4

BERKELEY

BERKELEY IN HISTORY

The central thesis of Berkeley's philosophy is that matter does not exist. Ever since he propounded it, it has been much maligned and much misunderstood. It has been objected that his idealism is inconsistent with both science and commonsense, yet Berkeley positively insists it is consistent with both. In what follows I hope to show not only that idealism was a perfectly reasonable philosophy for Berkeley to formulate in his historical context, but that it is quite possibly true.[1]

Berkeley's idealism is both a continuation of and a reaction against the philosophy of the seventeenth century. It is a reaction against the scientific materialism which implied that the universe is ultimately constituted by imperceptible material atoms in motion. It is a continuation of empiricism. Indeed, it is a pushing of empiricism to some of its logical conclusions. Empiricism entails that all knowledge is ultimately acquired through experience. Idealism, to put it simplistically, is the theory that only the contents of experience may be known with certainty to exist. This is a simplistic interpretation because Berkeley also contends that the subjects of knowledge and experience, God and the soul, may also be known with certainty to exist, even though they are not empirical objects. Berkeley's primary philosophical motivation was theological. He wished to arrest the

growth of atheism which seemed to draw sustenance from the scientific materialism of the previous hundred years. However, the theory that matter does not exist does not logically require the existence of God as a premise, even though Berkeley argues for both these theses.[2]

Idealism is the opposite of materialism. Materialism is the theory that if something exists then it is physical. Idealism is the theory that if something exists then it is mental. According to the tenets of materialism, what we pre-philosophically take to be mental is in fact physical. According to the tenets of idealism, what we pre-philosophically take to be physical is in fact mental. Thus materialism is essentially the view that the mental is physical and idealism is essentially the view that the physical is mental. (This raises the interesting question of whether materialism and idealism, far from being diametrically opposed, actually imply one another. If the physical is mental then the mental must be physical, and if the mental is physical then the physical must be mental.)

Hobbes, Locke and Berkeley exemplify the three main ontological options in the philosophy of mind.[3] Hobbes is a materialist, Locke a dualist and Berkeley an idealist. Hobbes thinks that only physical objects exist; Locke thinks that both minds and physical objects exist; and Berkeley thinks that only minds exist. Notice, then, that empiricism does not force one to subscribe to one of these three ontologies rather than either of the others. It is possible to be an empiricist and a materialist, or an empiricist and a dualist, or an empiricist and an idealist. Prima facie at least, empiricism is consistent with any of these three ontologies.

George Berkeley was born on 12 March 1685, in the farm adjoining Dysert Castle, in Kilkenny, Ireland. Little is known of his mother, but his father was an English immigrant who had arrived in Ireland some time during the preceding fifteen years. We do not know whether Berkeley's family was half-Irish, half-English or wholly English. What is clear, however, is that he always regarded himself as Irish and not English. He was brought up a Protestant during the years of the Irish campaigns of the War of the League of Augsburg (1689–1699) and was five at the time of the victory of the Protestant king of England, William of Orange, over the Catholic ex-king of England, James II, at the Battle of the Boyne (1690).

Berkeley started school in Kilkenny in 1696 and must have been considered an able pupil because in 1700 he obtained a place to study philosophy, science and theology at the prestigious Trinity College, Dublin. He very quickly developed his idealist world-picture and by his mid-twenties had written three of his most influential books: *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709), *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) and *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713). In composing his idealism Berkeley had been well acquainted with the prevailing philosophical and scientific ideas of his time through the open-minded and up-to-date syllabus at Trinity. The young Berkeley avidly read and discussed Hobbes, Locke, Descartes, Malebranche, Gassendi and Leibniz. He also immersed himself in the new science, not only of Descartes, but Bacon, Boyle and Newton. Indeed, it would be a serious mistake to assume that Berkeley was anti-scientific in his thinking. He admired the new science. His quarrel was with its prominent ontological assumption, which horrified him for the threat it seemed to pose to Christianity: the assumption that the universe is ultimately material, composed of a substance called 'matter'. Berkeley thought the new science should jettison this assumption and could proceed quite consistently without it. Accordingly he made his life's work the refutation of materialism.

