

Is there an answer to George Berkeley's 'Idealism'?

Introduction

Before I answer, there is a prior question which we must tend to: what would count as an *answer*? There are at least three kinds, which I shall attempt to define and deliberate between. (i) A refutation requires proving his thesis false by establishing the mind-independent 'matter'¹ he denies. (ii) A *reductio* assumes his thesis true, and derives an absurd or contradictory consequence using *only* his own principles. (iii) A dissolution requires showing that a supposedly substantive claim of Berkeley's states no determinate fact by his own standard of meaning; and so, is not truth-apt.

A refutation was my first natural reading, but I set it aside: proving the existence of 'matter' requires perceptual access to something that is, by definition, unperceived—a contradiction. Yet crucially, the same insulation covers Berkeley's posit of the 'spirit'¹, which he also concedes is unperceived. A refutation thus fails, but its failure discloses what a dissolution turns to: the substrate, 'matter' or 'spirit' alike, lies beyond anything experience could prove or disprove. A *reductio* fares better: Berkeley's idealism arguably reduces to solipsism, since—on his own account—every other mind, God included, is known only by inference (§145)², from ideas that could have issued from his own mind, or from none. Berkeley responds with God, a 'spirit' whose perceiving sustains the world (§§29 and 146); but this response invokes a spiritual substance, and whether he successfully blocks the reduction depends on whether such a substance is a contentful posit at all. I set a *reductio* aside too: it defers to a prior question the dissolution asks—whether spiritual substance says anything determinate.

Before I attempt a dissolution, it is necessary to divide Berkeley's thesis into three claims, for he treats them as one. The first is negative: there exists no 'matter' that supports perceptible qualities (§§9 and 16-17). The second is *esse est percipi*: sensible things exist *only* in being perceived (§3). The third is the claim that the perceivers, in which those ideas

¹ When this essay uses 'matter' and 'spirit' in quotation marks, they refer to Berkeley's metaphysical posits: matter as an unknown substance supporting qualities mind-independently; spirit as the active, perceiving substance in which ideas inhere.

² Citations marked "§" (e.g., §145) refer to sections of George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710); quotations follow Jonathan Bennett's modernised text (Early Modern Texts, 2017). Secondary sources are cited in-text and listed in the bibliography.

exist, are ‘spirits’ (§§7 and 135). The second and third together compose his idealism—the verdict that reality is exhaustively mental. But they are separable: *esse est percipi* does not entail a perceiving substance, nor the denial of ‘matter’ that reality is mental. I take no position on the negative claim. Instead, I shall focus *solely* on dissolving the verdict that reality is mental. I do so by arguing that Berkeley’s posit of ‘spirits’ is the surplus by which that verdict exceeds the mere denial of ‘matter’, and it is this surplus that fails Berkeley’s own criterion of meaning. The dissolution touches only the third claim. The second—*esse est percipi*, taken as an account of the ideas we perceive—remains contentful, and the world of those ideas remains.

I proceed in three stages. (i): I show that Berkeley’s *a priori* arguments fail to establish the verdict: his Master Argument conflates the representation of an object with the object represented, while his remaining *a priori* arguments, his “likeness principle” among them, reach at most the negative claim. (ii): With no *a priori* proof left, the verdict rests on ‘spirit’—never perceived, only “noted” (§§89 and 140), and experientially indistinguishable from the ‘matter’ he rejects. (iii): I apply the very criterion by which he condemned ‘matter’—that an unperceived substance, whose support of the qualities cannot be explained, is an empty name (§§16-17,68 and 80)—to ‘spirit’, which empties his own verdict in turn.

(i) Berkeley’s a priori arguments

To establish his verdict, Berkeley needs an *a priori* argument that does more than deny ‘matter’. His *a priori* arguments divide accordingly: some aim to prove his verdict, others reach *only* the negative claim. Of those, I examine the ‘Master Argument’ and the ‘likeness principle’: the former fails; the latter, however fully granted, falls short; so no *a priori* argument establishes that reality is mental.

The force of Berkeley’s ‘Master Argument’ lies within this logical trap: challenged to conceive of a sensible thing existing unperceived (§22), one appears to fail in the very attempt, since any object produced is, in being conceived, thought of, and so not conceived as unperceived after all (§23). I set out the argument as follows:

1. If a mind-independent object is possible, one can conceive of an object existing unperceived—and so unthought-of.
2. To conceive of an object is to think of it.

