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Berkeley's Idealist Theory of Knowledge and Whether or Not Empiricism Can Lead To Idealism

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Abstract

George Berkeley is perhaps one of the most unique and intriguing figures in the history of modern philosophy. Dissatisfied with and angered by the materialist philosophies of his contemporaries, especially the ideas of John Locke, Berkeley called for a return to "common sense." But "common sense," for Berkeley, involved not just a skeptical view of materialism, but the assertion that the material world does not exist at all! Berkeley utilizes persuasive logical arguments and empiricist principles in order to refute the existence of matter. However, when he attempts to account for what *does* exist, he makes a startling claim which does not hold up to his own rigorous logical standards.

The empiricist project has always been concerned with the argument that knowledge is based upon experience rather than innate ideas. In its pursuit of knowledge about things other than the contents of our own minds, empiricism seeks to get us *out* of the mind and into the "real" world. George Berkeley, one of the most unlikely empiricists, sought to utilize the empiricist argument in order to prove his extremely unorthodox theory - that matter does not exist and that all the things we perceive are really

ideas in the mind of God. This paper will detail the way in which Berkeley uses logical arguments in order to essentially transform empiricism into idealism. We will first discuss Berkeley's critique of Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities. We will then examine how Berkeley denies Locke's theory of representational realism and how Berkeley then leads us to his conclusion that nothing exists except ideas. Finally, we will discuss some of the problems with Berkeley's theory and ask whether or not empiricism does indeed lead to idealism.

Berkeley begins his argument with an attack on John Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Locke attempted to show that the qualities we sense regarding objects can be separated into two categories. According to Locke, qualities which are dependent on the mind's ability to perceive them, such as color, sound, taste and temperature, are secondary qualities. Primary qualities, however, exist *within* the object and continue to exist whether one perceives them or not. The primary qualities include weight, shape, dimension and motion. Essentially, the primary qualities all add up to the idea of *extension*. According to Locke, the extension of objects is a fact that cannot be denied. We can do all kinds of things to an object – paint it a different color, change the way it tastes or smells, move it to a different location, slice it up, crush it, etc. But no matter what we do to the object, it remains extended. Extension cannot be possible without material substance. Therefore, according to Locke, we can say we know that matter exists and that matter is the substance, which underlies all extended objects. It must be noted that Locke does admit that

we do not have *direct* access to the underlying substance. Instead, we have direct access only to our ideas, but we can trust that our ideas represent the actual external world. (As we shall see, Berkeley will demolish this argument too.)

In the first of *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Berkeley tears apart Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities and leads us to the counter-intuitive conclusion that *matter does not exist*. Berkeley argues that primary qualities are just as subjective as secondary qualities. In other words, there is no distinction between the two categories at all. He begins by establishing a basic foundation of empiricism - *that we know things only through sense experience*. Berkeley, in the voice of Philonous, takes Hylas (meant to be Locke) through such secondary qualities as heat and cold, taste, sound and color. He uses the following example to refute the existence of heat or cold in an object. A person can make one of his hands cold and the other hot. The same person can then put both hands into a single vessel of lukewarm water. The water will feel cold to the hot hand and warm to the cold hand. But it would be a contradiction to say that the same water is both cold and hot at the same time. Therefore, temperature exists in the mind and not in the object. Essentially, Berkeley merely confirms what Locke has already admitted - that secondary qualities are entirely subjective and exist only within the mind of the perceiver.

But Berkeley goes much further than this. He next attacks the idea of primary qualities and shows that the primary qualities are also mind-dependent and therefore do not exist within the object. Philonous proves to

Hylas that dimension and size are subjective by getting Hylas first to admit that all perceiving animals should perceive the same dimensions of an object if indeed dimension is inherent in the object itself. Philonous then talks about the foot of a mite. The mite perceives its own foot as a certain size relative to the mite's body. But to Hylas, and other larger animals, the mite's foot is so tiny that it cannot even be seen with the naked eye. In other words, to a very small animal, an anthill can seem like a mountain, while to a larger animal the same anthill will seem tiny. And again, it would be a logical contradiction to state that the same thing can be both huge and tiny at the same time. Therefore, since all animals can have a different perception of size regarding the same object, then dimension is subjective. But is this a sound argument? Can't there be one "true" size of the mite's foot - an objective and actual size? Based on the foundation we started with - *that all we can know are things we perceive with the senses* - the answer is no. There cannot be any knowledge of a "true" size if knowledge is only possible through sense perception. Therefore, size is not an inherent quality in the object itself.