Berkeley obtained his BA degree in 1704 and his MA in 1707, and immediately became a Fellow and tutor of Trinity College. He remained in this post until 1720, teaching and writing. In 1709 he was ordained.

In 1714 Berkeley began to travel. He visited England for the first time in that year to promote the *Dialogues* in London, and make the acquaintance of intellectuals there. He met Swift and Pope, and was received at the court of Queen Anne. In 1714 he was in France and Italy, part of that time in the service of the Earl of Peterborough as his chaplain and part in the service of the Bishop of Clogher as tutor to his son. He returned to London in 1714, only to go back to Paris the following year. It has been said that there he met Malebranche, and even that the heated dispute between the dualist and the idealist contributed to Malebranche's death in that year. Certainly Malebranche's Cartesian view that both minds and physical objects exist is logically inconsistent with Berkeley's thesis that only minds exist. The story of the meeting is perhaps apocryphal,

because other sources suggest that Berkeley did not in fact visit Paris in 1715. However, we know that Berkeley was in Italy from 1717 to 1720, travelling and writing, that he was in London in 1720, and that he returned to Dublin that year. During his seven years' absence Trinity College seems to have awarded him multiple sabbaticals.

In 1721, Berkeley published a short but philosophically significant work called *De Motu* ('Concerning Motion'). In it he tried to reconcile some of the new science with his own idealism, by demonstrating that there is motion but not matter. Motion was one of the central concepts of the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century scientific world-picture, and Berkeley tried in that book to separate 'motion' from its seeming conceptual dependence upon 'matter'. Motion is the result of the operations of conscious minds, in Berkeley's view, and matter does not exist. That he wrote this book, and that he took such care over notions of vision, space and distance in his works on vision, in my opinion shows beyond doubt that Berkeley had a profound respect for the natural sciences of his time and that his only fundamental quarrel was with the assumption that scientific method implied materialism.

Berkeley was not only concerned that false metaphysical doctrines were finding widespread acceptance; he was appalled by the practical living conditions of much of the British and Irish populations of that time. The tendencies that dismayed him were linked: materialism caused the spread of atheism, which caused in turn moral, social and economic decay. By 1721 he had formulated a utopian politics which, retrospectively, may be characterised as a kind of Christian socialism. His travels had made him familiar with a variety of social conditions, and his interests turned from the problems of metaphysics to politics and applied philosophy. By his mid-thirties Berkeley had not given up trying to understand the world but he had definitely decided to change it.

He seems to have thought the moral, social and economic reform of European societies too large a task for him to undertake, so he turned his eyes to the New World where, it seemed to him, societies existed which were almost pre-political. He resolved to go to Bermuda and set up Christian educative institutions which would promote his utopian ideas in a real society. During the 1720s he had meetings with Newton's disciple Clarke, and it is more than likely that they

discussed the nature of space and time. However, suddenly, in September 1728, Berkeley sailed for America.

In January 1729 the ship arrived at Rhode Island. Berkeley quickly became disillusioned by the practical difficulties of establishing a college in the West Indies, and realised he had been grossly optimistic in his project of transforming the societies of the Americas. His interests returned to metaphysical and scientific matters and in 1731 he sailed back to England. There he published his *Alciphron* (1732) and *A Theory of Vision, or Visual Language, Vindicated and Explained* (1733).

By 1734 Berkeley was in Ireland once more and in that year he became Bishop of Cloyne, a post he held until his death in Oxford in 1753.

MATTER

Berkeley is an idealist philosopher. Idealism is the doctrine that what exists is fundamentally mental or spiritual in character and idealism is logically incompatible with materialism, the theory that what exists is fundamentally material or physical in character. Berkeley's major works therefore not only contain a defence of idealism but also a systematic attempt to refute materialism, an attempt, in fact, to show that matter does not exist. Locke and Newton are frequently the implicit targets of Berkeley's arguments, even though he sometimes ascribes to them views rather different from the ones they actually held. However, his philosophy may be read with profit by anyone who believes in the existence of a mind-independent, self-subsistent, spatio-temporal material constituting the universe. Berkeley deploys several arguments against the existence of matter. I shall examine the main ones in this section.

