Of the Principles of Human Knowledge

George Berkeley

This essay outlines Berkeley's arguments for an immaterialist view of the origins of ideas.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0azrs_yPvg
Where Locke posited that objects’ primary qualities acted upon human senses in order to produce ideas, Berkeley argues that the origin of ideas cannot be material objects (indeed, he argues that there are no material objects at all), but instead must be God.
Berkeley devotes the first part of this selection to arguing that we are unwarranted in believing that material objects cause our ideas.
He points out, first, that all of the objects of human knowledge are ideas of one sort or another (§ 1), and that the thing that perceives those objects is the mind (§ 2).

From this he argues that, because anything perceived by the mind is an idea, and because ideas cannot exist absent a mind to perceive them, everything we perceive is an idea and is mind dependent.

Thus, what we call “objects” are just ideas.
Another of Berkeley’s arguments against materialism concerns the meaning of “exist.”

- The term “exist” when applied to sensible things simply means that
  
  - (a) when one is with the thing, one can perceive it, and
  
  - (b) if one is away from that thing, one would be able to perceive if he returned to that thing’s presence.

- But the things we perceive are ideas.

- Thus, existence is really about ideas, not materiality.
Another way to put Berkeley’s argument is as follows.

- One cannot conceive of an object of one’s perception existing absent one’s perception of it, for any conception of an object existing outside one’s perception involves a conception of it.

- Further, since a conception of an object involves an idea of it, and since having an idea of it involves perceiving that idea, it follows that it is impossible to conceive of an object existing where one is not perceiving it.
Berkeley also criticizes Locke’s distinction between primary qualities and secondary qualities

- Locke claims that primary qualities are in substances themselves, which in turn implies the existence of matter.

- Berkeley holds that qualities such as motion, number, and extension are really just ideas, and that they therefore do not exist independently in matter.

- One argument he gives for this conclusion is that one cannot conceive of Locke’s primary qualities separately from conceptions of Locke’s secondary qualities.

- So, for example, one cannot have an idea of motion without picturing something in motion, but doing so requires that one have an idea of the moving thing’s color.
Berkeley concludes…

- from these (and other) arguments that there is no corporeal or material substance, and that “the cause of ideas is an incorporeal…substance or spirit.”
- He rules out the possibility that one’s own spirit causes one to have ideas.
- Rather, ideas are caused by God.