

Mind-Dependence

Lecture 3: Berkeley's Puzzle

1. Berkeley's Master Argument

Berkeley invites us to conceive of the objects of perception unperceived.

I am content to put the whole upon this issue; if you can but conceive it possible for one extended moveable substance, or in general, for any one idea or any thing like an idea, to exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it, I shall readily give up the cause. . .

He is willing to accept that, if you can succeed, Idealism is false. But he is confident you can't!

But say you, surely there is nothing easier than to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them. I answer, you may so, there is no difficulty in it: but what is all this, I beseech you, more than framing in your mind certain ideas which you call books and trees, and at the same time omitting to frame the idea of anyone that may perceive them? But do you not yourself perceive or think of them all the while? This therefore is nothing to the purpose: it only shows you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind; but it doth not shew that you can conceive it possible, the objects of your thought may exist without the mind: to make out this, it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest repugnancy.

The Master Argument seems an “an all-purpose argument for idealism that does not depend on any previously stated premises or reasoning” (Rickless 2013, 127).

2. Is the Master Argument any good?

There are two standard responses to the argument.

A. Internal/External Viewpoints It *is* possible to conceive of an object of perception unperceived. When we conceive an object unperceived, then it is still true the object is (in a sense) on our mind, but this fact is not part of the imagined scenario. (See Williams 1973 ‘Imagination and the Self’ and Peacocke 1985 ‘Imagination, experience, and possibility’)

B. Non-sensory Conceptions Doesn't Berkeley in his argument simply confuse conception and (sensory) imagination? Surely we have forms of conceiving—of ‘bringing things to mind’—that are non-sensory.

3. Berkeley's Puzzle

Berkeley has a point. The real question is: *How can perceptual experience of objects be what provides you with a grasp of the possibility of existence unperceived?* (see Campbell and Cassam 2014). Those who think that we have a clear grasp of the possibility of existence unperceived face the following paradox:

1. Sensory experience grounds all our knowledge of the world
2. Sensory experience can only ground knowledge of sensory experience and its qualities
3. Our knowledge of the world is not limited to sensory experience and its qualities

4. Idealism and Empiricism

If we accept (1) and (2), the idea of a world unperceived doesn't make sense. We could not have knowledge of such a world. Berkeley himself concludes that (3) is a mistake. Our knowledge of the world *is* limited to sensory experience and its qualities. This paves the way for Idealism.

To resist this conclusion, we could reject (1) and assume that sensory experience does not ground all our knowledge of the world. There is knowledge of the world that we have via some other source (e.g. nativism). Not many people nowadays would find this anti-empiricist reply satisfactory.

5. Experiencing Objects as Mind-Independent

Another option is to reject (2), and show sensory experience can provide us with a grasp of the possibility of existence unperceived. Berkeley himself seems to think imagination would be the only plausible route to attain such a grasp, but thinks it is hopeless. Imagination can't really add anything to what is already given in perception.

However, Campbell and others think that the mind-independence of things already shows up *in perception*. One simple example: *joint attention*

You and I are watching someone who's digging a hole in the road. We are talking together about the scene. Let's suppose that this is a case of joint attention. That is, it's not that we just happen, by accident, to be focusing on the same person. Let's suppose that what's causing you to focus on that man is, in part, my focusing on him, and that what's causing me to focus on him is, in part, your focusing on him. (2013, 67)

(Compare Campbell's strategies to the discussion of re-identification and objectivity in P.F. Strawson's *Individuals* (1959).)

Maarten Steenhagen (ms2416@cam.ac.uk) | February 2017