The argument from qualities

Berkeley argues that secondary qualities exist only relative to minds, so they must be subjective. By 'relative' I mean: *A* exists relative to *B* if and only if the existence or nature of *A* depends on the existence or nature of *B*. By 'subjective' I mean: *A* is subjective if and only if the existence or nature of *A* depends on the existence or nature of a mind. For example, the fact that an object feels cold

to one hand but hot to another suggests that temperature is not an objective, or subject-independent, property of the object but a subjective, or mind-dependent, property of the perceiver. Further, primary qualities are just as relative as secondary qualities: for example, objects look large or small, in motion or at rest, depending on the state of the perceiver. If it is rational to deduce the subjectivity of secondary qualities from their relative nature, then it must be rational to deduce the subjectivity of primary qualities from their relative nature. It follows that the primary qualities of an object do not exist independently of the perception of them. But the primary qualities of a physical object are its essential properties, so it follows that physical objects essentially only exist perceived:

> in short, let anyone consider those arguments which are thought manifestly to prove that colours and tastes exist only in the mind, and he shall find they may with equal force be brought to prove the same thing of extension, figure, and motion.
>
> (P 15)

Notice that the primary/secondary quality distinction Berkeley considers is not exactly Locke's, even if it is intended as such. For example, Berkeley accepts that 'heat and cold are only affections of the mind' (P 14), but there is an important sense in which Locke does not accept this. Locke says our ideas, or experiences, of secondary qualities are wholly mental, but as dispositions of the object to produce those ideas, secondary qualities are properties the object intrinsically possesses in virtue of its primary qualities. The broad difference between Berkeley and Locke may be put this way: for Locke, ideas are in the mind but qualities are in the object, but for Berkeley all qualities of physical objects are nothing over and above ideas (in the wide sense of 'ideas' that include 'experiences'). There is a way of reading Berkeley which does not make him misrepresent Locke. On this reading, by 'secondary qualities' Berkeley does not mean what Locke means. He means colours, sounds, tastes and so on, as we pre-philosophically or commonsensically think of them, that is, not as dispositions of objects but as contents of experience. Berkeley would then be perfectly correct, in the exegetical sense, in maintaining that Locke thought that secondary qualities construed in that way are completely mind-dependent. Clearly, however, the interesting

philosophical question of the subjectivity or objectivity of the properties of physical objects remains, whether Berkeley misconstrued the historical Locke's position or not.

Berkeley also argues that primary qualities logically depend upon secondary qualities, secondary qualities depend upon minds, so primary qualities depend on minds. This argument seems to me valid but not sound. It is valid because of the transitivity of 'depends upon': if *A* depends upon *B*, and *B* depends upon *C*, then *A* depends upon *C*. The problem is that the first premise is false. Berkeley says he cannot *imagine* the existence of a primary quality without a secondary. He says: 'It is not in my power to frame an idea of a body extended and moving, but I must withal give it some colour or other sensible quality which is acknowledged to exist only in the mind' (P 69).

I can imagine this. Think of invisible physical objects. More significantly, from the fact that *p* cannot be imagined it does not follow that 'not-*p*'.[4]

The argument from meaning

Locke, it will be recalled, uncomfortably postulated a material substance to answer the question of what the properties of a physical object are properties of. Berkeley finds 'material substance' a meaningless expression. It divides into two putative semantic components, the concept of bearing or supporting properties, and the concept of being: it is that which properties are properties of, and it exists. These are the only two claims that may be extracted from the concept by way of verbal definition.

Berkeley points out that to say substance 'bears' or 'supports' properties is to speak metaphorically. It is reasonably clear what these terms mean literally, when used to describe, for example, the pillars supporting part of a building. That is to use the terms empirically. However, we could not possibly be acquainted with the relation between a putative substance and its primary qualities in the same way, and Berkeley thinks that, once the notion is shorn of metaphorical content, it becomes utterly vacuous.[5] Berkeley's empiricism about meanings is here directed against Locke's metaphysical concept of matter.

