

Berkeley's idealism

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1	Idealism: the basic idea	1
2	Berkeley's argument from perceptual relativity	1
2.1	The structure of the argument	2
2.2	The subjectivity of taste, smell, and color	2
2.3	The subjectivity of primary qualities	5
3	The subjectivity of sensible things	7
4	Berkeley's theory of material things	8

1 Idealism: the basic idea

So far our attention has been focused on materialism and dualism.

According to the materialist, the world consists entirely of physical things. Mental properties are certain types of physical properties. (The Russellian monist agrees with this, if 'physical properties' includes the quiddities of the fundamental particles of physics.)

According to the dualist, the world includes two fundamentally different kinds of things: material things and mental things.

The idealist agrees with the dualist that the world contains mental things and properties which are not physical things and properties. And the idealist agrees with the materialist that there is only one fundamental kind of thing in the world. The idealist disagrees with both in trying to explain the physical world as part of the mental world.

2 Berkeley's argument from perceptual relativity

George Berkeley is perhaps the most important defender of idealism in the history of philosophy. One of his central arguments for idealism began by examining color experience.

Berkeley's discussion of the nature of color is given in the form of a dialogue between Hylas (the name is derived from the Greek for 'matter') and Philonous ('lover of mind'). Their debate is framed as a debate about the nature of sensible things — 'those which are immediately perceived by sense.'

Philonous poses the central question:

Philonous: Doth the reality of sensible things consist in being perceived? or is it something distinct from their being perceived, and that bears no relation to the mind?

Hylas: To exist is one thing, to be perceived another.

The question is whether sensible things — the immediate objects of senses like sight and touch — exist independently of being perceived. Philonous, the idealist (and the spokesman for Berkeley's own view) says not, whereas Hylas, the anti-idealist, thinks that the things we sense can exist independently of the mind.

2.1 *The structure of the argument*

It will be easier to get clear on the shape of the argument if we first introduce a distinction between *objective* and *subjective* things and properties of things. Roughly, we can say that:

A thing is subjective if it could not exist without being perceived.

A property of a thing is subjective if a thing's having it depends on its being perceived to have it.

Plausible examples of subjective things: after images, hallucinations. Plausible examples of subjective properties: being disgusting, being funny.

All things and properties which are not subjective are objective.

In these terms, the argument can be thought of as breaking down into three steps:

- (1) An argument for the subjectivity of taste, smell, and color
- (2) An argument from there to the subjectivity of all sensible properties
- (3) An argument from there to the subjectivity of sensible things

2.2 *The subjectivity of taste, smell, and color*

The first sensible quality which falls under discussion are the sensible qualities detected by taste — for example, sweetness and bitterness.

Philonous: ...that which at other times seems sweet, shall to a distempered palate appear bitter. And nothing can be plainer, than that divers persons perceive different tastes in the same food, since that which one man delights in, another abhors. And how could this be, if the taste was something really inherent in the food?

Hylas: I acknowledge I know not how.

Philonous is here focusing on certain facts about the relativity of taste perception: that one food can taste sweet to one person, but not to another. Philonous seems to be correct about this; for example, recent studies have shown a particular variability in the ability to taste bitterness. It turns out that people vary widely in their sense of the bitterness of foods which contain a certain chemical — among which are brussels sprouts and stout beer. Philonous is then asking: given that some people taste these foods as bitter and others not, how can it make sense to say that they really are, in themselves, bitter or not?

His implicit conclusion is that sensible qualities associated with taste are dependent on the perceiver, and hence subjective.

Philonous then convinces Hylas that other sensible qualities — like smells — are also subjective, in this sense, before turning to the central case of colors:

Philonous: ...I hope you will make no difficulty to acknowledge the same of colors.

Hylas: Pardon me; the case of colours is very different. Can anything be plainer, than that we see them on the objects?

Philonous: The objects you speak of are, I suppose, corporeal objects existing without the mind.

Hylas: They are.

Philonous: And have true and real colours inhering in them?

Hylas: Each visible object hath that colour which we see in it.

This first suggestion of Hylas — that every object really has the color we perceive it to have — is easily refuted, based on illusions:

Philonous: ...are then the beautiful red and purple we see on yonder clouds, really in them?

It is at this point that Hylas appeals to a very natural distinction between real and apparent color:

Hylas: I must own, Philonous, those colors are not really in the clouds as they seem to be at this distance. They are only apparent colors.

Philonous: Apparent you call them? How shall we distinguish these apparent colours from real?

Hylas: Very easily. Those are thought to be apparent, which, appearing only at a distance, vanish upon a nearer approach.