3. So, whatever one conceives is thereby thought-of.
4. Therefore, one cannot conceive of an object existing unperceived.
5. What cannot be conceived is impossible.
6. Therefore, nothing can exist unperceived; *esse est percipi* holds of necessity.

Even if we grant premises 1-3 and 5, the argument nonetheless fails in the step from premise 3-4, which equivocates on “thought of”. To be ‘thought of’ can mean two things:

- (a). the object is *represented*—that it figures as the object of an act of conceiving;
or,
- (b). the object is *mind-dependent*—that its existence is contingent upon
being perceived.

Premise 3 secures only (a): whatever I conceive, I thereby represent. But premise 4 requires (b), for only “I cannot conceive an object whose existence is independent of every mind” contradicts premise 1. Here Berkeley conflates the *representation* with the *represented*, when they are in fact two distinct things (Downing, 2021): when I conceive of a tree standing unperceived in a park, the act of conceiving is *mental*; the tree it represents is not thereby mental.³ Thus, the inference from premise 3-4 is invalid; the Master Argument fails.

Berkeley’s other argument for the verdict—that sensible things, being collections of what we perceive, are collections of ideas (§§1-3)—fails in the same way, inferring the mind-dependence of an object from the mind-dependence of the *perceiving* of it.

Arguendo, I grant his one remaining *a priori* argument, the ‘likeness principle’⁴ (§8). And since I grant it, representative realism falls—no idea copies mind-independent ‘matter’. Nevertheless, this precisely yields *only* the denial of ‘matter’, and it does nothing to establish that substances of the world are ‘spirits’.

Thus, I have shown that no *a priori* argument successfully proves his verdict; and what remains to support it is experience. Yet experience, as I now argue, cannot distinguish a mental world from a material one.

³ The equivocation objection originates with George Pitcher (1977).

⁴ Berkeley’s “likeness principle” holds that an idea can resemble only another idea. Since ideas exist only in being perceived, while ‘matter’ would be unperceivable, no idea could resemble—and therefore represent—it.

(ii) 'Matter' versus 'Spirit'

Experience never reaches the substrate. What we perceive is the ordered stream of ideas in their settled regularities; what we do not perceive is any substance beneath them. Whether the ground of these ideas is mental rather than material is registered by no perception whatsoever.

Berkeley concedes as much of 'matter'. Every phenomenon explained on the supposition of 'matter', he states, "could just as well be explained without it" (§50)—and he recasts even the motion of the earth as a claim about what a suitably placed observer would perceive (§§58-59). But the concession cannot stop at 'matter'. What carries the order of experience is the regularity of the ideas themselves—the laws by which one succeeds another (§30)—no substance in which they inhere, or from which they issue, is registered by experience. Remove the material substrate, and the phenomena are untouched; put a spiritual one in its place, and they are untouched again. The kind of substance beneath experience—mental or material—makes no experiential difference.

The choice of substrate is therefore a bare posit. Nothing observable turns on whether reality is ultimately material or mental. And whether a posit of that kind states any substantive fact is what I now press—and I press it with Berkeley's own criterion of meaning.

(iii) Criterion of Meaning

Berkeley never explicitly states such a criterion, but his argument against 'matter' wields one. He concludes 'matter' not to be false, but empty. Pressed to explain how a substance "supports" qualities, Berkeley finds the word has no sense anyone can supply (§§16-17); the definition of 'matter' is "entirely made up of negatives," approaching "the description of a nonentity" (§68) and one may "use 'matter' in the same sense that other men use 'nothing'" (§80).

Berkeley's criterion of meaning can thus be formalised like this:

'A substance that answers to no perception, and whose "support" cannot be explained, is not a false posit, but an empty name.'⁵

'Matter' was condemned on both counts: it answered to no perception, and its "support" of qualities could not be explained. However, the 'spirit'⁶ also meets both. It answers to no perception as no one can form an idea of it (§27), and the 'spirit' is assigned the very "support" that 'matter' held: 'spirit' is "the only substance or support in which ideas can exist" (§§135; cf. 2 and 7), a relation no better explained for ideas than it was for qualities. By Berkeley's own standard, then, "spiritual substance" is his verdict on 'matter' over again—not false, but empty.

Berkeley responds by granting that although we have no idea of the 'spirit', we have a notion of it (Downing, 2021): that is, we understand the word, and know our own 'spirit' by reflection unlike the 'matter' we know nothing of (§§89 and 140).

