BERKELEY (1685-1753)

1. What is Berkeley’s main thesis and how does this view contrast with that of Locke?

Berkeley’s main thesis is summed up in the phrase *esse est percepi*, “to be is to be perceived.” Berkeley described his position as *immaterialism*; however, it is more commonly known as a form of *Idealism*, or more precisely—*Subjective Idealism*. The view is, in a sense, the opposite of Hobbes’ *Materialism* and it is specifically a rejection of Locke’s *Representative Realism*. Locke held that even though all we ever have knowledge of is the ideas in the mind, he assumed that at least some of these ideas actually do represent real things in the external world. Berkeley really just draws out the implications of Locke’s empiricism. If all knowledge comes from experience, and everything we experience is in the mind, then we really have no standpoint outside the mind to check that correspondence between the ideas in the mind and the things themselves that supposedly, on Locke’s account, cause the ideas. Berkeley thus comes to the seemingly bizarre position that there is no substantial world outside the mind. The “world” simply is composed of ideas in the mind—thus, all that exists are ideas and minds thinking ideas. Berkeley’s view is thus that “to be” is “to be perceived.” Berkeley’s position thus seems to deny the very material existence of the world, he seems to suggest that if no one is around to perceive something then it doesn’t really exist at all. Thus the well-known gambit: “If a tree falls in the forest, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?”

Its actually a little more extreme than that, for on first glance, Berkeley’s view sounds like he is saying that not only does it not make a sound, if no one is around to perceive it, it doesn’t really exist. Berkeley’s position thus sounds very counter-intuitive to common sense. The great English essayist Samuel Johnson famously thought he refuted Berkeley, when he kicked a stone and said to a friend “Thus I refute him.” Unfortunately, Johnson’s refutation demonstrates little understanding of Berkeley’s actual view. What is perhaps most strange of all, is that Berkeley thought that his view was actually consistent with Locke’s conception of empiricism as simply restoring to philosophy a “common sense” which was lost in the speculative metaphysics of the Rationalists. So what exactly is Berkeley’s idealism and how can it be understood to be a defense of “common sense?”

2. What are the two main agendas motivating Berkeley’s philosophical program?

The first thing to remember about Berkeley is that he was a Bishop of the Anglican Church. He wrote his philosophical work when he was quite young. The *Principles of Human Knowledge* was published when he was only 25. His *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* came out when he was only 30. He spent the rest of his years devoted to his service to the people as Bishop of Cloyne, Ireland. He spent some time in the new world concerned with the education. But apparently he thought he had said all that needed to be said in his early philosophical works.

Berkeley was motivated by two main agendas and both are indicated on the subtitles of his two main philosophical works.

First, he wants, consistent with Locke’s empiricism, to defend common sense against speculative metaphysics and thus make “the sciences more easy, useful, and compendious.” In this he wants thus to set out “the chief causes of error, and difficulty in the sciences.”

Secondly, as a serious Christian, he wants to bring Christian faith back and defend it against dangerous trends in the philosophical climate of his day—he wants, in short, to defeat both skepticism and atheism. He thought that there were three views current in his day that threatened Christian faith: 1) the skeptical
believe that nothing could be known for certain, 2) the materialism that comes from Hobbes which seemed to imply atheism, 3) the belief, among those that believed in God, that God had no continuous involvement with the universe. This Deist conception of God was held by Newton and many others (including many of the key founders of our country like Jefferson and Franklin). According to this view, God created the universe with great precision and order like a vast clockwork, set it in motion, but then stood back and allowed it to run on its own. Berkeley wanted to defend a more traditional Christian conception of God as a personal God who not only designed the universe but continually keeps it going through His continuous presence.

Thus, he thought he could reconcile both common sense and traditional Christian faith.

3. How does Berkeley’s program compare with that of both Descartes and Locke?

Like Locke, Berkeley wanted to provide an analysis of the nature and scope of human knowledge. Like Descartes, he wanted to defeat the skeptics and provide a firm foundation for knowledge. Also like Descartes, he wanted to prove two points most central to traditional Christian faith: the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. As with Descartes, he was not content to fall back on revelation, and he felt proofs of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul were needed to stem the tide against skepticism and atheism. These theological aims of both Descartes and Berkeley are relevant philosophically precisely because they do not fall back on blind faith or revelation and try instead to give rational arguments.

