

# Handout 21: Berkeley's Arguments for Immaterialism

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy  
Professor Geoff Pynn  
Northern Illinois University

Spring 2016

## I THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

1. Berkeley's explicit claim: if there are material things, we can never know this.
2. The argument (*Principles* 18-20).
  - (a) If we can know that material things exist, we can know about it either by sense or by reason.
    - i. All we can know by sense are our own ideas and sensations.
    - ii. Material things  $\neq$  ideas or sensations.
  - (b) So, we can't know that material things exist by sense.
  - (c) If we can know that matter exists by reason, we can know about it either by deductive or causal inference from what we know by sense.
    - i. It's clearly possible for us to have the very same ideas we do without there being any material things corresponding to them (as happens in "dreams, frenzies, and the like" (*Principles* 18)).
    - ii. So we can't know that material things exist by deductive inference from what we know by sense.
    - iii. If we can know that material things exist by causal inference from what we know by sense, then we must have some understanding of how such things could cause our ideas or sensations (*Principles* 19).
    - iv. We have no understanding of how material things could cause our ideas or sensations ('[B]y their own confession [the materialists are] unable to comprehend in what manner body can act upon spirit, or how it is possible it should imprint any idea in the mind" (*Principle* 19)).
    - v. So we can't know that material things exist by causal inference from what we know by sense.
  - (d) So, we can't know that material things exist by reason.
  - (e) So, we can't know that material things exist.
3. Two key moves in the argument:

- (a) That all we can know about by sense are our ideas or sensations.
  - (b) That we have no understanding of how material things could cause our ideas.
4. Both moves would have been accepted by many of Berkeley's readers. The first is a key part of REPRESENTATIONALISM, the Lockean view of perception which was widely accepted (and still garners a lot of support today). The second is a by-now familiar claim, central to Princess Elizabeth's objection to Descartes's interactionism.
  5. One way out of the argument is to deny REPRESENTATIONALISM. Another is to be a materialist (in the strong sense; i.e., to claim that mind is reducible to matter). If ideas *are* material phenomena, then there is no in-principle mystery as to how matter could cause an idea.

## 2 THE INCONCEIVABILITY ARGUMENT

1. Also known as the MASTER ARGUMENT because Berkeley says he is "content to put the whole upon this issue" (*Principles* 22).
2. The basic claim: matter is inconceivable.
3. Berkeley's argument for this claim is either very bad or subtle and powerful.
4. The bad reading of the argument (taken mostly from *Principles* 23):
  - (a) If matter is conceivable, then you can conceive of an object that exists unconceived.
  - (b) It's impossible to conceive of an object that exists unconceived.
  - (c) So, matter is not conceivable.
5. Second premise has big problems. Distinguish between:
  - (a) There is an object which I am conceiving and exists unconceived.  
 $\exists x(\text{I am conceiving of } x \ \& \ x \text{ is unconceived})$
  - (b) There is an object which I am conceiving as existing unconceived.  
 I am conceiving that  $\exists x(x \text{ is unconceived})$
6. Clearly, 5.(a) is impossible. But 5.(b) is not.
7. The subtle and powerful reading of the argument:
  - (a) If you have an idea of an object existing unconceived, then that idea came from experience.
  - (b) The idea of something existing unconceived couldn't come from experience.
  - (c) So, you have no idea of an object existing unconceived.
8. Empiricists should like (a). And, given empiricism, (b) is plausible. What experience could give us an idea of something existing *absolutely independent of any experience*?

### 3 WHY THESE ARGUMENTS MATTER

1. Virtually no one—not in Berkeley’s time, and not today—accepts Berkeley’s immaterialism. Nonetheless, Berkeley’s arguments are important.
2. They suggest that (a) and (b) are together incompatible with (c). But to deny (c) is to embrace a strong form of skepticism about the world around us:
  - (a) THE VEIL OF PERCEPTION. In perceptual experience we are aware of the world as it appears to us, but not as it really is (or as it is “in itself”).
  - (b) EMPIRICISM. Our knowledge and understanding of the world around us derives exclusively from perceptual experience.
  - (c) COMMON SENSE.
    - (i) We know that the world we perceive really exists.
    - (ii) We have a more-or-less firm understanding of what the world we perceive is like.
3. The EPISTEMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT suggests that given (a) and (b), (c-i) is incorrect because we can never know whether there is a world beyond of our own perceptual experience.
4. The INCONCEIVABILITY ARGUMENT suggests that given (a) and (b), (c-ii) is incorrect because we can never have any understanding of what the world outside of us is really like.
5. Berkeley sees himself as saving (c), and hence “banishing skepticism” by denying (a). He says that the world *just is* a collection of ideas, and hence the world as we experience it *just is* the world in itself. So there is no VEIL OF PERCEPTION.
6. But the problem with Berkeley’s “solution” is that it appears to deny another important part of COMMON SENSE:
  - (iii) The world we perceive is mind-independent.
7. Still, the tension remains. If we hold on to THE VEIL OF PERCEPTION and EMPIRICISM, then it is hard to retain COMMON SENSE.
8. RATIONALISTS deny EMPIRICISM. For example:
  - For Descartes, our knowledge of the world’s existence comes from *a priori* proof of the Rule of Some Truth, and our understanding of its nature — i.e., as extension, governed by mechanistic laws — is innate (we are shown these things by “the light of nature”).
  - Leibniz holds that our knowledge of the world around us is, in a certain sense, wholly *a priori*—it unfolds in a sequence of “perceptions” implanted in our minds by God from the beginning of time.
9. But these forms of RATIONALISM can be hard to swallow. And strong forms of RATIONALISM can also lead to conflicts with part (ii) of COMMON SENSE. (E.g., for Descartes objects in the world are not colored; they are not hot or cold; they do not have smells or tastes.)