

## Berkeleyan Idealism (1710)

Berkeley agrees with Locke that all knowledge is derived from experience, or perception, and that we only ever perceive *ideas*. But, he does not share Locke's optimism for knowledge about material objects. In fact, he rejects their existence altogether!

**1. Primary Qualities Do Not Resemble Either:** Locke offered several demonstrations for why our ideas produced by secondary qualities do not resemble anything in the objects themselves. (For instance, there is nothing like the sensation of sourness in a lemon.) Berkeley uses these same arguments to prove the same of PRIMARY qualities!

Relativity of Primary Qualities: Recall Locke's claim that warmth or coolness is not in water but in YOU because one and the same object can be perceived as either warm or cool depending merely on changes in the observer. But, now consider the shape of a table. From directly overhead, its surface is a large rectangle. But, from across the room, its surface is a small parallelogram. Like this:



Thus, our IDEAS of **size** and **shape** change according to our condition. Yet, the ACTUAL size and shape of the object are supposed to remain unchanged. So, just as our ideas of secondary qualities are demonstrated by this method to not resemble anything in the object, apparently our ideas of PRIMARY qualities ALSO do not resemble anything in objects! (*Put another way: The thing I am perceiving changes its size and shape. But, supposedly, if there were a REAL table, it does NOT change its size and shape. Therefore, the thing I am perceiving cannot be the real table.*)

Berkeley also points out that even **motion** can be relative to the observer; for instance, depending on the observer's speed, or even her state of his mind. Have you ever been in a car crash or some scenario where everything seemed to be going in slow motion?

Secondary Qualities Inseparable: Another supposed difference between primary qualities and secondary qualities was that the former are INSEPARABLE from matter, while the latter are separable. But, Berkeley challenges this claim. Are they REALLY?

Berkeley claims that, when he tries to conceive of an object, he must not only give it some size, shape, or motion, but also some COLOR or SOME sort of sensory property if he is to consider it at all.

Claims of Resemblance Impossible & Unintelligible: Locke has said that our ideas of primary qualities REALLY DO RESEMBLE something in the external object; i.e., if I have a sensation of *circularity*, the object producing that sensation REALLY IS circular. But, how could he know this? In order to know that one thing RESEMBLES another, one would have to be able to COMPARE THEM. However, on Locke's representational view of perception, such comparison is by definition impossible (due to the **veil of perception**).

1. In order to know that our idea, or mental image (A) resembles the thing in the world (B), we must be able to compare them.
2. Yet, all we directly perceive are ideas (A); and never the thing in the world (B).
3. It is impossible to compare A with B if one cannot (even in principle) perceive B.
4. Therefore, we cannot know that ANY of our ideas resemble things in the world.

Such resemblance claims are not only impossible, but also unintelligible! For they would require that **something perceivable resembles something unperceivable**. (Absurd!)  
"I appeal to any one whether it be sense to assert a color is like something which is invisible; hard or soft, like something which is intangible; and so of the rest." (I.8)

**2. Idealism:** So far, Berkeley has merely established that we cannot be sure that our ideas of size, shape, motion, and so on RESEMBLE the things in the world exactly as they are. But, this does not entail that there ARE NO things out there with sizes, shapes, and motions. Fear not. Berkeley offers further proof that there are no such things!

To Assert Existence is to Assert Perception: First, notice that any time you make a claim about the existence of some "external" object, it is really a claim about perception; e.g.,

There was an odor.	is to assert	An odor was smelled.
There was a sound.	is to assert	A sound was heard.
There was a shape.	is to assert	A shape was seen, or felt, etc.

Similarly, to claim that there is a table in your room is merely to say that, IF someone goes to your room, they will PERCEIVE a table. (*Is Berkeley right? If you mean something MORE than this when you posit the existence of things, what DO you mean?*)

Objects Are Merely Bundles of Ideas: Next, we've all agreed that **ideas exist only when being perceived**. For, ideas are merely perceptions—the "what it's like" of experience.

But, now consider the supposed external OBJECT which is thought to CAUSE these sensations; e.g., consider an apple. What IS this supposed "apple" that is NOT itself an idea? Describe it. Inevitably, you will describe it as red, round, sweet, crunchy, and so on. In short, your understanding of the apple is be nothing more than a collection of ideas.

A "Substratum" is Unintelligible: Sure, our UNDERSTANDING of external objects comes only in the form of a bundle of ideas. But, surely the object itself is some "substratum"—some underlying THING which HAS these properties. If that's your view, then matter is just some BARE substratum; i.e., some undetectable, unperceivable, property-less thing. *(Do you see the influence of Descartes' wax example here?)*

An Unperceived Thing is Unintelligible: Berkeley thinks that the existence of such a thing—i.e., some unperceived, bare substratum—is unintelligible. Just try to imagine an object—say, an apple—independent of any perception. Go ahead. You can't!