Like Locke he was also concerned to put an end to the meaningless nonsense of speculative metaphysics. So his arguments for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul must be consistent with the principles of empiricism.

On the other hand, Berkeley’s program contrasts with the more modest program of Locke’s empiricism. Some have attributed this perhaps to their respective ages—Berkeley’s youthful 28 versus Locke’s mature 57. Berkeley is thus very confident in his rejection of Skepticism and Atheism. And he is quite confident that we can know all there is to know about things—it’s just that there just isn’t anything to know about things that we cannot know simply from the use of our senses. Locke ends with a kind of modesty or skepticism in claiming that we just cannot have knowledge of substance.

One might notice a similarity with Wittgenstein. The later Wittgenstein conceived of philosophy as simply removing confusion rooted in language that leads to philosophical problems. Instead of solving the classic problems of philosophy, Wittgenstein seeks to dissolve them by clearing up these confusions and thus “to help the fly escape from the fly-bottle.” Berkeley does this with the problem of substance. He doesn’t try to solve the problem of how we have knowledge of substances, he simply dissolves the problem by denying that there is anything such thing.

4. What general strategy does Berkeley use to try and defeat skepticism, materialistic atheism, and the Deist conception of God?

He thought Locke’s view actually had a hidden skepticism. Locke had said that “matter” or to be more precise, the philosophical concept of “substance” was something that “I know not what.” Using a unique strategy, Berkeley thought he could disarm the dangerous skepticism that might arise from Locke’s view that matter is unknowable by arguing that matter does not exist. This obviously would also defeat the atheists who agreed with Hobbes’ materialistic view that the only thing that exists are particles in motion. Finally, he attempts to counter the Deist conception of God with his subjective idealism. When the tree
falls in the forest, does it not make a sound, or even not exist, if no one is around to perceive it? If we all walk out of this room, does it somehow vanish from existence? Berkeley’s answer to the apparent absurdity of his subjective idealism is to argue that, yes, to be is to be perceived, but the tree does exist and does make a sound even if no human being is around to perceive it, and the room doesn’t vanish when we all walk out of the room because God is there as the eternal perceiver. Thus God’s existence is necessary to the continuous existence of the world.

5. How does Berkeley arrive at his startling position of subjective idealism?

discuss difference between his argument in the Dialogues vs the Principles

Summary of Berkeley’s basic argument
1) accepts the argument that we can have no idea whatsoever what a substance might be—that all we can know of a thing are its sensible properties or “qualities” (straight from Locke)
2) dissolves the distinction between primary and secondary qualities—it cannot be a distinction (as Locke argued) between properties inherent in the objects themselves as opposed to the properties that the objects simply cause in us
3) once one accepts that all knowledge of the world (except for knowledge of one’s one existence and of God’s existence) must be based upon experience, then why should one think that there is anything other than our experiences.

Matson’s Outline of Berkeley’s Argument
1) All the philosophers agree that besides God, reality consists of mental substance, or material substance, or both.
2) But we cannot know that there is any such thing as material substance. Berkeley here develops Locke and Descartes’s worries on the subject. If he stopped here he would be stuck in Skepticism.
3) The supposition that there is material substance is entirely useless. It doesn’t explain anything.
4) Furthermore, the notion of material substance is not even logically coherent, since matter is supposed to be like and unlike ideas.
5) Therefore reality is wholly mental.
6) Therefore reality consists of minds and their ideas. Since ideas cannot just float around, they must inhere in something: mental substances or minds.
7) The coherence of our ideas, some of them at least, and their agreement with ideas in other minds, proves that they must have an external cause. This cause must be God, who arranges that our ideas are synchronized.
8) The totality of all ideas, and of the spirits in which they inhere, is the universe. God eternally perceives the whole.

