

## **That Thing-I-Know-Not-What**

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The philosopher George Berkeley, in part of his general thesis against materialism as laid out in his *Three Dialogues* and *Principles of Human Knowledge*, gives an argument specifically leveled against the possibility of a material ‘substratum’ existing independent of any minds and their perceptions of quality. That is, in addition to his opposition of various other sorts of materialism, he makes an argument specifically against the form of materialism which claims there to be some sort of “thing-I-know-not-what” which “supports” or “stands under” the qualities of a thing, or in which such qualities “inhere”. He argues not only that we can have no epistemological access to such a thing (that is to say, no reason to believe that it exists) but further that we do not even have a meaningful notion of what such a thing would really be if it did exist, and thus that as pure conceptual nonsense, no such thing as a material ‘substratum’ could possibly exist. In this paper, I intend to reconstruct Berkeley’s argument against the concept of a material substratum, and then critically evaluate it, intending to show that we can in fact have a meaningful idea of what ‘substratum’ is, but that the idea which I propose to flesh out this concept of ‘substratum’, when understood the way I do, is not entirely incompatible with, and in some sense is even implied by, Berkeley’s own cosmology.

Berkeley’s argument against the possibility of substratum begins by asking what precisely “substratum” is. It is purportedly the essential matter of a thing, that which is left of it when it is stripped of all its qualities. It is said to be the thing, whatever it is, which stands under or supports all those qualities, or in which those qualities inhere. But Berkeley argues quite rightly that it is impossible to conceive of anything utterly devoid of any of its qualities. I can form no idea in my mind of something which is no color and thus cannot be seen, which emits no noise and thus cannot be heard, which cannot be felt, smelt, or tasted. I, like Berkeley, have no

positive idea what it is that someone could mean by the “substratum” of some thing, devoid of all qualities, for it is just those qualities which make the concept of such a thing conceivable.

But a materialist may reply to such an argument that, while indeed we cannot have any positive idea of a substance, we can have a relative idea of it. That is to say, we can understand it in terms of it's relation to things of which we do have positive ideas. An example of a relative idea would be the idea of “the murderer” in a murder mystery. In such a story, someone has been found dead by unnatural causes, and of this fact we can form positive ideas. But there is always a character in such a story, ‘the murderer’, whose positive identity we do not know, of whom we cannot (until he is revealed in the end) form a positive idea. Yet still we can have some idea of this person by his relation to those things of which we can have positive ideas. ‘The murderer’ is that person, whoever he is, that killed the victim. In like fashion, a materialist could argue that while we have no positive idea of what ‘substratum’ is, we can have a relative idea of what it is by the explanatory role it plays relative to those things of which we do have positive ideas, namely qualities. Substratum is that thing, whatever it is, which does something yet to be named in relation to perceivable qualities.

But here Berkeley objects that we do not even have a relative idea of substratum, because the thing which it supposedly does in relation to perceivable qualities cannot be adequately explained by materialists, leading him to conclude that they do not properly understand it themselves. In other words, there is no proper idea answering to the purported descriptions of what substratum is supposed to do in relation to perceivable qualities. A materialist would say that substratum is that thing, whatever it is, which “supports” the qualities of a thing, which “stands under” such qualities, or in which they “inhere”. Berkeley replies that these are all vague metaphors which do not clearly describe what it is, exactly, that the substratum is doing in relation to perceivable qualities. And as understanding substratum via a relative idea can only work if we know what substratum does in relation to perceivable qualities, which according to

Berkeley we do not, then we cannot even have a relative idea of what substratum is, making such a thing inconceivable and thus impossible.

I would argue in response to Berkeley that I do in fact have some idea of the role that substratum plays relative to perceivable qualities. I will not try to defend such vague notions of “supporting” or “standing under”, but I believe that understanding what substratum is can be achieved through the idea that it is that thing, whatever it is, in which qualities *inhere*. The word *inhere* derives from a compound of the Latin *in-*, “in” and *haerere*, “to stick, to hang.”