At BEST, when you try to do so, you maybe imagine the apple while NOT imagining an observer or perceiver. But, **YOU are still perceiving the apple simply by imagining it!**

In short, any attempt to conceive of an object which is unperceived is logically impossible; i.e., these **unperceivable external objects are literally inconceivable:**

"do not you yourself perceive or think of them all the while? ... [I]t does not show that you can conceive it possible the objects of your thought may exist without the mind. To make this out, it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest repugnance." (I.23)

Conclusion: There are no bare, unperceivable "substrates" which HAVE properties like redness, roundness, sweetness, and so on. There are only the properties themselves.

**But, if objects are nothing more than collections of ideas, and ideas exist only when they are being perceived, then OBJECTS exist only when being perceived!**

Whoa... Thus, Berkeley's famous saying, "Esse est percipi" or "**To be is to be perceived**". (Fun [video](#) on Berkeley; and another [here](#) on Locke vs. Berkeley)

In short, there exist only **thinking things** and **ideas**. *(Like Descartes, Berkeley is at least certain of his OWN existence as a thinking thing. He 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. **Matter does not exist.**

Note that Berkeley here takes himself to be offering a SOLUTION to the skeptical worry. The whole problem has been that we cannot know whether our experiences correspond to the way that things in reality REALLY ARE. But, if our experience JUST IS reality, then our certainty about what the world is like is restored. Voila! Skepticism solved!

**3. The Absurdity of a Material World:** If you are still insisting that there are external material objects outside of your mind, then here are some bullets you'll have to bite:

- (a) *The Real Objects are Never Perceived:* Because of the veil of perception, you believe in the existence of so-called REAL objects "out there" in the world which you will NEVER OBSERVE directly!
- (b) *A World Without Matter Would Be Just Like This:* Entertain Berkeley's thesis for a moment and imagine that you WERE merely an immaterial mind in a world where matter did not exist. That world would seem EXACTLY the same to you! In short, if you think that our experiences prove that material objects exist, at least recognize that someone in Berkeley's world (*or someone who is dreaming, or deceived by an evil demon for that matter*) would have exactly the same "proof" that YOU have.

"Suppose—what no one can deny possible—an intelligence without the help of external bodies, to be affected with the same train of sensations or ideas that you are, imprinted in the same order and with like vividness in his mind. I ask whether that intelligence has not all the reason to believe the existence of corporeal substances, represented by his ideas and exciting them in his mind, that you can possibly have for believing the same thing? Of this there can be no question—this one consideration is enough to make any reasonable person suspect the strength of whatever arguments he may think himself to have for the existence of bodies without the mind." (20)

- (c) *God Created A Vast Number of Unnecessary Substances:* Given that material objects are never perceived, and whether or not they really existed would make NO difference to us, their existence is entirely unnecessary. In other words, by **Ockham's Razor**, we should just omit matter, since it serves no purpose.
- (d) *The Mind-Body Problem:* Berkeley, like Locke and Descartes, believes that you are an immaterial mind (i.e., a soul). But, then, someone who believes that we have material bodies has the seemingly impossible task of explaining how an immaterial soul moves a material body. How in the heck does mind move matter, or vice versa!? Berkeley has no such problem.

**Objection:** If *to be is to be perceived*, does that mean that my table ceases to exist when I look away—or worse still, that I cease to exist when I fall asleep (and stop perceiving myself)!? Should we take shifts to watch each other sleep so we don't stop existing!?

Answer: No. Have no fear. Nothing winks out of existence when you look away because GOD is ALWAYS watching! Good night, see ya in the morning!

This was the subject of these famous limericks (probably both by Ronald Knox, c. 1905):

God in the Quad

There was a young man who said "God  
Must find it exceedingly odd  
To think that the tree  
Should continue to be  
When there's no one about in the quad."

Reply:

"Dear Sir: Your astonishment's odd;  
I am always about in the quad.  
And that's why the tree  
Will continue to be  
Since observed by, Yours faithfully, God."

**Two odd anecdotes**

The Hanging Experiment: Wanting to experience new ideas (possibly seeking to know if any new ideas were experienced at the moment of death), Berkeley asked a friend to hang him. His friend waited a bit too long to take him down—he was unconscious and took a long time to resuscitate. Once revived, he merely asked his friend if he wanted to go next! (the friend refused)

Tar-Water: In his old age, Berkeley became obsessed with 'tar-water' (i.e., turpentine – distilled pine resin, poisonous when inhaled or consumed, and today used primarily as a paint thinner). Berkeley endorsed it as a cure for pretty much everything, and wrote two treatises recommending that everyone drink it daily. His first treatise on tar-water was his best-selling work!