Berkeley agrees with Locke:
1) in holding that all we ever directly or immediately perceive are ideas as opposed to whatever it is that causes the ideas (Is this what Matson challenges?)
2) none of our ideas is innate
3) all of our ideas derive from perceptual experience
4) since our knowledge must be a function of the ideas we have, all our knowledge derives from the ideas we get in experience
Berkeley on the Self
Thus, since I never have any direct perceptual experience of my mind or myself, but only of various particular perceptual qualities or operations of the mind, I cannot be said to have any idea of my mind or myself.

But he does not go on to say it is meaningless to speak of the ‘mind’ or ‘self’
Hume, however, goes on to say just this, that it is meaningless to speak of the “self”
Berkeley’s position seems inconsistent with his treatment of material objects

quite clear that by ‘idea’ he means perceptual ‘image’
to have an idea is thus to have a perceptual image, to experience certain sensible qualities with one of the five senses, or to remember or imagine these sensible qualities

Berkeley quite insistent on distinguishing between ideas and words
his point is that in philosophical inquiry we should focus not on words themselves, but to the concrete phenomena of direct experience
many recent philosophers no longer regard this determination to get back to pure experience as either possible or desirable

Berkeley parts company with Locke over the issue of abstract ideas
Berkeley thinks that an idea must be determinate and particular
thus the notion of abstract idea is a contradiction in terms

this distinction is quite significant:
if ‘ideas’ are thought of in the way he thinks
consisting only of sensible qualities
then no term can be considered meaningful unless it corresponds to a particular sense-perception
this leads directly to his rejection of material substance and thus to his subjective idealism

the term ‘idealism’ is somewhat misleading for it suggests the view that notion exists but ideas
the slogan “esse est percepit” contributes to this
Berkeley is not an ‘idealist’ in this sense for he believes that something does exist other than ideas:
beings who perceive ideas
thus his view would be better summarized: to be is either to be perceived or to be a perceiver
still, these perceivers are spiritual beings, immaterial entities; they are not material things
thus the term ‘immaterialism’ is more appropriate

6. How does Berkeley undermine Locke’s distinction between primary and secondary qualities and what are the implications of this move?

1) first step is to point out that we cannot imagine what things would be like which had primary qualities but lacked secondary qualities
“extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable”

2) more decisively, Berkeley points out that our ideas of extension, figure, motion, and the rest, are ideas no less than our ideas of colors, sounds and tastes
3) thus, if it is true as Locke contends, that we never directly experience anything other than our own
ideas, then in neither case are we justified in holding that our ideas of these qualities correspond to actual
qualities of things existing independently of our minds

the consequence of the collapse of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities is that there is
then no reason to hold to the existence of matter independently of our minds

Berkeley’s denial of the existence of matter is directed specifically at a concept of matter or material
substance cast in terms of Locke’s “primary qualities”
for this conception rests on a contradiction
Locke’s conception is that material substance exists independently of any mind
and has the properties of extension, figure, motion, solidity
but in Berkeley’s analysis in which the distinction between primary and secondary qualities collapses,
these properties are sensible qualities no less than color, sound, taste and smell
as sensible qualities these are all ideas
thus they cannot exist absolutely or independently of mind

one could avoid contradiction here only by not attributing any qualities to matter that are sensible
this means not attributing any qualities which we have ever had any experience
perhaps one could hold as Locke did that things could exist independently of mind and have
qualities resembling our ideas of primary qualities
to this objection Berkeley replies that ‘an idea can be like nothing but another idea’
this seems perhaps dogmatic
more modest position would be that we simply cannot know whether our ideas resemble qualities of
things since we can never compare them

but Berkeley goes further
his point is that one cannot coherently speak of a resemblance between our idea and the qualities of
independently existing things when there is a great difference between them in principle

if one takes a different strategy and does not attribute any sensible qualities to things
then Berkeley’s response is that this is meaningless
Berkeley finds such a conception of matter to do no real work
it is not required to explain any single factor of experience
and doesn’t provide an easier and simpler explanation than can be given in immaterialist terms
the notion of substance in this case is empty
it has no explanatory power; very susceptible to Occam’s Razor
the notion of matter thus loses all practical and theoretical interest

this still seems to leave open the possibility of something in the world other than ideas and spirits
Berkeley seems to overstate his case against someone who wishes to maintain the bare logical possibility
of something existing other than ideas and spirits
he will have established a great deal however, if the existence of anything other than ideas and spirits is
only a bare logical possibility
the traditional notion of material substance would lose all philosophical interest

