

Berkeley's Idealism

In section 23 of his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, George Berkeley argues that we cannot conceive unobserved objects. This claim forms part of his greater argument for the nonexistence of matter. In this essay, I will explain section 23 of the *Treatise* and how it fits into Berkeley's greater argument. In addition, I will consider objections to his argument, possible Berkeleyan responses, and explain my own response to his argument.

Berkeley's argument in section 23 of his *Treatise* takes the form of a challenge. Berkeley asks his reader to imagine "trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody around to perceive them." He notes that although you can easily imagine trees or books while "at the same time not including the idea of any one that may perceive them," you still perceive the books and trees in your mind. Indeed, you cannot "imagine these objects existing outside the mind." However we try to imagine trees and rocks, our imaginings will always be perceptions, and we will always be there as perceivers.

Berkeley argues that our continued presence as observers means that we cannot make any sense of trees or books as external objects. "When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas." Since our ideas of external objects are always simply ideas, they do not give us access to anything outside our mind. Furthermore, since we cannot imagine an unperceived object, it makes no sense to talk about objects existing independently of perception. Thus, objects exist only as perceptions and there are no

outside material objects that are represented by our perceptions. Since we cannot imagine any unperceived object, Berkeley argues that we should give up our ideas of mind-independent, material objects.

Of course, you could object that Berkeley's argument does not preclude the possibility of material objects outside the mind. Even granting Berkeley's point that our perceptions are always mind-dependent and that we only experience the world through our perceptions, you could say that it is unclear whether there is matter underlying our perceptions. Perhaps our perceptions mediate between mind and matter, rather than existing independent of any material base. In reply, Berkeley would argue that talking about an unperceived thing makes no sense. Since we cannot conceive an unperceived thing, an unperceived thing is inconceivable and therefore impossible. Remembering Berkeley's challenge above, we must admit that we are unable to conceive an unperceived tree or book or anything else.

We could raise at least two objections to this point: first, although we cannot conceive *of* an unperceived tree or rock, we seem able to conceive *that* an unperceived tree or rock could exist. Second, the realm of our perception does not necessarily align with the realm of existence. Even though we cannot imagine or conceive any unperceived objects, unperceived objects could still exist.

Taking up the first objection, we note that we seem able to conceive that a tree could exist without our perception. This objection, however, seems weak. Although it is certainly conceivable that something could exist without our constant minding, this objection misses Berkeley's point. We have yet to provide any description of the tree beyond a packet of perceptions. We do not know the tree in any way that would justify

our claiming that it exists even while no one perceives it. When we say “The tree exists, even while no one perceives it,” what do we mean by tree? We cannot mean the tree exists as a packet of perceptions while no one perceives it; how could perceptions exist without a perceiver? This objection requires that we think of the tree as a thing outside our mind, with some stable, mind-independent existence, even though all we have to work with is our mental perceptions. We are assuming the very thing we were trying to prove. Although this objection might show how Berkeley’s argument does not render a representative theory of perception impossible, it provides nothing that contradicts Berkeley’s claims.

Our second objection is stronger. We can note that Berkeley assumes that only conceivable things are possible. He presents no argument for this assumption, and it certainly seems possible that unperceivable things could exist. We have no reason to suppose that our mind is made in such a way that it can comprehend all the things in the world. In addition, unperceived objects are not contradictory (or “absurd,” as Berkeley puts it), they are merely impossible. We can see this when we consider the concept “object.” This concept is not necessarily attached to the concept “perceivable”; in any case, if there is such a connection, my concept of “object” lacks it. Since we cannot derive “perceivable” from an analysis of the concept “object,” neither an unperceived object nor unperceivable object are contradictions. Indeed, Berkeley’s own argument hints at this: he asks us to try to imagine an unperceived object, rather than arguing from the concepts. Berkeley’s challenge is a good test of what we can do (that is, it reveals that we are unable to imagine an unperceived object), but it is not a good test of what may exist (it does not reveal anything about the

actual existence of unperceived objects). If the concepts “object” and “unperceived” truly contradicted each other, an unperceived object might seem impossible. Since an unperceived object is only a mental impossibility, however, we can say that we are unable to conceive unperceived objects only because of our mind’s inability.

In conclusion, I agree for the most part with Berkeley’s argument. He rightly observes that we have nothing beyond our own perceptions on which to base our understanding of objects. He also notices some of the limitations of our mind in considering possible objects and perceptions. Although he does not prove that all objects are perceptions and that there are nothing but perceptions and perceivers in the world, he does leave us conscious of the perceivedness of the characteristics we observe in objects. We cannot imagine external objects, if they do exist. All the perceptible qualities of those objects (that is, all the qualities we can conceive of) are mind-dependent. This observation is valuable as we try (and fail) to imagine the unperceived world of objects in themselves.