Etymologically, to inhere in something is to stick in or hang on to it. From this understanding of inherence, I believe that a relative idea of substratum can be derived. Substratum is that thing, whatever it is, which causes all the various perceivable qualities of a thing to stick or hang together with one another, rather than only being found together sometimes by accident and at other times being found apart from one another. In other words, it is that thing which binds qualities together into ordered bundles and patterns, giving coherency to our experiences.

Allow me to illustrate this with an example. At this moment I can both see and feel the my computer keyboard before me. Because of these sensations I think and say things like “my keyboard is black” and “my keyboard is smooth”. In all these propositions, “my keyboard” is the object of which I predicate both “blackness” and “smoothness”, as well as all other qualities. Put another way, the substratum of “my keyboard” is the thing in which I claim by such statements that the qualities of “blackness” and “smoothness” both inhere. What that means is that the substratum of the keyboard is what keeps the feeling of smoothness and the appearance of blackness unified together as one thing. If there were no substratum to my keyboard, nothing causing these perceptions of blackness and smoothness to be so unified, then it would be expected that sometimes, while I continue to touch-type this essay and feel the smooth feeling of the keys beneath my fingers, I might at the same time watch those same keys appear to float off the keyboard and drift around my room, leaving me typing on an invisible-keyed keyboard while

intangible apparitions of keys drifted above my head. The thing, whatever it is, which explains the order and consistency in all my perceptions such that events as I have just described do not ever occur — that thing in which all my perceptions inhere, rather than merely drifting about, coming and going at random — is the thing that I call the “substratum” of the world. Beyond this, I know nothing of it, but I need no more to say that I have a relative idea of what substratum is.

Were I able to present this argument to Berkeley himself, I imagine that his response would be to say that he already has an explanation for the order and consistency of all our perceptions, and thus the positing of a “substratum” to somehow hold them together in a unified fashion is unnecessary, because perceptions exist only in orderly, coherent packages to begin with, sent to us that way by their originator - God, who according to Berkeley needs no occasion and no intermediate cause by which to effect the phenomena which we perceive. However, it seems to me that a materialist would be just as justified in saying that, as he has in fact a coherent notion of what a material substratum would be, he could just as well assume that that thing is the explanation for the ordered patterning of perceptions, leaving no further need to posit the existence of God; as many atheists have said, and which Berkeley fears materialism may lead to.

However, I do not think that there is really a dispute on this issue besides one of terminology, for if the “material substratum” of the world and “God” really are redundant with each other, each posited entity filling the same role as the other, then it seems clear to me that these are merely two terms for the same thing, which in any case can only be rightly understood in terms of it’s relation to our perceptions — despite whatever other things Berkeley, as a religious man, would want to attribute to God. If this redundancy can be proved, then any further debate between Berkeley (with his personal God prone to suspending the laws of nature at will) and atheist materialists (with their impersonal world that strictly conforms to the laws of nature) may be understood as merely a debate over the laws according to which “God” or “the world” produces observable phenomena. That is to say, the debate will be merely one for empirical

science to decide, regarding how the world came to be as we know it, what laws it operates by, whether those laws are ever violated, whether certain behaviors are distinguishable as morally better than others, whether there are negative consequences to behaving otherwise, and so forth.

But again, I can foresee how Berkeley would reply to such an argument, as he has already addressed the claim that it would be more natural to assume that mind-independent matter is responsible for the coherency and order of the perceived world. His argument is that it is in fact simpler to assume that a far more familiar type of entity, a “mental substance”, is responsible for that order, rather than some strange and new “material substratum”, and that the great mind responsible for all the order in the world is what we call God.