Berkeley argues that this should not be the least disturbing
for it makes no practical difference where either science or ordinary experience is concerned
science can continue to investigate the laws of nature
the only difference is in terms of the understanding of what these laws are of
Berkeley here has a very modern understanding of science
he regards the laws of nature which the scientists discovers not as utterly independent of human
experience, but as descriptions of patterns of phenomena occurring in human experience
science is concerned only with the descriptions of regularities among observed phenomena
the scientist is not concerned with what may exist beyond these phenomena

Berkeley is the first philosopher to argue that empirical knowledge
the knowledge that comes through experience is in fact genuine knowledge
skepticism is inescapable if one holds that things have an existence independently of our minds
but all we ever directly experience is our own ideas
Berkeley is thus right in maintaining that only if one holds that things are nothing more than complexes
of our ideas, can one avoid skepticism and regard empirical knowledge as genuine knowledge
in a sense he doesn’t solve the epistemological problem Descartes set for Modern Philosophy
he dissolves it by denying the existence of things-in-themselves

7. Considering his idealist viewpoint, how does Berkeley think he can maintain the distinction between
real existence of things on the one hand, and things merely dreamed, imagined, or hallucinated on
the other?

Like everyone else he wants to distinguish between real existence and things dreamed of, or imagined or
hallucinated
thinks it is just as possible on his view as on the materialist account
he argues we ordinarily make this distinction based on three criteria:
1) their vividness and clearness
2) the fact that they are involuntary rather than voluntarily brought to mind
3) their coherence with the rest of our experience
4) their coherence with everyone else’s experience
Berkeley thus puts forth a version of the coherence theory of truth
language is thus important as truth is established through inter-subjective experience
quite rightly he maintains he can employ these criteria as well as the materialist
there are problem cases: certain kinds of hallucinations and visual deceptions, very vivid dreams
but they are no more problems for him as for anyone else

8. What function does God play in Berkeley’s philosophy and how does he argue for God’s existence?
The function is to be the cause of our perceptions
to explain the continuous existence of things when we are not perceiving them
Berkeley rejects Locke’s version of the causal theory of perception
for it obviously maintains the independent existence of material substances
Berkeley goes further to argue that even if there were independently existing material substances they
could not be the cause of our ideas
for it would have to be an active substance
if it were completely inactive, it could not be the cause of anything
Berkeley argues (against Hobbes) that the movement of extended particles could never produce a thought or idea.

but Berkeley does not conclude from all this that the causal theory of perception is completely wrong—he adopts a different version of it.

he is completely in agreement with Locke that there must be some cause of our perceptions

that some of them at least are not voluntary

Berkeley rejects that material substance can be the cause

arguing that only God could be

might be objected that he is pulling God out of a hat here

we never experience God causing our perceptions any more than material substance

God also serves to make sense of our conviction that things exist when we are not perceiving them

how he knows that things exist continuously is a problem

if one accepts his critical arguments against materialism, but dropped God our of the picture then there is a real problem

Locke had held that the notions of material and spiritual substances stand or fall together

since we have no direct perception of either one, and since our notions of both are obscure

but he accepted both notions for he did not see how we could do without them

Berkeley finds he can do without the notion of material substance but not spiritual substance

spiritual substance is that whose existence consists, not in being perceived, but in perceiving ideas and thinking

