External World Skepticism: Berkeley begins with something like Locke’s theory of perception and concludes that there is no external, material world. He arrives at this conclusion in the following way:

1. From Locke: The only things we perceive are ideas: Everything we perceive is always composed of “ideas”—or, as we now call them, “sensory data.”

   “Ideas” are things like colors, flavors, shapes, sizes, etc. But note: Even material OBJECTS (that are not themselves typically considered to be ideas) are grasped by the mind only as collections of ideas. For instance, an apple is grasped as the collection of a certain color, taste, smell, and shape. There is no further component of the concept of an apple that is not itself an IDEA.

2. From Descartes: I am a thinking thing: The thing that thinks of or perceives the ideas (i.e., ME) is not itself an idea. I am a thinking thing; a mind, soul, or spirit.

3. Of Ideas: “To be is to be perceived”: Notice that, if I am a thinking thing, and all of my thinking consists of ideas, then I am the thing in which those ideas EXIST. Ideas exist in me only whenever I am perceiving them. Berkeley writes, “The existence of an idea consists in being perceived.” (1.2)

4. The supposedly “external objects” are merely ideas: Berkeley adds that the existence of the OBJECTS THEMSELVES consists in being perceived as well. This is because “external objects” are nothing more than mere collections of ideas. Therefore, since ideas only exist whenever they are perceived, it is also the case that OBJECTS exist only whenever they are perceived. It is impossible to conceive of a sensible object existing distinct from a perception of it because the object and the sensation of the object are one and the same thing. They are not distinct. The object IS the idea (or group of ideas) we have of it.

Since objects are merely ideas, and ideas have their existence only in minds, it follows that the only things that really exist are minds. (Berkeley says that the only “substances” are minds. A substance is a thing that exists independently of other things. Ideas, obviously, cannot be “substances” in this sense, since they depend on minds in order to exist.)

Therefore, there is no external, material world.
Argument: Consider this argument about “objects” in the external world:

1. These “objects” are supposed to be the things we perceive with the senses.
2. The only things we perceive with the senses are ideas.
3. Ideas only exist when they are perceived.
4. Therefore, “objects” only exist when they are perceived.

Berkeley takes premise 2—“The only things that we perceive are ideas”—from Locke, and thinks premise 3—“Of ideas: To be is to be perceived”—is obviously true. The only vulnerable premise, then, is premise 1.

Objection to premise 1: Those who deny premise 1 are suggesting that external objects are NOT the things that we perceive with the senses. This might mean either that (a) They ARE perceived, but only INDIRECTLY, or (b) They are not perceived AT ALL. Most argue that (a) is the correct view.

Even if it is true that the only things we perceive are ideas, it does not follow that there ARE NO external objects that correspond to these ideas. So, at most, Berkeley has shown that the only world we have DIRECT ACCESS TO is the internal world of our mind and all of the ideas that it has. But, perhaps we are INDIRECTLY accessing some real, external world that exists “out there.”

Reply: Berkeley notes that, if there ARE external objects “out there,” then these objects are either: (1) Able to be perceived, or (2) Not able to be perceived.

(1) If the objects ARE able to be perceived, then they are ideas, since the only things that are perceivable are ideas.
(2) If the objects ARE NOT perceivable, then we would be committed to the conclusion that our color ideas correspond to something that is invisible, that our idea of hardness corresponds to something intangible, etc. And that is absurd.

If there ARE external objects which are not ideas, then they are never perceived. This follows because of the “Veil of Perception”; that is, if the only things that are perceived are ideas, and ideas can exist only in minds, then any non-idea supposedly existing outside of the mind is, by definition, never perceived. Berkeley believes that we should conclude from this that there ARE NO external, material objects. There are only minds and the ideas that occur within those minds.

Elsewhere he asserts, not only is this suggestion—that there are objects that are not directly perceived—ABSURD, but IMPOSSIBLE, and results in a contradiction: 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.