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Berkeley and Shepherd on Ideas and Materialism

In his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley argues for the non-existence of material objects, pushing that the only things that exist outside the mind are ideas. In her *Essays on the Perception of an External Universe*, Mary Shepherd, while agreeing with some aspects of Berkeley's position, finds fault in his solipsistic philosophy. In this paper, I will examine the basics of Berkeley's position and what Shepherd's stance is concerning Berkeley's views of immaterialism and idealism. I will conclude with suggesting potential positions Berkeley could take against Shepherd, some of which were explicitly laid out in his *Treatise*.

Berkeley argues for the tenet of idealism: not only that neither "thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by the imagination exist without the mind," but in fact, that every sensation and sensible object relies on perception and the mind for it to exist (*Treatise*, 487). He recognizes in the first premise of his argument that people perceive external objects like mountains, houses, and the like. But, in his second premise, he holds that we don't actually perceive anything but our own ideas and sensations. So, he concludes that the only things that exist are ideas, and he considers it "repugnant" that sensible objects could exist unperceived (*Treatise*, 487). This stance is called immaterialism. Berkeley's ontology can be summed up by saying that the only things that exist are minds (which themselves are immaterial) and their ideas. I will further analyze some of Berkeley's justifications in context of Shepherd's arguments.

Shepherd mentions that she agrees with Berkeley in that objects' qualities are sensations when interacting with the mind. However, she departs from Berkeley in her belief concerning external material objects: "I do not agree with him in stating that objects are nothing but what we perceive by sense" (*Essays*, 550). She holds Berkeley's position that ideas only resemble ideas (more specifically, that ideas don't resemble the objects they supposedly represent). But, she takes an indirect realist view and states that sensible objects are "in one respect like the ideas they create" (*Essays*, 552). She states that an idea of the object is "proportional to" the material existence of the object. Shepherd's idea of "proportionality" seems heavily influenced by the Cartesian special causal principle Descartes established in his *Meditation on First Philosophy*, in which an idea must be caused by a thing or a variety of things that have as much formal (concrete) reality as the idea does objective (idea-based) reality. Indeed, if one is to criticize Shepherd here, they must also take on Descartes' philosophy.

Shepherd also attacks Berkeley on grounds of his ambiguous definition of "perceive," which he used to establish his conclusion that external objects don't exist. (This is quite ironic given Berkeley expressed concern over imprecisions in language usage in his introduction). She points out that he uses the term "perception" to refer to both the "notice the mind takes of the presence of certain qualities" due to the "conscious use of the organs of sense," and the "mental consciousness of those qualities" (*Essays*, 550-551). In other words, external and internal perception. This renders Berkeley's syllogism obsolete, as the very term upon which it rests refers to two different things.

Shepherd also critically addresses Berkeley's statement of "ideas being imprinted on the senses," as she finds it contradictory. She does this by arguing that ideas don't exist as ideas until they are seen, for example, by the eye or any other sense organ, and have been "affected by some

sorts of outward objects.” As a result, she concludes anything perceived by sense organs cannot be ideas, and there is no way such “ideas” can be “imprinted” (*Essays*, 550). In tandem, she also criticizes Berkeley because he states that “one idea or object of thought cannot produce or make any alteration in the other” (*Treatise*, 492). She hints that the concept of “senses as organs” is illogical. Based on Berkeley’s statement, she questions how if the organ itself is just an idea, how can it create an idea given his ascribing ideas a “passive” nature (*Essays*, 550).

Another argument Shepherd posits concerning our knowledge of external objects is that “we perceive by *reason*” the objects that need to be present to “affect the sense.” Or, our reason and experience guides us to believe that there are indeed external objects which “continue to exist, ready to appear when the senses call” (*Essays*, 552). Shepherd does recognize that making such an inference is generally frowned upon in philosophical arguments. She also knows that in his treatise, Berkeley mentions and subsequently dismisses her exact argument that if we do have “knowledge of external things, it must be by reason, inferring their existence from what is immediately perceived by the sense” (*Treatise*, 490). However, she absolves herself in that Berkeley also made an inference in what she thinks is a less reasonable area to be making inferences in. In his *Treatise*, Berkeley infers the existence of other “perceiving” and “active” spirits (*Treatise*, 492), which seem to be a much more abstract inference that rests on no more solid ground than Shepherd’s inference.

