

BERKELEY LECTURE 2

1. Berkeley's aim in the *Principles* and the *Dialogues* was to attack scepticism and atheism (PHK 156, Preface to the *Dialogues*). We shall begin with scepticism. The main body of the *Principles* opens with an argument that the only things we can know (with one exception) are *ideas* (PHK 1). Berkeley thinks that ideas are contents of the mind (PHK 3). So he thinks that the only things we know of are things that exist in the mind. So far, then, it would seem that Berkeley is on a route to scepticism.
2. But this is not so. Not only does Berkeley think that ideas are the only things we can know about, but also that they are the objects of our *perception*: 'By sight I have the ideas of light and colours... By touch I perceive hard and soft, heat and cold' (PHK 1). Taken together these points take much of the sting from scepticism. For if scepticism only leads us to doubt things that we never touch, or hear, or feel, what does it matter? A lot therefore turns on Berkeley's theory of perception, and in particular his argument for the claim that the objects of your perception are the contents of your mind.
3. The alternative is that what we immediately perceive are mind-independent things, and the whole of the first *Dialogue* is directed against that idea. We may start with the notorious 'heat' argument (1D 175-180). Berkeley is arguing against an opponent ('Hylas') who says that heat is a property not of my mind but of an unthinking substance in which it inheres ('matter'). B. argues that intense heat is indistinguishable from pain, and that pain cannot exist except in a mind, and therefore neither can heat.
4. Berkeley has here laid bare an arbitrary assumption in our ordinary thinking. We are very tempted to say that the colour or temperature of an object is a property *in* the object, but that the pain is not e.g. in the nettle. But why do we make this distinction? Colour and taste, as Locke himself thought, are indeed nothing in the objects themselves (*Essay* II.viii.10); why should we not say the same about heat or, for that matter, shape and size?
5. Berkeley's argument may work for painful degrees of heat or cold but not for more moderate ones; but a second argument concerns heat in general (1D 179-80). Water can feel hot to one hand and cold to the other at the same time. If heat were *in the object* this would be impossible. So it can be nothing in the object. Again, 'the same object' seems to have different shapes if viewed from different angles. So the (perceived) shape is nothing in the object (PHK 14). It is not clear how much weight Berkeley himself wanted to put on this second argument. He admits that that the argument only shows 'that we do not know by sense which is the true extension or colour of the object.'
6. Berkeley's opponent now attempts to resist perceptual idealism by appealing to an 'act-object' theory of perception, according to which sensation – what is *in* the mind – is an *activity* of the mind but its *object*

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is external to it (1D 195). Berkeley resists this distinction on the grounds that it confuses the activities that might *precede* a perception (turning one's head, opening one's eyes) with elements of perception itself, which is entirely passive (1D 195-7).

7. He then (1D 198, *PHK* 16) turns to the very coherence of the idea that there is a non-mental substance in which the objects of perception subsist. He points out that the word 'substance' is strictly a metaphor: it means what 'stands under' the qualities it is thought to support. But clearly 'stands under' is not to be taken literally here: so what does it mean? Berkeley can find no answer.
8. You might reply that Berkeley's position is itself vulnerable to this argument: in what sense can our ideas be said to be "*in*" a mind? Clearly this does not mean *spatially* inside the mind; but then what sense *can* it have? It was left to Hume (*Treatise* I.iv.5-6) to draw out the full implications of the empiricist position on this matter; Berkeley himself, as we shall later see, adopted a position intermediate between Locke and Hume.
9. Again, it is natural to think that our sense of vision directly conveys an impression of distance or outwardness, so that not only is it true, but we can see that it is true, that we see things outside of our selves (1D 201, *PHK* 42). But Berkeley denies that we see distance, on the grounds that distance is perpendicular to the optical sensorium (1D 202, *NTV* 2). The reason that sight informs us of distance is because of the *learned association* between visual and tactile ideas (*NTV* 45).
10. But perhaps we could maintain that although one directly perceives only ideas, one *indirectly* perceives their mind-independent causes (this is the *representational* theory: see 1D 203, Locke *Essay* IV.xi.2). Berkeley agrees that immediate perception can give us knowledge of what is not immediately perceived, but denies that we can be said to *perceive* the latter at all, directly or indirectly. His argument for this is as follows (1D 203-4): two people A and B looking at a picture of Julius Caesar perceive exactly the same thing, even if only A has ever heard of him. Since B cannot in any sense be said to perceive Julius Caesar, neither therefore can A.
11. Berkeley's arguments here are numerous and often very powerful; why then do we find it so natural to think that we not only perceive, but *directly* perceive, external objects? I think the answer has something to do with Wittgenstein's remark that perception is a *tangled* concept (see *Philosophical Investigations* II, xi). On the one hand, we judge of the contents of somebody's perceptions by the *reports* that she is immediately inclined to make: this supports the everyday view. On the other hand, we think of perception naturalistically as the point of impact of the external world on our sensory surfaces. This criterion (perhaps most clearly operative in the *NTV* argument that we do not see distance) is clearly what drives many of Berkeley's arguments.