**Arguments for God’s Existence**

his argument is neither the ontological argument

nor the same as versions of the cosmological argument offered by Locke and Leibniz

i.e., he does not argue that the existence of God is presupposed by the existence of the world

or that the existence of God is presupposed by his own existence

he gives two arguments, one in the *Principles* and one in the *Dialogues*

the one in the *Principles* is a version of the cosmological argument

> It is therefore plain that nothing can be more evident to any one that is capable of the least reflection than the existence of God, or a Spirit who is intimately present to our minds, producing in them all that variety of ideas or sensations which continually affect us. (*Principles*: §149)

he takes this to be obvious because the perceptions we have that are not voluntary must have some cause, and if material substance is ruled out, the only alternative is some other spiritual substance

this argument depends upon the validity of two premises

1) that our perceptions must have some cause which transcends both them and our minds

2) this cause cannot be some independently existing material substance

The argument in the *Dialogues* is different—it is one of the most astonishing arguments for the existence of God in the history of modern philosophy (the only rival would be Kant’s)

the argument is that God is necessary not as the cause of our perceptions
but rather to account for the existence of things independently of my mind and of all human minds, which can exist only insofar as they are perceived in some mind.

not a version of the cosmological argument; would seem to be sound if the premises are valid:
1) for things, to be is to be perceived
2) that things have an existence which is continuous and independent of their being perceived by us even if we grant the first, the second is the curious one
what justification does Berkeley have for assuming it?
Would seem to be impossible to establish the truth of this premise either by experience or reason
it can only be a mere belief or assumption
thus it would seem to undermine his proof

his version of the cosmological argument in the Principles does not rest on the same unjustifiable assumption
but what is the nature of this God, that is necessary to account for our perceptions
what follows is an argument from design

But, though there be some things which convince us human agents are concerned in producing them, yet it is evident to every one that those things which are called the Works of Nature, that is, the far greater part of the ideas or sensations perceived by us, are not produced by, or dependent on, the wills of men. There is therefore some other Spirit that causes them; since it is repugnant that they should subsist by themselves. See sect. 29. But, if we attentively consider the constant regularity, order, and concatenation of natural things, the surprising magnificence, beauty and perfection of the larger, and the exquisite contrivance of the smaller parts of the creation, together with the exact harmony and correspondence of the whole, but above all the never-enough-admired laws of pain and pleasure, and the instincts or natural inclinations, appetites, and passions of animals—I say if we consider all these things, and at the same time attend to the meaning and import of the attributes One, Eternal, Infinitely Wise, Good, and Perfect, we shall clearly perceive that they belong to the aforesaid Spirit, ‘who works all in all,’ and ‘by whom all things consist.’ (Principles §146)

Berkeley does not use the argument from design to prove the existence of God
only to establish the nature of God

9. How does Berkeley argue for the immortality of the soul?

Of the notion of soul, or spiritual substance
According to Berkeley’s own admission, the very meaningfulness of the notion of God is dependent on the meaningfulness of the notion of a spiritual substance like ourselves but if it is meaningless to talk of material substance because we have no direct experience of such it seems his notion of spiritual substance is equally suspect

but let us grant that it is meaningful to speak of a ‘self’
what is its nature?
As Richard Schacht puts it in Classical modern philosophers: Descartes to Kant:
“I am not the ideas I have through perception. . . . Rather, I am that which has these ideas, and that alone. And this means that I do not have a dual nature, or spirit and body; rather, I have a single, spiritual nature” (p. 170).
thus Berkeley does not have the mind/body problem
his is not even a two-aspect theory like Spinoza’s
so no problem of conceiving how a single substance could have two different aspects

Berkeley’s argument for the immortality of the soul follows logically from his conception of its nature
the Soul is an indivisible, unextended thing, which thinks, acts, perceives
consequently incorruptible because change cannot affect an active, simple, uncompounded substance
soul of man is naturally immortal simply because it is conceived of as a simple, indivisible substance

What about the problem of other minds?
Since the existence of other minds is not established by perception
he uses an argument by analogy
but Schacht finds it to be unconvincing and thus his view entails a kind of solipsism
“We should be able to account for our knowledge of the existence of other minds—or other persons—without having to resort to such extreme measures. And the fact that Berkeley is impelled to do so suffices to raise serious doubts about his general position, even in one has been persuaded by the arguments he gives in support of it” (p. 174).