

BERKELEY LECTURE 4

1. Berkeley denied the existence of material substance but he did not deny the existence of *all* substance. He accepted the existence of *spirits* i.e. subjects of experience (*PHK 27*) in which ideas inhere, not by way of 'mode' but 'by way of idea', that is, by way of being perceived (*PHK 49, 3D 237*). But how can we have knowledge of these spirits? On Berkeley's own view, ideas are essentially inert and spirits are essentially active; there can therefore be no idea of a spirit, any more than an idea of material substance (3D 231). Why not eliminate spiritual along with material substance? – on this view the 'self' is really just a 'system of floating ideas' (3D 231).
2. That was indeed the line that Hume took for more or less this reason (*Treatise I.iv.6*); and Berkeley himself was at least attracted to it at an early stage (PC 577-81). But the mature position was certainly committed to a substantial unitary self. Why? Berkeley thought that we have a notion of spirits from reflection on our own case, which means something like an intellectual appreciation independent of any idea (*PHK 142*). But then can we not have a notion of a matter? No, says Berkeley, because matter unlike spirit is *contradictory* (3D 232-3).
3. But it is hardly clear what 'notions' are, or why one might think that one has a notion of the self. Berkeley does also give an argument for the self based on the unity of consciousness: since one perceives both colours and sounds (say), there must be one thing distinct from either idea that has both of them (3D 233-4). One objection to this argument is that one might say the same about matter: since the same thing can be seen from different angles, or by the naked eye and through a microscope, what is seen cannot be identical to any one idea of it. Berkeley replies that strictly speaking one does not see the same thing from different angles or with the naked eye and then a telescope (3D 245; *NTV 85*)
4. Berkeley's view of causation implied that the only causes are agents. This was the basis of his 'passivity' argument for the existence of God (cf. Tipton, *Berkeley*, pp. 320-1). 'When in broad day-light I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or no, or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my view... There is therefore some other will or spirit that produces them' (*PHK 29*; cf. Locke *Essay IV.xi.5*).
5. The argument assumes that every event has a cause, that every cause is an agent, and that ideas are not caused by me. You might object that even if these assumptions are granted, it doesn't show that there is *one* agent that produces *all* involuntary sensations. Berkeley's reply is be that the coherence of 'external' sensations is grounds for attributing a single cause. They appear 'in a regular train or series, the admirable connexion whereof sufficiently testifies the wisdom and benevolence of its author' (*PHK 30*). In ordinary life we infer from the 'coherence' of a man's actions that he is animated by a single consciousness; why should we not do the same here?

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6. We have already examined the assumption that all causes are agents; as for the assumption that every event must have a cause, Berkeley seems (wrongly) to assume it without argument. (e.g. at *PHK* 26). What about the assumption that my ideas of the 'external' world are not caused by me? The assumption is based on a contrast, it seems, between my omnipotence over my imagination and my impotence over my perception. But nothing in the argument requires such a strong assumption: we need only accept that *some* of our perceptions are uncaused by us.
7. Berkeley also offers a 'continuity' argument for the existence of God: the objects that we perceive exist unperceived by any human spirit. There must therefore be an eternal spirit in which they inhere at those times (3D 230-1). As it stands this looks hopeless. Berkeley is arguing *from* the unperceived existence of physical objects to the existence of God. But if he is an idealist he is just not entitled to this assumption. He needs to give *independent* grounds for the premise.
8. This objection exploits the standard view that Berkeley is an *idealist*: he believes that physical objects are just collections of ideas. An alternative (see 'Unperceived Objects' in K. Winkler, *Berkeley*) is that he was a *phenomenalist*. The phenomenalist's doctrine is not one about *objects*, but about 'material-object *propositions*'—he says that they can be translated into propositions about ideas. He need not say that objects do not exist unperceived; he translates a statement like 'There is a dog in the next room unperceived' into the *true* subjunctive 'If I were to go into the next room I should have a visual-dog-idea'. Berkeley seems to agree in some places (*PHK* 3) but this seems to violate the official doctrine that we can make no sense of unperceived existence (e.g. *PHK* 6)
9. But the argument is more interesting if we take Berkeley to be a phenomenalist. On this view, the independent existence of objects is replaced by the idea that states of affairs obtain independently of our (perceptual) knowledge of them: the classical logical principle of the law of excluded middle. This means that one of this pair of subjunctives is true: *Either* If I were in the next room I'd see a dog *or* If I were in the next room I'd not see one. Now given the plausible premise that subjunctives can only be true in virtue of a non-subjunctive truth, it seems therefore that there must right now be a perception in the next room either of a dog or of no dog. Who is having that perception? God. It seems therefore that a phenomenalist who accepts classical logic must believe in God (cf. Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* xxxix).