Philonous uses the same principles to refute the objective existence of motion, shape, solidity and extension. But what about the idea that there can be a distinction between "absolute" extension and "sensible" extension? For example, can't we admit that we perceive size differently simply due to our own size in relation to the object? Likewise, can't we assert that we perceive extension differently due to our own distance from an object? In other words, can't there still be a true and absolute quality of size and a true and absolute quality of extension that exists

within the object, no matter how the object is perceived by our mind? Berkeley says this is impossible. There cannot be any such thing as “absolute” extension. In order to make a case for such a thing as absolute extension, one would have to conceive of extension in an abstract form. In other words, one must be able to think of *pure extension*, without relating such extension to any object. Berkeley says this is impossible because nobody can conceive of pure extension – we always must assume some *thing* which is extended. The world is comprised of *particulars* – not of abstractions. Even if we try to argue that extension is the quality common to all extended things and that motion is the quality common to all moving things, we are effectively asserting nothing at all. We are admitting that we do not know anything definitive about what we call “extension” or “motion”.

Berkeley remains consistent in his logic by sticking to the empiricist principle that all we can really know are “sensible” things. If all we know are sensible things and our senses constantly furnish us with different data regarding the “same” object, then we cannot know anything at all about the object *itself*. And because abstraction is invalid, we cannot say that anything like “true” size or “absolute” extension exists. By dismantling all arguments in favor of Locke’s primary qualities, and by demolishing the very concept of extension, Berkeley has effectively refuted that there can be any knowledge of the existence of material substance. And, again, if all we can know are sensible things, and, according to Berkeley’s argument, we cannot know material substance, then there is no logical way to assert that material substance exists. We must remember

that Berkeley’s goal is not to simply put forth skepticism with regard to material substance, but to actually deny material substance. This of course is crucial to his project, which is to prove that the world consists only of ideas. By denying the existence of matter, Berkeley denies the existence of the external world. But then what *does* exist? According to Berkeley, only *ideas* exist. And if the refutation of matter is not enough to convince us of this fact, then Berkeley has *another* argument to prove that nothing can exist except ideas.

In his second argument, Berkeley refutes Locke’s theory of representational realism. Locke asserted that external objects exist and that we receive data about the external world through our sense perceptions. Locke admitted that we do not have *direct* access to the object itself – we only can directly know our own ideas with regard to the object. But to avoid skepticism and to assert that we *can* have knowledge of the external world, Locke proposed that our ideas are representations of the real objects. In other words, although we can only directly know our ideas, we can trust that our ideas actually represent the “real” things. Ideas in the mind are reflections of nature.

Berkeley strikes down this theory with two major arguments. First he asks how can it be possible for us to *know* that our ideas truly reflect the real thing? If Locke agrees that we only have direct access to our minds, then how can we ever be “outside” our minds in order to compare our ideas with the things they supposedly represent? This one question strikes a serious blow to Locke’s theory. If we cannot be in a position to compare ideas in the mind with objects in the real world, then we simply cannot know

whether or not our ideas truly represent real things. In order for a comparison to take place, we need to have access to both things which are being compared. According to Berkeley, Locke makes an invalid inference when he asserts that our ideas represent reality. We simply cannot know this with any certainty at all.

This brings Berkeley to another argument regarding the unbridgeable gap between ideas and the “real” world. Since ideas cannot ever be compared with reality, then it would seem that the mind and the external world are of two different substances. Although it seems intuitively correct that there *is* a distinction between mind and matter, and that both mind and matter exist, the idea of substance dualism creates many problems for epistemologists. Dualism poses a question which is still being asked today – how do the two distinct substances of mind and matter interact with one another? What exactly is the connection between the body and the mind, and how can one affect the other? Berkeley argues that two unlike substances *cannot* causally act on each other. After establishing that we only perceive sensible things, and that sensible things are all mind-dependent, he concludes that there can only be one substance – that of ideas or the mind. The argument is as follows. We have already established that we can only know sensible things – things accessed through the senses. But since “sensible” things are all mind-dependent, then the material world (if it exists) is itself “insensible”. That which is sensible cannot be like that which is insensible. Therefore, only sensible things can affect sensible things. In other words, only ideas can affect ideas. As Berkeley states in the voice of Philonous, “In a

word, can anything be like a sensation or idea, but another sensation or idea?” (*Three Dialogues...Part II, Section 241*) Therefore, *only* ideas can exist.

And here is Berkeley’s main thesis. There is no evidence to support the theory of an external world. In fact, the existence of a material world is contrary to logic. Therefore, of the two proposed substances – mind and matter – only mind can exist. Reality is composed of ideas, and since we have direct access to our ideas, there is no gap between our knowledge and reality. *But without an external world, where do all our ideas come from?* According to Berkeley, they come from God.

This is the problematic part of Berkeley’s theory. So far, he has used logical arguments to deny the existence of matter and has led us to question what our intuition has always told us – that there is a material world and that it is this material world which comprises reality. But why does he now jump to a seemingly unfounded conclusion – that God exists and that “reality” is comprised of ideas in the mind of God? Well, he does have an argument for this, and we shall discuss whether or not the argument is a good one. (From here onward, when we refer to “reality” and “real” things, we mean not a material reality but Berkeley’s definition of reality – reality as ideas.)