It is important to distinguish two aspects of Hylas' view here. First, he is suggesting that we distinguish between real and apparent colors in terms of the conditions under which the object is viewed: objects show their real colors when viewed in certain conditions, but not otherwise.

Second, he is suggesting a particular view of what those conditions are: close up.

Philonous then moves immediately to attack the second part of Hylas' view.

Philonous: Is the nearest and exactest survey made by the help of a microscope, or by the naked eye?

Hylas: By a microscope, doubtless.

Philonous: But a microscope often delivers colours in an object different from those perceived by the unassisted sight. . . . I think it may evidently be concluded from your own concessions, that all the colors we see with our naked eyes, are only apparent as those on the clouds . . .

Philonous is drawing out a consequence of Hylas' way of distinguishing between real and apparent colors: the consequence is that we never perceive the real colors of things. This line of reasoning seems to show that, for example, for all we know apples are not red and that snow is not white; these are surprising conclusions.

Another worry about Hylas' view here is that it is not obvious that there is such a thing as *the* closest view of an object — for any magnification, can't we imagine a greater one? And, if so, there may be, on Hylas' view, no such thing as the real color of an object — which is just the view for which Philonous is arguing.

One might think here, though, that the problem is less with the real/apparent color distinction than with the particular way in which Hylas draws that distinction. Why not say that, for example, the real colors of things are the colors that they seem to have to a human being with normal color vision in normal conditions — for example, in normal daylight, illuminated at 90 degrees (so that the light is shining directly on the object, rather than from the side)?

This way of distinguishing real from apparent colors runs into at least three lines of objection:

- No matter how we specify the normal conditions, we will leave some things out. For example, given the above definition, rainbows are invisible under normal conditions — but surely still have real colors. Or consider bioluminescent fish, or other objects which intuitively only reveal their true colors in other sorts of viewing conditions.

- The color something appears to have depends in part on the colors with which it is juxtaposed. So when we are trying to find the real colors of things, should we put them next to other colors? And, if so, which ones? One might think that we can see the real colors of things if we eliminate color contrast: if we, for example, view the color through a tube which eliminates surrounding colors from the field of vision. This has the striking consequence that nothing is really brown, since perception of brown depends essentially on contrast. (Brown things viewed without contrast look yellow or orange.)
- There are also problems with the idea of a human being with normal color vision, because it is not clear that there is such a thing. Unique hue tests of the sort we have already discussed seem to show that color perception varies by gender, race, and age. So are, for example, people of one race normal perceivers, but not others? This is hard to believe.

At this point, you might think, the distinction between real and apparent colors seems to be in trouble.

But if this distinction is in trouble, and if, as our illusions seem to show, objects at least sometimes seem to have colors that they don't really have, colors are all only apparent, as Hylas concedes. The argument might be laid out like this:

1. If objects have objective colors, then there must be some distinction between the colors objects really have and the colors that they merely appear to have.
2. If there is a distinction between the colors objects really have and the colors that they merely appear to have, this distinction must be drawn in terms of a distinction between viewing conditions which reveal the true color, and viewing conditions which do not.
3. There is no way of drawing this distinction between types of viewing conditions.

C. Objects do not have objective colors.

Hylas does not consider rejecting (2). Could we just say that there is a real difference between the color an object appears to have and the color it really has, but that this distinction is not to be drawn in terms of a distinction between types of viewing conditions?

Philonous might reply that on this sort of view, we would have no way of knowing what the true color of an object is. Is this a problem for the view? Are there any other ways of resisting this argument?

2.3 The subjectivity of primary qualities

But Hylas thinks that we can grant that this argument is sound without giving up on the idea that *some* qualities of material objects are really in those objects, independently of being perceived:

Hylas: I frankly own, Philonous, that it is in vain to stand out any longer. Colours, sounds, tastes, in a word, all those termed secondary qualities, have certainly no existence without the mind. But by this acknowledgement I must not be supposed to derogate any thing from the reality of matter . . . For the clearer understanding of this, you must know sensible qualities are divided by philosophers into primary and secondary. The former are extension, figure, solidity . . . And these they hold really exist in bodies.

Hylas is conceding that colors, tastes, smells, and the like are all subjective, in the above sense. But this does not show that the existence of sensible objects is dependent on their being sensed; and this is because there are some sensible qualities — such as shape and size — which are primary qualities — which are really in material objects, and hence not subjective.

So Hylas is offering a reply based on a distinction between two categories of properties:

- Primary qualities, including extension, shape, and solidity
- Secondary qualities, including color, smell, and taste

His idea is that while secondary qualities are subjective, primary qualities are not; and for this reason we can think of material things as existing without the mind and having, independently of their being perceived, certain primary qualities.

Philonous offers two sorts of argument against this view.