While Shepherd’s criticisms are quite adept—certainly more so than Berkeley’s, in my opinion—she is not immune to criticism herself. Perhaps the strongest refutation Berkeley could make is the argument he already constructed about abstraction and dissolving of distinction between primary and secondary qualities. This is especially effective, given Shepherd does not address this in her essay. Berkeley would respond to Shepherd, saying that “those who assert that

figure, motion, and the rest of the primary ... qualities do exist without the mind” simultaneously believe that secondary qualities don’t exist in objects and are products of the mind. But, we cannot “conceive the extension and motion of a body [a.k.a primary qualities] without all other sensible qualities [a.k.a. secondary qualities].” Thus, he concludes they are “inseparably united” and cannot be abstracted from these “secondary” qualities that only exist in the mind. Even what people consider “primary” qualities do not exist, save their perception in the mind (*Treatise*, 489).

Another argument he included in his *Treatise* is that ideas “are produced sometimes and might possibly be produced...without their concurrence,” for example, in “dreams, frenzies, and the like” (*Treatise*, 490). Here, matter is not required for the creation of ideas, as we can imagine, daydream, have delusions, etc. However, this argument would likely become circular between the two philosophers, as Shepherd would likely respond that we nevertheless can still use our reason to infer the existence of external objects despite their appearance in dreams, and then each would criticize the inference each uses to reach their conclusions (as discussed earlier).

One particular issue Berkeley avoids in his philosophy is the question of the mind-body relation, which Descartes, who was criticized heavily by Berkeley, struggled with. Berkeley could ask, how could Shepherd’s external objects act on the mind and create sensations? Because his philosophy only consists of immaterial minds and immaterial objects, there is no need to bridge the gap between the tangible and intangible. However, I don’t believe this lack of explanation voids Shepherd’s view. In his analysis on Shepherd’s argument, Samuel Rickless mentions that just because we don’t understand matter, that it doesn’t exist. He uses God as an example—whose existence the religious Berkeley could not refuse. Just because “we cannot

conceive how our minds should be affected by God that God does not exist” (“Is Shepherd’s Pen Mightier Than Berkeley’s Word?,” 320).

As thoughtfully posited by a classmate in lecture, one way Berkeley could respond to criticisms of his inference of the existence of spirits is proving God as a spirit: then, “the inference rests on the assumption of multiple spirits” (Lecture Notes). I think this is a reasonable stance for Berkeley to take. His spirits are intelligent, immaterial beings, both traits of which are characteristic of God. Given our understanding of God’s existence, and God’s creation of man in his likeness, this could be proven. Then, he would have grounds for attacking Shepherd on her inference of external objects.

Finally, Berkeley could criticize the semantics behind Shepherd’s language, just as she did to him. Particularly, the phrase “in proportion to” when she is discussing the lack of resemblance between an external object and the idea it produces. He could claim that this phrase is too vague, and, just like she claims of “perceive,” has too many meanings to be precise enough to refer to what she means (*Essays*, 550-551). In addition, even if she gave an exact definition of proportionality, he could claim that this definition is too similar or equivalent to his word “resemble” to create any meaningful difference in their philosophies concerning the doctrine that ideas only resemble ideas.

Overall, I agree more with Shepherd’s indirect realism and materialism. She adequately calls out the weak points in Berkeley’s argument, including the ambiguity in the language he uses concerning perception, the contradiction resulting from his belief in ideas existing prior to being sensed by sense organs, and even his double standard for inferential reasoning—these are highly damaging to his philosophy. While there are some potential arguments Berkeley could

retort with, I don't think they are consequential enough to account for the faults Shepherd calls out.

Works Cited

Rickless, S. C. (2018). Is Shepherd's Pen Mightier Than Berkeley's Word? *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 26 (2), 317-330. <https://ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/is-shepherds-pen-mightier-than-berkeleys-word/docview/2063269516/se-2>