The notion, however, faces a dilemma:

- a. On Berkeley's account, what we have is "a relative notion" of 'spirit' as the support of its powers (§27)—but a relative notion of an unknown something that supports qualities is exactly what he refused Locke, as having "no meaning at all" (§§16-17).⁷
- b. Suppose he presses instead that reflection gives more—a positive acquaintance with the substance itself. When one does so, what is found is a succession of particular acts—this perceiving, or willing—never a substance in which they inhere. As Hume (2017) observed, one never catches oneself without some perception, and lays hold of nothing but perception. Reflection acquaints me with perceiving, not with a perceiver.

⁵ The criterion is extracted from Berkeley's practice, not imported: he deploys it against matter without ever formalising it. Its later, explicit formalisation is Ayer's verification principle (*Language, Truth and Logic*, 1936, ch.1), on which the realist-idealist dispute is itself "fictitious." The present argument requires only Berkeley's own local use of it.

⁶ Considered as perceiving ideas, 'spirit' is called the "understanding", considered as producing ideas, the "will" (§§27; cf. 2). It is not a peripheral posit: since Berkeley denies the existence of 'matter', 'spirits' are all the substance that exists, and God—the omnipresent being—sustains the world by perceiving it without interruption (§§146-147). The stakes are theological: Berkeley—later a bishop—took 'matter' to be the foundation for scepticism and atheism (§92), and so needed 'spirit' as the sole substance in which ideas could exist.

⁷ The posit also threatens regress: ideas cannot exist unsupported, yet the 'spirit's' own powers of willing and perceiving (§27) seem to also need support, inviting a further support in turn—a structure akin to the Third Man regress (Rickless, 2007). Berkeley's reply—that 'spirit' is simple, its powers are not parts (§27)—names the problem rather than solves it.

So, the notion is empty on either reading: a relative notion of support condemned ‘matter’; reflection yields only acts, not substance. Therefore, Berkeley’s notion of the ‘spirit’ is rescued *only* if ‘matter’ is rescued alongside it.

Another route might seem to escape this. Berkeley infers an active cause from the passivity of our ideas: since ideas are inert (§25), and those of sense do not answer to our will, they must be produced by some other active thing (§29), which he calls a ‘spirit’. But the inference warrants only that *something* active produces them—not that this something is a substance, still less that it is a mental one. The step from ‘an active cause’ to ‘spiritual substance’ is the move the criterion has already emptied. The passivity of our ideas may show that something acts, but it cannot show that a ‘spirit’, in the sense Berkeley needs, is there to do it.

Thus, the conclusion is not that no one thinks, but that “spiritual substance” states no determinate fact. The verdict that reality is exhaustively mental inherits this emptiness, for ‘spirits’ are its substances (§§7 and 89). Crucially, it is not refuted; but rather, dissolved: there is nothing it has got right or wrong; no ‘matter’ produced, and no realism affirmed.

Conclusion

It may be objected that this dissolution proves too much. If “spiritual substance” is empty because it answers to no perception, then—it seems—so are other minds, God included, and so is the world unperceived; the criterion appears to dissolve not one posit but the whole of reality—and the standing of this essay with it. But, the objection mistakes the criterion’s reach. It empties only what answers to no perception. The stream of ideas is still perceived; Berkeley’s distinction between ‘ideas of “sense” and “imagination”’ is a difference within experience (§33)⁸, and so remains intact. *Esse est percipi*, as a claim about those ideas, keeps its content. The inference to other minds survives too, since it rests on perceivable patterns of ideas (§145); only the further claim that each such mind is a substance dissolves. Nor does this essay dissolve itself: its claims answer to Berkeley’s text and to experience, and so are not among the emptied. In every case the criterion dissolves the same thing—an

⁸ Berkeley’s criterion for distinguishing ‘ideas of sense’ (real things) and ‘ideas of imagination’ (imaginary things): ideas of sense are vivid, involuntary, and orderly, while ideas of imagination are faint, voluntary and fleeting. This distinction is entirely internal to experience—both types are perceived—so the dissolution criteria does not touch it.

unperceivable something beneath the ideas, making no difference to them. And it dissolves it even-handedly: ‘matter’ first, by Berkeley’s standard; spiritual substance follows, by the same standard; and the dispute over whether reality is mental or material ends not because either side has won, but because there was never a fact to win. There is, then, an answer to Berkeley’s idealism—not a refutation, nor a *reductio*, but a dissolution.

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