However, I must dispute that any “mental substance” is at all more familiar to me than the “material substratum” I earlier posited. Of both, I have only a relative idea. I have no positive idea of my “self”, “soul”, “spirit”, or “mind”, though I have of course positive ideas of my body, and of my imaginings, my desires, my emotions, and so forth (which, it seems to me, are merely further internal sensations of things such as muscle tension and heart rate, or echoes of previous external sensations). But of whatever it is that “I” am above and beyond those experiences, the only idea I can seem to have is that of that thing-I-know-not-what which is subject to all the aforementioned experiences. Conversely, “material substratum” or “the mind of God” are two proposed names for that thing-I-know-not-what which is the object all experiences; that thing to which all perceptions answer, or in which they inhere, of which all I can know is that relation.

I must take a moment here to clarify, for Berkeley seems to understand being an “object of experience” differently than what seems to me the natural way, and this misunderstanding appears to be the root of his awkward conclusion that we must call tables, chairs, and other such physical objects “ideas” if we are to speak strictly and properly; a conclusion which I would dispute even if I were to deny the existence of matter of any sort. To clarify, consider this analogy: a painting of a unicorn is not itself a unicorn. A unicorn is what is depicted in the

painting, even if in fact no such animal exists independent of such paintings of it (as all will be inclined to agree). Likewise, ideas themselves are not properly called objects of perception or conception; rather, the things perceived of or conceived of *in* those ideas are the objects of perception or conception, even if (as all will admit is often the case in conception) no such things exists independent of such ideas thereof. That terminology clarified, I hope that Berkeley would not object to my saying that what he proposes as the object of our perception is the mind of God; that is to say, that God's mind (or a part thereof) is the thing to which our perceptions answer, or which they represent, and thus from which all their ordered patterns derive.

It now becomes further clear to me that not only is my familiarity with my own "mental substance" no greater than "material substratum" understood as I have proposed, but that the relative ideas I have of both are completely inverse to one another. The relative idea of my "self" is that of the thing *experiencing*, the *subject* of perceptions; the relative idea of "material substratum" or "God" is that of the thing *experienced*, the *object* of perceptions, in the sense that I have just made clear. We have no way of knowing whether "God" or "the material world", the thing from which ideas of perception originate and derive their order and coherency, the thing which defines the patterns such perceptions represent to us, or in which those perceptions "inhere" (all of which, to me, mean the same thing), is at all a subject of experiences, rather than just the ultimate object thereof. While it is conceivable that the ultimate object of experiences ("God" or "the world") is also an omniscient subject of experiences, as much as it is conceivable that my own mind (a subject of experience) may arise from objects of experience such as my brain, it seems that we cannot know whether or not that is the case. Thus we cannot know whether "the world" or "God" has emotions, desires, and other such features characteristic of our own experiences, since it may have no experiences at all. So it seems that for Berkeley to claim that his conception of the object or origin of all perceptions is more likely to be correct than another conception thereof, just because it resembles a more familiar substance, our own minds,

is doubly unjustified. Not only are we no more familiar with our own “mental substances” than we are with the entity in question, but the only ideas we can justifiably claim to have of said entity are nothing like the only ideas we can justifiably claim to have of our own minds.

But Berkeley has a second argument against the proposition that some sort of “material substratum” could be the explanation for the order and coherency of our perceptions, and that argument is that matter cannot be the cause of such things, because only an active thing such as a mind can have true causal power, and matter is by hypothesis supposed to be entirely passive. But it seems to me that my mind operates on no different sort of causal principles than the material world seems to. My inner thoughts seem to follow from each other in patterns quite similar to how certain perceptions follow from each other, and sometimes even equally beyond my control. Lightning strikes a tree, which causes that tree to burn, which causes neighboring houses to burn, and so on. Likewise, I perceive that the fire will reach my own home, which causes me to be frightened, which causes me to want call the fire department, which causes my fingers to dial and my mouth to speak. The cause and effect transcends any purported mental-material distinction, and seems entirely ‘passive’. I can no more choose to be unafraid than wood placed in a fire can refrain from burning; these effects always follow from their causes unless prevented somehow by further mitigating factors.

