

Chapter 16

George Berkeley's Immaterialism and Subjective Idealism

Key Words

Immaterialism , *esse est percipi*, material substance, sense data, skepticism, primary quality, secondary quality, substratum theory.

Introduction

Bishop George Berkeley (12 March 1685 – 14 January 1753) is the second among the great British Empiricist thinkers, after John Locke. Though he agrees with Locke on many aspects concerning the nature of philosophy, Berkeley's contributions are more noted for his opposition as well as refutation of the former's fundamental assumptions and doctrines. For instance, one major issue with which Berkeley preoccupied himself was the refutation of material substance, a theory that occupied a central place in Locke's philosophical framework.

Berkeley had reasons for opposing Locke, particularly the notion of material substance, as he was an Anglican Bishop—the Bishop of Cloyne, a small Irish town—and the idea of an independent or autonomous material substance counters some basic assumptions of the Christian Church. Berkeley thus denied the existence of material substance and his major works initiate arguments in favour of this philosophical position. In his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* he advocated that nothing exists outside the mind and in another work titled, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, he propounded that the world depends for its existence on being perceived; *esse est percipi*.

As a Bishop, he wants to refute materialism and atheism and he thought that this could be attained by showing that the notion of a mind-independent material substance is untenable. With this refutation, Berkeley intends to establish the spiritual basis of all reality and assert that all things owe their existence to a perceiving mind. Methodologically, this way of argument is of course an extension of the empiricist epistemology initiated by Locke. But while

Locke derived a form of representationalism from the basic principles of empiricism, Berkeley follows those basic principles in their extreme form and seeks to demonstrate that they ultimately suggest a psychic basis for all reality. Argument against the material substance is set forth in *The Dialogues of Hylas and Philonous*, a work written in the form of a dialogue between two characters; Hylas, who stands for scientifically educated common sense and Philonous, is Berkeley himself. The Greek word Hylas means “wood”, which implies “matter” and the word Philonous is a combination of “philo” which means “love” and “nous” which means, “mind”. Philonous is thus a lover of the mind, who asserts that every reality is mental.

Berkeley's Important Themes

From the outset, Berkeley intends to advocate a form of immaterialism, which affirms that material substance does not exist. Bertrand Russell observes that, “Berkeley is important in philosophy through his denial of the existence of matter—a denial which he supported by a number of ingenious arguments.

In order to substantiate his major point, Berkeley examines all those aspects of the philosophical doctrine that supports the existence of a material substance. Most of his arguments were raised against Locke's doctrine of material substratum. He thus contends that another objectionable thesis that supports the idea of material substance is the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, which Locke considered as central to his representationalist epistemology. Berkeley argues that this distinction is superfluous and further asserts that objects owe to their existence minds which perceive them. This theory is known as subjective idealism.

He then argues against Locke's notion of abstract ideas, which asserts that human mind has the ability to frame abstract ideas. This doctrine would eventually suggest that external objects have a natural or real existence, distinct from being perceived. Before we examine these refutations, we shall have a brief look at the notion of material substance, which Berkeley finds objectionable.

The Idea of Material Substance

The notion of material substance has a long history in western philosophy. In the ancient Greek philosophy, the naturalists were eager to affirm its existence,

as they were largely trying to explain the reality underlying the corporeal world. In Plato's metaphysics, matter was treated as unreal but his disciple Aristotle reinstated its importance and understood it as a substance on which the qualities of material objects depend on. Matter is therefore, a substance which has those qualities. It figures as one of the four causes that operate behind the workings of the universe and it remains the same, irrespective of the changes the object undergoes as a result of forms shaping them differently.

During the modern age, Descartes' dualism of the mind and the body conceives matter as constituting an independent domain (from the domain of the mind). With this dualism Descartes could explain the workings of the material universe independent of any metaphysical or spiritual principles; an outlook that was very important during the modern period. But as mentioned above, it was Locke's notion of material substratum that Berkeley found more objectionable and he ventures to refute it with several arguments.

According to Locke, the material substratum is an unknown support of the sensible qualities objects have. It is thus an entity independent of mind or consciousness. Following the dictates of his representationalist empiricism, Locke argued that the qualities we perceive in the objects of the external world cannot hang in air and are in need of a support. He thus maintained that there must be a substratum or support to which these qualities are attached.

Responding to these theories Berkeley wonders whether we can represent to ourselves what we mean by matter in this sense. He asks whether this material substratum is not just a word, which we use without any understanding behind it. He is curious to know whether we can describe what we mean by the existence of objects in abstraction from the fact that they are being perceived. Berkeley invites us to see matter as nothing but the very things we see, feel and hear; as only the collections of ideas which make up the experience of perception. This is Berkeley's immaterialism, which he expounds in his work, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, in which Philonous represents Berkeley's views, which include immaterialism, refutation of material substance, subjective idealism etc. Hylas represents an opposite of these views, which ultimately argue for the reality of material substance.

