

Remote Learning Module for 15 April 2020

Lecture Notes: Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*

Last time we examined the Introduction (1-25) to Berkeley's *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, wherein he outlines his project for establishing *immaterialism* as correctly characterizing the real world. We saw in particular that Berkeley launches his project with a nominalist critique the rationalist doctrine of abstract ideas—that is, the doctrine that we can form ideas of extension, motion, shape, color, etc. by a rational operation of the mind (*sola mente percipere*, as Descartes put it in the *Meditations*). On Berkeley's view, once we realize that *we don't have any abstract ideas at all*, we shall have to abandon rationalism as foundering on a grammatical error—an error so egregious that once we correct it, we shall be forced to reject the existence of material objects as fundamental constituents of the world, and to adopt metaphysical *immaterialism* instead. Today, we'll turn our attention Berkeley's exposition of immaterialism (in Sections 1-33) and its consequences (in Sections 85-156) of the *Principles*.

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— Immaterialism —

(1) Once we abandon any hope of rescuing rationalism from nominalism, we are left with an empiricist epistemology. For Berkeley, empiricism implies that “to be is to be perceived or to be perceivable” (*esse est percipi aut percipere*). Consequently, empiricism undermines materialism because it compels us to collapse the distinction between Locke's primary and secondary qualities (as well as Galileo's distinction between physical and sensory properties). Once these distinctions are collapsed, moreover, we shall have to abandon both inferential and representational realism.

(2) To advance his project, then, Berkeley considers the view formulated by Locke as follows.

- (a) Nothing can be perceived unless it acts on a sense organ, thus producing an idea.
- (b) What is immediately perceived is not the external object, but the sensory idea that *represents* the object.
- (c) Some features of the representation are like (resemble) and others are not like (do not resemble) the objects represented.
- (d) Objective reference is possible because of similitudes between the *referens* and the *referendum*.

(3) Berkeley's *tour de force*: none of the ideas (sensations) we have are such that their qualities are similar to primary qualities. Perceptual length is no more *like* physical length than perceptual color is *like* physical color. The only thing an idea can be similar to is another idea. What makes the distinction between primary and secondary qualities seem *prima facie* tenable is that secondary qualities are relative to the percipient (remember Galileo's feather, or how there are no colors in the dark, or how the same water feels hot to one person and cold to another). So,

without a percipient, secondary qualities do not exist at all. But, Berkeley argues, the so-called primary qualities are just as relative to the percipient: shape is relative to point of view; motion is relative to the motion of the perceiver (Galilean relativity); and distance is relative to standards of estimation. Suppose, for example, you want to measure the *exact* dimensions of your desk. You might take out a meter stick or a ruler, and line it up with the edges of the desk, first on the left side, and then, looking to the right side, see what mark on the ruler coincides with the right edge of the desk. How do you know when the ruler is flush with the left edge? Well, you use that marvelously precise tool of yours: a finger; and on the right side you have to use your eye to identify the coincidence of a mark on the ruler with the edge of the desk—which can never be perfectly coincident anyway since for this, the two would have to occupy exactly the same space at the same time.

Now, since we can form no abstract idea of space, motion, distance, etc., if there is no percipient, then there is no space, motion, distance, etc. All qualities, therefore, must be perceived or perceivable.

(4) Berkeley's argument is a species of reductionism: we can reduce our talk of tables and chairs, of desks and laptops, to regularities in our experience; and since we can successfully refer to our ideas, the reducing class of objects is real. We can call Berkeley's theory then, *immaterialist* realism (in contrast to the *inferential* realism of Galileo and Descartes and the *representational* realism of Locke).

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— Consequences —

(5) At Principle 85 we find, according to Berkeley, that immaterialism dissolves a host of otherwise intractable problems. His examples include: Can material objects think? Is matter infinitely divisible? How can matter operate on spirit (or vice versa)? These all become pseudoproblems from the vantage of immaterialism.

(6) Principles 86-89 assert that, furthermore, materialism leads to skepticism: on either Cartesian or Lockean terms, we always begin with our sensations; so, our knowledge of matter is *mediated* by our sensations. In short, we can never sneak a peek at the objects of perception to determine which qualities that appear in our sensations are primary, and which are secondary, so we can, in principle, never know if any of our sensations correspond to how things are in and of themselves. Recall the analogy we used to make sense of Locke's distinction: when we examine a photograph of three people standing on the front steps of the JUB (a consummation devoutly to be wished these days), we compare the photo to the people before us—that is, we can sneak a peek—and thus determine that being glossy and surrounded by a white border are secondary qualities of the photograph. We cannot do this with our immediate perceptions. Think of the sensory apparatus as like a veil we must transcend if we are to remain materialists; but, since we can only see the qualia behind the veil, skepticism is inevitable. Berkeley calls this the "egocentric predicament."

(7) If we divide things into (a) unthinking ideas (bundles of qualities) and (b) thinking spirits or minds, then skepticism disappears, because we know the real things directly. A perfect, seamless virtual reality is, in other words, indistinguishable from reality *per se*, and indistinguishables are identical.

(8) Principles 92-94 trace the consequences of materialism to atheism and irreligion. Atheism follows, according to Berkeley because materialism has no resources to account for how God created matter in the first place. Moreover, materialism leads directly to Hobbesian and Spinozist physicalism, which in turn leads to determinism, and thus to fatalism (denial of free will). Of course, we might imagine Hobbes and Spinoza both responding with an ironic: Yeah, and so, what's your point? For Berkeley, even worse, materialism leads to idolatry, by making material bodies into gods. But atheism and irreligion disappear under Berkeley's hypothesis: if we knew, he contends, that the sun is only an idea in our minds, we'd not worship it, but rather would worship the "eternal, invisible mind" that produces our ideas of the sun.

(9) At Principle 98, Berkeley turns his attention to various "errors and difficulties in the sciences" that are consequent on materialism, but which evaporate entirely once we adopt immaterialism. His reflections on time are particularly interesting, and in the interests of our time constraints today, we'll conclude our tour of the *Principles* with these reflections. Materialism requires that we distinguish between:

- (a) *Psychological Time*, which is a pure continuum: between any two moments there is always a third—the succession of ideas in our minds is continuous; and
- (b) *Physical (or Clock) Time*, which is abstracted from the succession of ideas into an infinitely divisible succession of discrete moments.

But this distinction leads to a dilemma from which there is no escape: either I exist at innumerable moments without a thought; or I am annihilated at innumerable moments only to be recreated again at innumerable moments. Neither horn of this dilemma is tenable, for Berkeley; moreover, neither follows from immaterialism. And thus, he rests his case.

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On Friday, we'll take meet the towering figure of David Hume, with a brief tour of his life and times. Be well everyone, and, remember: social distancing, while it may inhibit our perceiving one another directly, does save lives, thereby keeping us firmly in the realm of the perceivable.