

## 1 The case of primary qualities

Last time, we looked at relativity arguments against secondary qualities inhering in objects.

Relativity arguments concerning primary qualities (465-6):

- Extension and figure
  - Differing perceptions of the mite's foot
  - Viewing the same object from different distances
  - Microscope
- Motion
  - Time is measured by the succession of our ideas.
  - But this can happen at varying speeds.
- Solidity (hardness or resistance)
  - This varies given the firmness of our limbs when touching something.

## 2 Berkeley's anti-abstractionism

Hylas's next move is to offer an account of the difference between "sensible extension" and "absolute extension."

- What we sense are qualities like greatness, smallness, swiftness, and slowness.
- But there is also absolute extension *in* the object, or "extension in general."
  - "...it does not follow, because those modifications of motion do not exist without the mind, that absolute motion abstracted from them therefore does not." (467)
- How does this solve the difficulty posed by relativity arguments?

Philonous's challenge: "If you can frame in your thoughts a distinct abstract idea of motion or extension, divested of all those sensible modes as swift and slow, great and small, round and square, and the like, which are acknowledged to exist only in the mind, I will then yield the point you content for. But if you cannot, it will be unreasonable on your side to insist any longer upon what you have no notion of." (467)

From the *Principles*: "... I deny that I can abstract one from another, or conceive separately, those qualities which it is impossible should exist so separated; or that I can frame a general notion by abstracting from particulars in the manner aforesaid. Which two last are the proper acceptations of *abstraction*." (Intro 10, 441)

Berkeley recognizes two methods of abstraction:

- Framing an idea of a general quality independent of particular ones
  - The mind perceives a particular complex idea.
  - It focuses mental attention on some quality without attending to the others, even though they are present in thought.
  - It frames an abstract idea of that quality.
- Separating ideas of qualities
  - The mind perceives several particular qualities.
  - It focuses mental attention on what's common.
  - It frames an abstract idea by throwing out of any of the particulars whatever is not common.

Berkeley objects that we can neither abstract general extension (etc.) from particular ideas (per method 1), nor abstract extension (etc.) from sight, sound, and so on (per method 2).

- First, he thinks that everything that exists is particular.
- Second, though we talk as we have such ideas, it does not follow that we do.
  - Example of mathematical reasoning
  - Sensible things are either perceived or imagined; pure intellect is concerned with “spiritual objects” like virtue, reason, and God.

Berkeley also thinks the doctrine of abstractionism leads to things existing unperceived (and to skepticism): “If we thoroughly examine this tenet, it will, perhaps, be found at bottom to depend on the doctrine of *abstract ideas*. For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived?” (PHK 4, 447)

### 3 Other arguments

Hylas’s next proposal: What distinguishes sensation from object is that sensation involves an act of perceiving by the mind, whereas the object is that which is immediately perceived.

- This is a form of direct realism.
- Recall Locke’s distinction between active and passive power.
  - Hylas: The mind is active “[w]hen it produces, puts an end to, or changes anything.” (468)
- But Philonous argues that perceiving does not involve the will.

### Material substratum

- Philonous presses Hylas on the characterization of matter as “support” for properties.
- Philonous: “It seems then that you have no idea at all, neither relative nor positive, of matter; you know neither what it is in itself nor what relation it bears to accidents.” (470)

### 4 The Master Argument

Hylas: “What is more easy than to conceive a tree or house existing by itself, independent of, and unperceived by any mind whatsoever? I do at this present time conceive them existing after that manner.”

Berkeley’s “Master Argument” purports to show that there is a contradiction in the above. That is, *we cannot actually conceive of any object existing unperceived.*

### Responses in the Dialogues:

- The tree is mind-dependent, as Hylas is conceiving of it.
- Philonous: “Of the idea or thing which you immediately perceive, neither sense nor reason informs you that it actually exists without the mind. By sense you only know that you are affected with such certain sensations of light and colors, etc. And these you will not say are without the mind.” (471)
  - “As for the rational deducing of causes from effects, that is beside our inquiry.” (472)

### Contemporary criticisms

- Thomas Nagel (*The View From Nowhere*): Berkeley's argument "involves the mistake of confusing perceptual imagination as the vehicle of thought with a perceptual experience as part of the object of thought."
- Bertrand Russell (*The Problems of Philosophy*): "If we say that the things known must be in the mind, we are either un-duly limiting the mind's power of knowing, or we are uttering a mere tautology. We are uttering a mere tautology if we mean by 'in the mind' the same as by 'before the mind', i.e. if we mean merely being apprehended by the mind. But if we mean this, we shall have to admit that what, in this sense, is in the mind, may nevertheless be not mental. Thus when we realize the nature of knowledge, Berkeley's argument is seen to be wrong in substance as well as in form, and his grounds for supposing that 'idea'-i.e. the objects apprehended-must be mental, are found to have no validity whatever. Hence his grounds in favour of the idealism may be dismissed."
- Hilary Putnam ("After Empiricism"): "...according to Berkeley and Hume, I do not have such a thing as an "abstract idea" or a "general idea" of green. When a particular token—be it a green color-patch or a token of the word "green"—occurs in my mind, and is used as a symbol for the whole class of green sense-data, all that happens is that the token is associated with a certain class of other tokens to which it is similar or which are similar to one another. Ayer and Russell depart from Berkeley and Hume on this point--and with good reason. For they see that if I can think of a *particular* relation of "similarity," then I am able to recognize at least one universal. Thus universals cannot really be avoided in the way Berkeley and Hume wanted to do."

### 5 The rest of the First Dialogue

The senses do not suggest that objects are close or far away, and hence are mind-independent.

- Dreams, blind man, distance as a line
- Analogy with colors
  - If distance is mind-independent because it is immediately perceived, then colors must be as well, for the same reasons; but they are not, and so distance is not.

### Explicit turn to indirect realism

- "...I think there are two kinds of objects, the one perceived immediately, which are likewise called ideas, the other are real things or external objects perceived by the mediation of ideas, which are their images and representations. Now I admit ideas do not exist without the mind, but the latter sort of object does." (472)
- Philonous's response: Julius Caesar case

The Likeness Principle: An idea can only be like another idea.

- "But say you, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them whereof they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind, in an unthinking substance. I answer, an idea can be like nothing but an idea; a colour or figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure. If we look but ever so little into our thoughts, we shall find it impossible for us to conceive a likeness except only between our ideas." (PHK 8, 448)