If we ask what other meaning 'material substance' has, this can only be 'being in general' and Berkeley says about this: 'The general idea of Being appeareth to me the most abstract and incomprehensible of all other' (P 17). Berkeley is right in thinking the concept of 'being' unclear. It is tremendously difficult to say what you have said about something when you have simply said that it exists, and the concepts of 'being' and 'existence' have repeatedly resisted any more primitive analysis in philosophy.[6]

Berkeley argues that because the concept of material substance is meaningless, material substance cannot exist. He is correct in the belief that putative entities which have only meaningless descriptions cannot exist, but it is less clear that he has shown that 'material substance' is wholly meaningless. Because we are unable to define a concept verbally it does not follow that that concept does not denote. 'Red', for example, construed phenomenologically rather than in terms of physics, resists verbal definition but we are not thereby entitled to claim that nothing is red; similarly with 'exists'. Clearly, however, from the fact, if it is a fact, that 'being' or 'exists' is meaningful it does not follow that 'material substance' is wholly meaningful, and from the fact that there is something it does not follow that there is matter. It is not open to the defender of material substance against Berkeley's argument to mention primary qualities in the definition of 'substance' (save as what substance supports) because substance is what has or bears those properties. It is not logically constituted by them. Also, Berkeley's argument that primary qualities are mind-dependent would have to be countered.

The epistemological argument

Suppose, however, the notion of material substance is meaningful, so that it is logically possible that there exist mind-independent physical particulars. Berkeley thinks this assumption false, but even if we accept its possibility, according to Berkeley, we can never know it to be true. There are two, and only two, putative routes by which we could know that there are mind-independent physical objects: 'Either we must know it by sense or by reason' (P 18).

The senses cannot inform us that physical objects exist unperceived because through them we are directly acquainted only with 'our sensations, ideas' (P 18), and it does not follow from the having of

such experiences that they are experiences of mind-independent physical objects. Also, from the fact that physical objects exist perceived it does not follow that they could exist unperceived. Indeed, if Locke is right that only ideas are perceived, then no one has ever perceived a physical object and it is logically possible that there are no physical objects. It follows that the senses cannot inform us that physical objects exist. If we hold, conversely, that physical objects are perceived, that cannot prove that they exist unperceived, because from the fact that an object exists perceived it does not follow that it exists unperceived. For sense experience to establish that conclusion it would have to be possible to perceive an unperceived object, but that idea is self-contradictory, so it is logically impossible that sense experience should prove physical objects exist unperceived.

Reason is powerless to inform us of the existence of physical objects precisely because there is no sound inference from the existence of experiences to the existence of physical objects. If reason and experience are the only putative means of knowing that physical objects exist independently of minds, and if reason and experience cannot provide this knowledge, then it is impossible to know that mind-independent physical objects exist. So Berkeley concludes: 'if there were external bodies, it is impossible that we should ever come to know it' (P 20).

Berkeley's epistemological argument does not prove that mind-independent physical objects do not exist. It proves at most that we cannot know that they exist (or perhaps only that we do not know that they exist). It does not prove that they do not exist, because from the fact that we do not, or cannot, know that something exists it does not follow that it does not exist. The concept of epistemologically inaccessible existents is not self-contradictory. If the reason why some putative entity is epistemologically inaccessible is that its concept is contradictory, then it does follow that that object does not exist. The incoherence of 'material substance' does not feature in any premise of this particular argument of Berkeley's, however.

Berkeley's argument that we cannot know that physical objects exist independently of our thoughts and perceptions seems to me valid. Even if we discard the Lockean representational theory of perception and hold that physical objects are perceived directly, it does not follow from the truth of that new view that they could exist unperceived and that they do not depend on our perceptions

of them. No one has refuted Berkeley, even though most people insist that his view is false.

The argument from causation

Reason is powerless to establish the existence of mind-independent physical objects because there is no sound inference from the existence of experiences to the existence of physical objects. Nevertheless, Berkeley considers the possibility that mind-independent physical objects probably exist as the causes of our ideas. Even if it does not follow from the fact we have experiences that physical objects exist, 'it might be at least probable there are such things as bodies that excite [our] ideas' (P 19). On this view, even if it is not deductively certain that physical objects exist, it is inductively probable. We postulate physical objects as the overwhelmingly likely cause of our experiences, and we are most likely correct in this postulation.

