Berkeley on Idealism, Part Two (1710)

1. Skepticism about primary qualities: Locke stated that SECONDARY qualities (e.g., things like colors, tastes, sounds, etc.) exist only in the mind, and our ideas of them are nothing like the things in the objects themselves. On the other hand, Locke thought that our ideas of the PRIMARY qualities (e.g., things like size, shape, motion, solidity, and number) very closely resembled the things in the objects themselves. In other words, objects are not really “red” in the way that we think of “redness,” but they ARE rectangular, hard, and motionless, etc.

Berkeley challenges this conclusion of Locke’s. He provides two reasons for why he thinks that, just as secondary qualities exist only in the mind, so too do primary qualities exist only in the mind. They are as follows:

(1) First, Berkeley asks his readers to try to conceive of an object that possessed ONLY primary qualities. In particular, he asks the reader to picture an extended, moving body devoid of all color, smell, etc. Berkeley believes this to be impossible. You MUST give such an object some color, or some sensible, secondary qualities in order to conceive of it. Since primary qualities seem to be inconceivable apart from secondary qualities, he concludes that they are inseparable and not really distinct. But, if they are inseparable, then they exist in the same place: i.e., in the mind. (1.10)

(2) Second, Berkeley recalls that one of the proofs by which Locke concluded that secondary qualities are in the mind involved demonstrating that the same object can be perceived to have different secondary qualities, depending upon the circumstances of the perceiver. For instance, the same water can feel cold to one hand, but warm to the other, depending upon the original temperatures of the two hands. That is, we perceive a change in secondary qualities without any change in the object itself. But, in this same way, Berkeley believes that the PRIMARY qualities can ALSO be shown to be perceiver-dependent. For instance, picture a table. From overhead, its surface is a rectangle. But, from the side, its surface is a parallelogram. Like this:

Changes are perceived in primary qualities without a change in the object itself; i.e., the primary qualities are not determinate, and so do not resemble anything determinate in objects themselves. So, just as the secondary
qualities are demonstrated to exist only in the mind by this method, so too are the primary qualities demonstrated to exist only in the mind.

**How Locke forces this conclusion:** We might think of this conclusion as something that follows from a tension between two theses that Locke holds:

1. The only things that we perceive are ideas.
2. Ideas of primary qualities resemble the actual primary qualities in objects.

Notice that, if (1) and (2) are true, then the following is also true:

3. We do not perceive the actual primary qualities in objects.

However, the following is obviously true:

4. In order to be able to assert that one thing resembles another, we must be able to compare them.

But, (1) and (3) result in the following:

5. We are not able to compare our ideas of primary qualities with the actual primary qualities in objects.

Therefore, Berkeley concludes that Locke is not able to make claim that he does in (2). We CANNOT assert that our ideas of primary qualities resemble the actual primary qualities in objects. Therefore, Locke is not justified in making a distinction between primary and secondary qualities, saying that ideas of the former resemble the qualities in objects, while the latter do not. Berkeley concludes that our ideas of NEITHER primary nor secondary qualities resemble the qualities in objects, and that we are better off concluding that there ARE NO such things, and that there are in fact no objects at all.

**2. There are no external objects:** But, why are we better off concluding that there are no external objects? Berkeley states that, if we could know that there WERE external objects, then we would either have to know this: (1) By the senses, or (2) By reason, or inference. However, neither of these are the case, since:

1. We cannot know that there are external objects by the senses, since the objects of sensation are all ideas, and not external objects.
2. We cannot know that there are external objects by reason, since there is no necessary connection between those objects and the ideas we perceive. To illustrate why this is true, Berkeley reminds the reader that everyone admits that ideas can occur within the mind completely independently of any objects causing them (e.g., during dreams, hallucinations, etc.).
Objection: One might argue that, even if we cannot KNOW FOR CERTAIN that there are objects out there, causing our ideas, surely the existence of objects is the best explanation for those ideas. So, the existence of external objects is still the inference to the best explanation.

Reply: Berkeley replies that this is not really the best explanation. He offers several reasons why:

- If there WERE objects that caused ideas in us, this would be quite mysterious, since no one has any clue HOW such an object might cause ideas in us. (In short, how matter could ever affect minds is a mystery)

- Since everyone admits that ideas can be produced WITHOUT objects, then such objects seem totally unnecessary. (In short, their existence is pointless)

- If there were a being who was just a mind, who was impressed with all of the same ideas that you or I are impressed with, but there WERE NO external objects, such a being would have just as much reason to infer that there are external objects as you or I do. But, such an inference in that case would be completely mistaken.

- Recall, also, that passage where he argues that unperceived objects are impossible: For, if you try to conceive of an object that exists while it is not perceived, then you will be perceiving an unperceived thing. And that is impossible.

Conclusion: there are no material objects and there is no external world.

Question: Nevertheless, Berkeley claims that God exists, as well as OTHER minds—i.e., the minds of other people. How can Berkeley maintain this view if he has rejected the external world?