Berkeley’s argument is as follows:

1. We have established that only ideas exist and that reality is comprised of ideas.
2. For an idea to be existing, it must be perceived by someone or something.
3. But real things continue to exist even when no person is

perceiving them. (For example, when everyone leaves the room, the room does not disappear.)

4. Therefore, ideas which are unperceived by people must still be perceived by *something*.
5. That something else is the infinite mind of God.

In other words, all of nature continues to exist because it is always being perceived by God. Berkeley states, "...it is plain (things) have an existence exterior to my mind, since I find them by experience to be independent of it. There is therefore some other mind wherein they exist during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them, as likewise they did before my birth, and would do after my supposed annihilation. And as the same is true with regard to all other finite created spirits, it necessarily follows there is an *omnipresent external Mind* which knows and comprehends all things and exhibits them to our view in such a manner and according to such rules as He Himself has ordained..." (*Three Dialogues...Part III, Section 13*).

Is Berkeley's argument a sound one? It seems there are several problems with it. First of all, even if we allow that premise number one and premise number two are true (and Berkeley has done a brilliant job at arguing for these premises), it seems that we can disagree with the truthfulness of premise number three. This is what the skeptic would do. Has Berkeley shown it to be undeniable that the world still exists even when we are not perceiving it? If we can allow the counter-intuitive idea that matter does not exist, why can't we allow that we don't know for certain whether the room

will still exist when we leave it? Berkeley says he knows it "by experience". But this does not fit with the rest of his theory. If all experience comes from sense perception, and all sensible things are ideas, then all experience turns out to be mental. How can he be sure that everything is not existing in his *own* mind? We can still agree with Berkeley regarding the reality of ideas and the need for ideas to be perceived in order to exist, but why must they be perceived by something other than ourselves? In effect, Berkeley *needs* premise number three to avoid both skepticism and solipsism. But he has no real argument for premise number three.

Berkeley was able to refute Locke's materialism because the burden of proof was on Locke. In other words, it was up to the materialist to show evidence for the existence of matter – it is not up to the doubter to give proof for the *non-existence* of something. But starting at premise number three, Berkeley is positing the existence of something without *proving* it. *Now* the burden of proof lies with Berkeley, and the skeptic can easily dismiss the rest of his argument by using the same criteria Berkeley used to defeat Locke. *There is no supporting evidence for premise number three*. For us to accept the premise, Berkeley must first give evidence for both God and other minds. But instead, he *uses* the premise to *infer* the existence of God and other minds.

Berkeley was relentless in his refutation of the materialist's evidence for the existence of matter. But he himself must also be prepared to be relentlessly questioned on his case for God and other minds. Berkeley does try to give evidence for both God and other minds, but what he proposes does not

seem solid enough to act as supporting evidence. Berkeley says that he knows “intuitively” that he himself exists. He knows it not through sense perception, but immediately and through intuitive notion. He states that he knows God and other minds in a similar way. (“...I perceive Him not by sense, yet I have a notion of Him, or know Him by reflection and reasoning. My own mind and my own ideas I have an immediate knowledge of; and, by the help of these, do mediately apprehend the possibility of the existence of other spirits and ideas.” (*Three Dialogues...Part III, Section 17*) In other words, Berkeley knows himself and God through intuition, and he knows other minds by analogy. His reason tells him that if he as a self exists, then he can assume that other selves exist too. But this is not an empiricist answer – it’s based on the rationalist theory that we can know things innately. Berkeley began his argument by establishing that we know things through sense experience – an empiricist foundation. But now he has abandoned that first foundational criteria in order to make a case for things known only through intuition.

Berkeley was much better at tearing down the materialist’s argument than at building up his own argument for an idealistic theory of knowledge. Berkeley effectively proved that we cannot know that reality is composed of material substance. But if he stopped there, he would simply remain a skeptic. Epistemology is concerned with what we *can* know. There has always been a great gap between our ideas and the reality which our ideas are supposed to represent. This gap needs to be overcome if we are to be able to say that we have real knowledge. By denying matter and making the case that reality

consists of ideas, Berkeley tries to close the gap. He argues that since everything is an idea, and we can *know* ideas, then we *can* know reality. By overcoming the gap between reality and ideas, Berkeley has seemingly overcome skepticism. But in order to account for ideas, Berkeley leaves the empirical road he started on, and ends up on a rationalistic notion of God. Berkeley’s argument against materialism is the compelling part of his theory. He did not propose a sound enough argument for the rest of the theory. In this way, empiricism does not lead to idealism, because it doesn’t follow necessarily. Instead, if we are to follow Berkeley’s arguments to their logical conclusion, empiricism seems to lead us further toward skepticism.

References

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