As mentioned above, his name indicates that Philonous is a lover of mind, who argues that all reality is mental. The word Hylas in ancient Greek means wood and implies matter and hence it stands for the view that material substances exist. The argument of immaterialism can be summarized in the following conversation between Hylas and Philonous.

Hylas: Can anything be more fantastical, more repugnant to common sense, or a more manifest piece of Scepticism, than to believe there is no such thing as *matter*?

Philonous: I do not deny the reality of sensible things, i.e., of what is perceived immediately by the senses. But there is no ground to believe that we do not see the causes of colours or hear the causes of sounds..... by sight we perceive only light, colour, and figure; by hearing, only sounds..... apart from sensible qualities there is nothing sensible, and sensible things are nothing but sensible qualities or combinations of sensible qualities.

Berkeley seems to argue in the following manner. Sense data are mental and heat and cold are sensations. Great heat is a pain, and pain must be in a mind. Therefore heat is mental. A sweet taste is a pleasure and a bitter taste is a pain, and pleasure and pain are mental. Odours are also pleasant or unpleasant and hence are mental. This points to the fact that all reality is immaterial, i.e., mental or spiritual. Berkeley advances an argument about Lukewarm Water to make this point clearer. He says that when one of our hands is hot and the other cold, if we put both into lukewarm water, it may feel cold to one hand and hot to the other, though water cannot be at once hot and cold. Therefore, all these sensations are mental.

The refutation of material substance follows from this argument. Berkeley argues that all our knowledge is derived from sensation and reflection. We know only ideas. And can never know a material world without us. It is a fact that, in our knowledge about material object we are limited to states of consciousness. We cannot compare our ideas with the bodies, as we do not know anything about them: and have no direct knowledge about them. We do not even know whether they exist or not.

Again, it has been pointed out that the idea of material substance inevitably leads to skepticism. John Locke, while talking about it had referred to the material substance as, "I know, not what". He says that, I know that such a substance should exist, as qualities cannot hang in air, but I do not know what it is, because I do not have ideas about it. For Berkeley, this leads to skepticism, as we cannot know it. Again, the idea of such a material substance, independent of the mind, may pose the threat of atheism and irreligion, as it posits an independent material substance and a world of pure space suggests the existence of an infinite, eternal immutable reality alongside of God. This will limit God and may even suggest His non-existence. Therefore, the belief in matter, leads to atheism and materialism. Hence in order to counter atheism, we have to demonstrate that material substance does not exist. He further states that the universe can be explained without material substance; with God, the supreme Spirit, and other spiritual beings.

Matter is described as an inert, senseless, unknown substance. This is why Locke had referred to it as "I know, not what". Matter neither acts, nor perceives, nor is perceived and it is mostly made up of negatives. The only positive supposition about matter is that it is a "support to qualities". Berkeley wonders how can anything be present to us, which is neither perceivable by sense nor reflection, nor capable of producing any idea in our minds, nor is at all extended, nor hath any form, nor exists in any place? He found that the basis of construing material substance is the theory of qualities and the distinction between primary and secondary qualities.

Accordingly, a corporeal body is a solid, extended, figured substance having the power of motion, possessing a certain color, weight, taste, smell, and sound. Some qualities like extension, figure, solidity, motion, rest etc., inhere in the substance and they are called primary qualities. On the other hand, qualities like color, sound, taste, smell etc. are nothing but the effects these primary qualities produce in a perceiving subject. They are not qualities of the body itself, but are in the perceiving subject. They are called secondary qualities.

This distinction between primary and secondary qualities therefore, assumes the existence of certain qualities in the object, which are independent of the perceiver. It is the distinction between what really and objectively exists

and what is merely subjective. This further implies that material things have certain properties independently of our perceiving them and therefore, they exist independently of us. The concept of primary qualities refers to the original qualities of the substance, which are in the body, and not just in the one who perceives them. They belong to the material object or the material substratum. On the other hand, the secondary qualities are in me.

A close examination reveals that, even the so called primary qualities are nothing but ideas in the mind. Lock recognizes this and affirms that they are in the object and also in the mind. According to him, they exist apart from the mind and are also in the mind. Berkeley argues that this is a contradiction. He thus maintains that the concept of matter thus involves a contradiction in it. He thus ventures to refute the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. He argues that the so-called primary qualities are not different in kind from the so-called secondary qualities. The ideas of extension and solidity, which are stated to be primary qualities and hence are understood as the original qualities that belong to the material substance are also gained through the sense of touch and hence are sensations in the mind. We cannot separate my idea of extension from the idea of colour and other so-called secondary qualities. When we perceive anything extended we perceive it as colored and having other secondary qualities also.