Philonous' first argument is that primary qualities are open to the same arguments from perceptual relativity as secondary qualities. Can't an object appear to have a different size, or different shape, based on the magnification or angle from which it is viewed?

One might, as in the case of color, reply by saying that the true size and shape of an object is determined by how it appears under certain viewing conditions — under those conditions, objects reveal their true sizes and shapes. But then we get the same kinds of problems we got above — problems specifying the conditions under which true size and shape is revealed.

One might then reply by denying that the primary qualities of matter can be sensed in perceptual experience at all. But then, Berkeley objects, we are removing material objects entirely from the realm of sense perception, since we are denying that we can perceive any properties that these objects really have. But then why believe in material objects at all, if we can have no perceptual experiences of them or any of their properties?

Philonous' second objection is that the proposed view of matter, as having in itself primary but not secondary qualities, is simply incoherent:

Philonous: Can you even separate the ideas of extension and motion, from the ideas of all those qualities which they who make the distinction term secondary? ... try if you can [to] frame the idea of any figure, abstracted from all particularities of size, or even from other sensible qualities. ... Since ... it is impossible even for the mind to disunite the ideas of extension and motion from all other sensible qualities, doth it not follow, that where the one exist, there necessarily the other exist likewise? ... Consequently the very same arguments which you admitted, as conclusive against the secondary qualities, are without any further application of force against the primary too.

Philonous is asking us to try to imagine an object which has extension — and so occupies a certain amount of space — but which simply lacks secondary qualities, like color.

He thinks that, once we try to do this, we will see that we are being asked to imagine something impossible — not just that it is impossible for us to imagine it, but that it is impossible that there be such a thing. His idea is that there is a contradiction in the idea of there being something with extension but no color at all.

If he is right about this, then, as he says, it follows that ‘where the one exist, the other exist likewise’ — that is, an object can have primary qualities if and only if it can have secondary qualities.

But we already know that objects’ having secondary qualities is dependent on their being perceived; so, if they can’t have primary qualities without having secondary qualities, then it follows that material objects can’t have primary qualities like extension, shape, and solidity without being perceived either.

This second argument might be laid out simply as follows:

1. Objects do not have objective colors.
2. Necessarily, if an object has an objective shape, it has an objective color.

C. No objects have objective shapes. (1,2)

3 The subjectivity of sensible things

But this seems to lead by a short argument to idealism: the view that the existence of sensible things is itself dependent upon our perceptions. Philonous’ discussion suggests the following argument:

1. Necessarily, if a sensible thing exists then it has sensible qualities.
2. Sensible things cannot have sensible qualities without being perceived.

C. Sensible things cannot exist without being perceived.

This answers the question with which we began:

Philonous: Doth the reality of sensible things consist in being perceived? or is it something distinct from their being perceived, and that bears no relation to the mind?

Hylas: To exist is one thing, to be perceived another.

Hylas might reply as follows: material things exist, and can exist without being perceived; they have a real mass, shape, and location; it's just that none of these real objective properties of material things can be sensed by us.

This is, in effect, to distinguish objective material things from sensible things; on this view, material things are never sensed by us. But Philonous has a ready reply: why should we believe in such things? The ordinary view is that we know about material things by sensing them; once we remove them from the realm of sense experience, there seems no reason to believe in these supposed independently existing material objects which have none of the properties we are acquainted with in our experience of the world.

4 Berkeley's theory of material things

All of this raises a question: if Hylas is wrong, then how should we think about ordinary objects, like tables and chairs? Philonous denies the existence of matter; but he does not deny the existence of tables and chairs. He only denies the existence of material things on the supposition that material things are not sensible; he believes in the existence of sensible things, and takes these things to have the properties — color, taste, shape, and size — which we perceive them to have.

In this way, Philonous thinks, the idealist is ultimately the defender of common sense:

Philonous: I am of a vulgar cast, simple enough to believe my senses, and leave things as I find them. To be plain, it is my opinion that the real things are those very things I see and feel . . . These I know, and finding they answer all the necessities and purposes of life, have no reason to be solicitous of any other unknown beings. A piece of sensible bread, for instance, would stay my stomach better than ten thousand times as much of that insensible, unintelligible, real bread you speak of. It is likewise my opinion, that colours and other sensible qualities are on the objects. I cannot for my life help thinking that snow is white and fire hot. You indeed, who by 'snow' and 'fire' mean certain external, unperceived, unperceiving substances, are in the right to deny whiteness or heat to be affections inherent in them. But I, who understand by those words the things I see and feel, am obliged to think like other folks.

Berkeley's metaphysics includes only two basic components: minds and their perceptions (or 'ideas'). Ordinary objects are thought of as collections or, or combinations of, perceptions.