Berkeley rejects this argument because it leaves wholly mysterious the nature of the causal relation between physical objects and ideas; the problem that dogs Cartesian dualism. Berkeley maintains that causal relations may only obtain between minds and each other, or minds and the contents of minds. Nothing as senseless and inert as the purported 'material substance' could have causal efficacy. Berkeley's idealism is a monism, as materialism is a monism, and Berkeley, like the materialist monists, rejects mind–body dualism partly because the alleged psycho-physical causal relation is a confused idea. Idealists and materialists often hold it in common that causal relations may only obtain between ontologically homogeneous kinds of entity, and it is impossible to conceive of a psycho-physical causal relation. I am inclined to give up the view that the causal relation is either mental or physical. If everything perceptible is either mental or physical, but the causal relation is neither, that explains its being imperceptible.

If it is true that there are no psycho-physical causal relations, and ideas are mental and material substances material, then it follows that material substance cannot be correctly postulated as the cause of our ideas. It cannot exist under that description.

This argument does not prove that material substance does not exist. It proves at most that material substance does not exist as the cause of our ideas. It is consistent with material substance not having

that causal role that it should exist, because the notion of a physical existent that does not have this particular causal role is not contradictory. It is, perhaps, part of the concept of a physical object that physical objects have *some* causal efficacy, but not the specific efficacy of causing mental states.

The argument from imagination

Berkeley argues that not only is it impossible to know that physical objects exist independently of minds, but also that it is impossible to imagine that physical objects exist independently of minds. Any such putative imagining of mind-independent physical objects is 'framing in your mind certain ideas', and this is necessarily only a mental occurrence. To imagine something unimagined, as to perceive something unperceived, is contradictory, or, as Berkeley puts it, 'a manifest repugnancy' (P 23). However psychologically compelling it might be to believe that we do imagine mind-independent objects, this belief is illusory because its content is self-contradictory.

It does not follow from someone's, or indeed everyone's, inability to imagine that something is the case that it is not the case. What is the case and what is not the case is logically independent of the psychology of our imaginative powers. However, if what is putatively the case is self-contradictory to describe, it is logically impossible that that should be the case. It is impossible to imagine logically impossible states of affairs; therefore in those cases where the reason why we are unable to imagine what is the case is that what we are trying to imagine is self-contradictory in its description, it follows that what is putatively the case is not. If Berkeley has shown that the notion of an object existing unimagined is contradictory, he has succeeded in demonstrating that there are no imagination-independent physical objects even when there seem to be.

Notice that in an important sense Berkeley's idealism is consistent with the world appearing just as it does commonsensically or pre-philosophically. If Berkeley were with you now he would agree that you are reading this book and that this book exists. He would, however, deny two claims about the book. He would deny that it exists over and above some perception or idea of it, and he would deny that it is made of a material substance called 'matter'. He is manifestly not asserting that there are voids or gaps in our experience

where commonsensically we take there to be books, tables, etc. All those objects exist, but certain fundamental beliefs about them, that they have a mind-independent and material character, are false. Berkeley's idealism is consistent with everything in the course of our experience. Nothing empirical refutes it. In that sense, Berkeley's idealism leaves the world intact.

Having said that, it might be that our beliefs in the mind-independent and material nature of the objects we perceive cannot be so readily divorced from the content of experience. Those beliefs may be 'read into' experience so that the world about us looks and feels mind-independent and physical. If that is right, then giving up those two beliefs does imply qualitatively altering our experience, not leaving it intact and just relinquishing beliefs about it. In that case, Berkeley's idealism is less consistent with the world as it appears commonsensically than he would have us suppose.

Whether or not Berkeley's 'immaterialism' is consistent with commonsense, it is not to be dismissed lightly. In my opinion there is no historically perennial commonsense, or at least, any would-be historically perennial commonsense has a metaphysical content sufficiently vague as to be consistent with competing ontologies in the philosophy of mind. Commonsense is historically constituted and historically changing. We early twenty-first-century Westerners have a commonsense which is largely Aristotelian and Newtonian, and central to it is the belief in mind-independent matter. It may well be that this view is false. If it is objected to this that the reality of matter is not only commonsensical but scientific, I think that view is certainly false. Science has not proven the existence of matter and Berkeley might well be right when he denies that there is any material substance of which the universe is composed. It might well be that the science of the twenty-first century is logically incompatible with materialism. If so, Berkeley's idealism will be taken much more seriously than it has been[7].