But it seems that Berkeley is not speaking here of cause in this sense, which he calls a ‘vular’ use of the terminology of causation, and which is in fact (by his account) nothing but a ‘sign-signified’ relationship, rather than a true ‘cause-effect’ relationship. Rather, it seems he means cause in some other sense which he considers more proper, which I honestly cannot rightly comprehend myself. It seems perhaps he means ‘cause’ in the sense that I cause my body to move; but that too seems nothing more than the constant conjunction of my desire for my body to move with the perception of it moving. Perhaps instead he means ‘cause’ in a sense contrasted with the mechanico-corpuscular way in which materialists of his day described matter;

but modern physics describes matter instead as many infinitesimal points ‘actively’ exerting forces upon each other at a distance, which is quite different from that mechanico-corpuscular view of matter, and yet still quite clearly a materialist view. So I cannot claim to understand what precisely Berkeley means by “cause” in this other, purportedly more proper sense; which is not something I can fault him alone with, as other philosophers of his day seem to have spoken of similarly mysterious understandings of causation. But regardless of how popular this concept may be, the only sort of causation which I ever could understand is that which Berkeley deems ‘vulgar’. Thus I cannot understand what sort of power it is that he claims minds have that matter does not, nor in what way matter is more ‘passive’ than minds, and so his argument that matter therefore could not fulfill the same relative role as God in his system seems completely empty.

Thus I feel I have shown that the only idea of God which Berkeley has right to claim for reasons other than mere faith — that of the thing which gives order and coherency to our perceptions, in which the sensible qualities that we perceive inhere, or to which they answer — is no different than the relative idea I have given of ‘material substratum’. An atheist or eliminative materialist might be inclined at this point to say, as Berkeley fears they might, that there is then no need to posit the existence of God, for God is no longer needed in the explanation of the physical world. But I feel that Berkeley would be equally justified in claiming that, if one were to assume God existed, there would be no need to posit the material world, as God needs no such intermediate cause or occasion. This seems to me merely a difference in terminology. There is something, we cannot know what, which explains the order and coherency of our perceptions. That thing is the supreme being, the ultimate object of all perceptions, the ground of all objective reality, and thus I see no fault in calling that thing God. Further, branches of modern science such as evolutionary psychology are showing us good, naturalistic reasons for the distinction we make between moral and immoral actions; so not only does the material world supply an explanation for reality, but it seems to supply an explanation for morality as well, eliminating one of the last



good reasons for people to cling to the notion of a God distinct from the world. That is, it seems that the material world can now be understood to fulfill, without appeal to anything beyond itself, all the same roles that are traditionally predicated of God. Thus I see no good reason to make a distinction between the two, as they are both known only by relative ideas, and the same relative ideas at that. Thus, atheist materialists have no warrant to claim that God does not exist, for God is rightly understood as merely the same thing as that which they call the material world; and likewise, Berkeley has no warrant to claim that no material substratum exists beyond our perceptions, for it is rightly understood as merely the same thing as that which he calls God.

But still I must give Berkeley credit for being on the right track here. The only thing of which we can have any positive ideas are perceivable qualities, and they are thus the foundation of any other metaphysical claims we are warranted to make. The way in which those qualities could hypothetically be perceived, which is the same as to say the way in which those qualities can be conceived, is the basis of all *a priori* sciences. And those qualities are, as a matter of contingent fact, perceived in certain bundles and in certain patterns, and to name and catalogue those patterns is all that we can claim to really be doing in the *a posteriori* investigation of the world. Why we perceive things the way we do, or why we perceive the particular things which we do, do not seem like questions that can be answered; not because of any particularly human limit, but just as a matter of principle. I am something, I cannot know what, which is a subject of experiences; and there is something, I cannot know what, which is the object thereof. Beyond these mysterious and nearly empty relative ideas, I can say nothing more of such things.