Berkeley thus concludes that the primary and secondary qualities are inseparably united. If secondary qualities exist only in the mind, the same thing must be true of primary qualities as well. As the lukewarm water argument affirms, the same water which appears cold to one hand seems warm to another. Therefore, secondary qualities of heat and cold are affections of the mind and are not patterns of real beings existing in the corporeal substances which excite them. An object which is sweet in one occasion may feel bitter on another occasion (for example, when we have fever) and to the same eye at different stations, or eyes of a different texture at the same station, figure and extension appear various. Hence they are not patterns or resemblances of qualities existing in matter.

If the existence of all objects depends on a mind's ability to perceive them, then is there anything called real existence of objects? Berkeley's response

is conditional. He says that they are real things in the sense that God arouses these sensations in us in a regular coherent order. Material substance is a mere combination of sensible qualities, such as extension, solidity, weight, and the like and not a support of accidents, or qualities without the mind. Nor are they ideal copies or resemblances of things that exist without the mind in an unthinking substance.

Berkeley argues that an idea can be like nothing but an idea and an idea can be compared only with another idea. This means that we cannot conceive a likeness except only between our ideas. For instance, a color or figure can be like nothing but another color or figure. According to Berkeley, every quality of an object can be reduced to a sensible quality or to a sensation, which is conscious and immaterial. Sensations are essentially psychic. Berkeley argues that there is nothing beyond sensations and hence every reality is mental.

Berkeley thus finally concludes that, there is no such thing as a material world. He maintains that, though sensible objects are real, they are not material. Instead, they are complex ideas or complex bundles of sensible qualities that exist only in the minds of the perceivers. In this sense, he holds that to exist is to be perceived: *esse est percipi*. Sensible objects exist only so long as they are being perceived by some mind. Hence things perceived are ideas which cannot exist without the mind. Therefore, the existence of things depends on them being perceived.

With the refutation of the distinction between the primary and secondary qualities and the notion of material substance, Berkeley challenges the substratum theory that holds that qualities of material objects depend on and exist in a substance, which has those qualities. This has been a widely held belief since Aristotle. It assumed the existence of a substance that remains the same through all the changes happening to the object. Berkeley categorically refutes this concept and asserts that one cannot form an idea of a material substratum that exists independent of a thinking mind. He thus takes the empiricist philosophical position forward with an attempt to refute materialism and atheism, but fails to extend his criticism of the idea of supporting substratum to refute the existence of the psychic substance. This is what his successor David Hume does. As Russell observes:

Berkeley advances valid arguments in favour of a certain important conclusion, though not quite in favour of the conclusion that he thinks he is proving. He thinks he is proving that all reality is mental; what he is proving is that we perceive qualities, not things, and that qualities are relative to the percipient. [*A History of Western Philosophy*]

Quiz

1. Berkeley's immaterialism does not attempt to prove.....
 - (a) The existence of a mind-independent material substance
 - (b) Establishing the spiritual basis of all reality
 - (c) Asserting that all things owe their existence to a perceiving mind
 - (d) To be is to be perceived
2. The theory that asserts that objects owe to their existence minds which perceive them is known as
 - [a] Immaterialism
 - [b] Idealism
 - [c] Subjectivism
 - [d] Subjective idealism
3. Which of the following is not true for Berkeley?
 - [a] Sense data are mental
 - [b] Pleasure and pain are mental
 - [c] We certainly know that material bodies do not exist
 - [d] The idea of material substance leads to skepticism.
4. According to Berkeley, the idea of material substance, independent of the mind may lead to
 - [a] Atheism
 - [b] Irreligion
 - [c] Skepticism
 - [d] Subjective idealism.
5. Which of the following are held by Berkeley?
 - [i] Primary and secondary qualities are inseparably united.
 - [ii] Primary qualities exist apart from the mind and are also in the mind.
 - [iii] We cannot separate my idea of extension from the idea of colour and other so-called secondary qualities.
 - [iv] Qualities of material objects depend on and exist in a substance, which has those qualities.
 - [a] All the four
 - [b] (i) and (iii)
 - [c] (ii) and (iv)
 - [d] (i), (ii) and (iii)

Answer Key

1. [a]
2. [d]
3. [c]
4. [d]
5. [b]

Assignments

1. Discuss Berkeley's immaterialism
2. How does Berkeley refute the distinction between primary and secondary qualities?

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