

BERKELEY: THE ARGUMENT FOR IDEALISM

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Phil 105

The Argument of Principles 1

- (1.0) Physical objects (e.g., apples, tables, books) are sensible things.
 - (1.1) Sensible things are sensible properties (e.g., red, sweet, round) or combinations thereof.
 - (1.2) Sensible properties are ideas.
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So, (1.3) Physical objects are sensible ideas or combinations thereof.

Berkeley takes (1.0) for granted. He argues for (1.1) at *Dialogue I.ii* and for (1.2) at *Dialogue I.iii-vii* (see below).

The Argument of Principles 2

- (2.0) The existence of an idea consists in its being perceived (*Esse est percipi*).
 - (2.1) Ideas exist.
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So, (2.2) Perceiving substances (call them “minds”) exist.

The Argument of Principles 3

Berkeley claims that it can be known by intuition that physical objects cannot exist unperceived. He holds that, merely by understanding the relevant words, we can know that “This table exists” means the same as (a) “I am perceiving this table” or (b) “Some other mind is perceiving this table” or (c) “If I were properly situated, then I would perceive this table.” But (a) and (b) are not plausible accounts of the meaning of “exists”, and (c), though more plausible than (a) or (b), does not entail that this table cannot exist unperceived.

The Argument of Principles 4

- (4.0) Physical objects are sensible things. [= (1.0)]
 - (4.1) Sensible things are ideas. [From (1.1) and (1.2)]
 - (4.2) Ideas cannot exist unperceived. [From (2.1)]
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So, (4.3) Physical objects cannot exist unperceived.

The Argument of Principles 7

- (7.0) Sensible properties are ideas. [From 1.2]
- (7.1) Ideas cannot exist unperceived. [= (4.2): from (2.1)]
- (7.2) Material substance is an unperceiving support of (at least some) sensible properties.
- So, (7.3) There can be no such thing as material substance. [7.0, 7.1, 7.2]
- (7.4) All substance is either material or immaterial.
- So, (7.5) The only kind of substance that exists is perceiving, immaterial substance. [From 2.2, 7.3, & 7.4]

The Two Arguments of First Dialogue, Section ii

First Argument: The “God” Example

Definition: *M* *mediately perceives* X iff M perceives X by virtue of the fact that M perceives something other than X that is in some way (whether causally or semantically) related to X.

M *immediately perceives* X iff M perceives X but does not mediate perceive X.

In the “God” example, I immediately perceive the word “God” and I do so by means of the senses, but I mediate perceive the notion of God and I do not perceive this notion by means of the senses. From this, Berkeley draws the following moral:

- (ii.1a) If M perceives X mediate, then it is not the case that M perceives X by means of the senses. (Contrapositively: If M perceives X by means of the senses, then M perceives X immediately. In English: Anything that is perceived by means of the senses is immediately perceived.)

Berkeley then adds

- (ii.2a) Sensible properties and combinations thereof are the only things that are immediately perceived by means of the senses.

and defines “sensible thing” as follows:

- (ii.3a) To be a sensible thing is to be something perceived by the senses.

From (ii.1a), (ii.2a) and (ii.3a), Berkeley concludes:

- (ii.4a) Sensible things are sensible properties or combinations thereof. [= (1.1)]

First Problem:

(ii.1a) doesn't follow from the "God" example. All that follows is (ii.1a*), from which (ii.1a) does not follow:

(ii.1a*) It is not the case that: if M perceives X mediately, then M perceives X by means of the senses.

The difference between (ii.1a) and (ii.1a*) is one of logical form:

(ii.1a) If P, then not-Q.

(ii.1a*) Not: If P, then Q.

Second Problem

There is no good reason to accept (ii.2a) unless one already accepts that sensible properties are ideas. If sensible properties are not ideas, but (say) powers in external material substances to cause ideas in our minds, then it could be true that we do not perceive sensible properties *immediately*. Rather, it may be that we perceive sensible properties by virtue of the fact that we perceive ideas that represent those properties.

Berkeley has a way of replying to this objection. He can say that representation is a matter of resemblance. So if ideas represent sensible properties that are powers in external objects to cause ideas in our minds, then ideas must resemble the sensible properties they represent. But Berkeley insists at *Principles* 8 that "an idea can be like nothing but an idea" (this is his Likeness Principle). So, if ideas resemble sensible properties, it follows directly from the Likeness Principle that sensible properties are ideas.

Second Argument: "The Senses Make no Inferences"

The second argument is the same as the first, except that there is now a different argument for (ii.1a). This argument relies on a somewhat different understanding of "immediate perception".

Definition: M *mediately perceives* X iff M judges that X exists by inferring it from the fact that M perceives something other than X that is in some way (whether causally or semantically) related to X.

M *immediately perceives* X iff M perceives X but does not mediate perceive X.

Argument for (ii.1a):

- (ii.1b) The senses make no inferences.
- So, (ii.2b) The senses do not judge that anything exists on the basis of any inference.
[From ii.1b]
- (ii.3b) If the senses do not judge that X exists on the basis of any inference, then they do not judge that X exists by inferring it from the fact that they perceive something other than X that is in some way related to X.
- So, (ii.4b) The senses do not judge that X exists by inferring it from the fact that they perceive something other than X that is in some way related to X.
[From ii.2b & ii.3b]
- So, (ii.5b) The senses do not mediate perceive anything. [From ii.4b and Def.]
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- So, (ii.1a) Anything that is perceived by the senses is immediately perceived.
[From ii.5b and Def.]

First Problem

This argument treats the senses as if they were perceiving beings. But the senses are merely faculties belonging to perceiving beings, i.e., minds. In order to avoid this problem, the argument must be restated. But how? And is it possible to restate it without falling into further difficulties?

Second Problem: Same as the Second Problem with the First Argument.