind.

However, Berkeley seems to have confused a thought with what the thought is about.

- P1. Thoughts cannot exist outside the mind - thoughts are psychological events or states.
- C1. Therefore, my thinking of a tree is not mind-independent. It is impossible (inconceivable) that there is a thought of a tree when no one is thinking of a tree.
- P2. But what a thought is about, e.g. a tree, is not the same thing as the thought itself.
- C2. Therefore, just because my thinking of a tree is mind-dependent, it does not follow that what I am thinking of is also mind-dependent. It is not impossible (inconceivable) to think that a tree may exist when no one is thinking of it. (Or, at least, the 'master' argument doesn't show this - if mind-independent physical objects are inconceivable for some other reason, then this thought is impossible.)

### **IDEALISM AND GOD**

Berkeley has argued that it makes no sense to think of physical objects as mind-independent. His arguments entail that what we think of as physical objects - indeed, what we must mean by 'physical object' if the term is to be coherent - are

bundles of ideas, the perceptions we have of physical objects. Physical objects exist as mind-dependent things.

But without mind-independent physical objects causing our perceptions, what explains why we perceive what we do? Answering this question will complete the outline of Berkeley's idealist theory.

- P1. As (the ideas that comprise) physical objects are mind-dependent, there are three possible causes of my perceptions: ideas, my mind, and another mind.
- P2. Ideas (including the ideas that comprise physical objects) don't cause anything.
- P3. If (the ideas that comprise) physical objects depended on my mind, then I would be able to control what I perceive.
- P4. But I can't. Perception is quite different to imagining; in perception, we are more passive - the sensations just occur to us, and we can't control them. Imagination is voluntary, but perception is involuntary.
- C1. Therefore, (the ideas that comprise) physical objects don't depend on my mind.
- C2. Therefore, (the ideas that comprise) physical objects must exist in another mind, which then wills that I perceive them.
- C3. Given the complexity and systematicity of our perceptions, that mind must be God.

#### Idealism and the cause of our perceptions

Why does Berkeley claim (P2), that ideas can't be causes? Think about the functioning of the mind. Should we say that thoughts think themselves, or that the mind thinks thoughts? Should we say that our perceptions cause our experience of them or that the mind perceives? Berkeley thinks the latter option is clearly better. Ideas themselves are passive; we do things with ideas in thought or we receive them in perception. How could an idea 'make' you think it or perceive it? It is the mind, and only the mind, that can cause, that is active - the mind that perceives, thinks, wills, and so on.

Berkeley uses this thought not only to support idealism in the argument above. He also gives two arguments for the claim that 'matter' can't be the cause of our perception. Hylas suggests that 'matter' is simply whatever is the cause of our perceptions. Berkeley responds:

- P1. Matter in the normal sense of the word, i.e. as mind-independent and possessing primary qualities, cannot exist (as argued previously).
- C1. Therefore, to talk any sense about matter, we must think of it as our perceptions of it.
- P2. What we perceive - primary and secondary qualities - are ideas.
- C2. Given that ideas are passive, whatever causes our perceptions must be a mind, not 'matter'.

In a second argument, Berkeley points to our ignorance of how mind and matter can interact. Realism requires that our minds are causally affected by mind-independent physical objects. Suppose physical objects causally affect our sense organs, which then affect our brains. Philosophers and scientists have struggled

with the next step - how does what happens in our brains causally affect our conscious perception? How can something physical and mind-independent possibly cause an idea in a mind? How could nerve signals in the brain produce sensations of sound and colour? 300 years after Berkeley made the objection, the puzzle still remains unsolved.

Berkeley is aware that his idealism is counter-intuitive. But, he argues, it follows from his previous arguments, and there is nothing impossible about his conclusion. We know from our own experience that minds can give rise to thoughts. Berkeley adds that many metaphysical puzzles can be solved by adopting idealism: for example, we can establish the existence of God and dissolve problems about the ultimate nature of matter, how matter can cause ideas in a mind, and how matter could ever produce mind. The rest of his defence of idealism amounts to answering possible objections and correcting misunderstandings.