

BERKELEY'S COMMON SENSE APPROACH TO LOCKE'S THEORY OF INFERENTIAL KNOWLEDGE*

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Berkeley's immaterial hypothesis has spawned a broad spectrum of diverging interpretations, ranging from the notion that the theory embodies an explicit denial of corporeality, as in the case of Dr. Johnson, to one that may be aligned more closely with modern realism than with modern idealism, as in the case of the revered Professor Luce (Luce, 1945 28). While a thorough examination of these varying interpretations is beyond the scope of the current project, my focus shall be upon one central claim that Berkeley's immaterial hypothesis embodies: to provide a defence of a common sense viewpoint. At first glance such a claim may seem highly problematic, as its author is also the proponent of a philosophical system that is renowned for its denial of matter. However, I shall endeavour to show that it is in his polemic against Locke that the nature of this common-sense approach most clearly manifests itself, and I shall demonstrate that Berkeley's claim to common sense can be legitimated when it is understood as a claim against the type of philosophical abstractionism inherent in the Lockean system. Let us begin by considering what Berkeley means by common sense.

Berkeley's first mention of common sense is contained in the introduction to the *Principles*, where he states that

...we see the illiterate bulk of mankind that walk the high-road of plain, common sense, and are governed by the dictates of nature, for the most part easy and undisturbed. To them nothing that's familiar appears unaccountable or difficult to comprehend. They complain not of any want of evidence in their senses, and are out of all danger of becoming sceptics. But no sooner do we depart from sense and instinct to follow the light of a superior principle, to reason, meditate, and reflect on the nature of things, but a thousand scruples spring up in our minds, concerning those things which before we seemed fully to comprehend (Berkeley, 2006 xxi).

* I would like to thank my reviewer, Mr Keota Fields, for his insightful and challenging critique of my work, on whose suggestion, I have made several changes to my original paper, which I hope serve to clarify and defend my central thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Stephen Thornton, who has offered many valuable criticisms and suggestions; if my views on Berkeley's immaterial hypothesis at times echo his, it is because I can find nothing in his reading of Berkeley to controvert.

Berkeley's so called vulgar man becomes the exemplar of his common sense viewpoint. He is the anti-skeptic, who accepts that his direct sensory awareness provides him with a picture of the external world that is accurate, justified and complete. He is the archetypal opposite of the philosopher, who, having been blinded by the 'light of a superior principle', has constructed a philosophical system that affronts very basic common sense beliefs about the world. Berkeley here has Locke clearly in mind, and maintains that his ontological system is the result of the philosopher's tendency to think abstractly, much to the detriment of the knowledge direct perception affords. By returning men to common sense, Berkeley is systematically exposing those aspects of Locke's system which have been corrupted by abstractionism.

I shall now outline Locke's representational theory of perception with a view to illuminating the so called 'uncouth paradoxes' (Berkeley, 2006 xxi) that Berkeley was concerned to eradicate. Locke had accepted Descartes' axiom that rather than being conscious of individual physical objects the mind is in fact conscious of mental impressions or representations caused by these objects, which he terms *Ideas*. His theory, accordingly, is that it is the action of objects upon our sensory organs that give rise to our awareness of *Ideas*, which are specifically caused by the action of the qualities of physical objects upon our sensory organs, saying that "external objects furnish the mind with ideas of sensible qualities, which are all those different perceptions they produce in us" (Locke, 1959 124). For Locke the relationship between the physical object and the *Idea* is one of cause and effect; the mind on Locke's analysis is comparable to a blank slate acting effectively as 'a mirror' for the objects of the external world, onto which *Ideas* are 'imprinted'. As such, the "mind can no more blot them out and make new ones itself, than a mirror can refuse, alter or obliterate the images or ideas which the objects set before it do produce" (Locke, 1959 143). The power to produce an *Idea* is what he calls a quality, of which there are two types: primary and secondary. The primary qualities are those qualities which inhere in the physical object and are "utterly inseparable from the Body" (Locke, 1959 169), these include solidity, extension and figure. The secondary qualities are those qualities which reside in the mind of the subject, they are a function of the mechanisms of perception, and include colour, taste and smell. While the primary qualities inhere in the physical bodies themselves and as such are considered to exist objectively, the secondary qualities of Locke's system are afforded only subjective significance. He says that "the Ideas of primary qualities of bodies are resemblances of them, and their patterns do really exist in the bodies themselves; but the Ideas produced in us by these secondary qualities, have no resemblance of them at all" (Locke, 1959 173). Locke reasoned that since we

observe an object and perceive its primary qualities there must be some underlying substance in which these qualities inhere. On his analysis it is inconceivable that primary qualities should exist *sine re substante*, thus he postulated the existence of a material substratum as the support of the primary qualities of his system. "Not imaging how these simple ideas can subsist by themselves, we accustom ourselves to suppose some substratum wherein they do subsist and from which they do result, which therefore we call substance" (Locke, 1959 390). Locke's account of primary qualities, together with his account of material substance, categorizes him as a materialist. By attributing objective status to these he establishes that the objective world is composed of physical objects which exist independently of the subject's mental representations of them. Our knowledge of the world of objects is made possible by the fact that the primary qualities of objects cause in us an *Idea* which corresponds to its object, or represents it in the form of a mental replica. Locke's theory, therefore, may correctly be described as being a representational theory of perception. As we shall see, Berkeley was to react strongly against representationalism, and would make the critique of materialism the basis of his own system.

Locke held that the *Idea* and its object are distinct entities, the former being representative of the latter in much the same way that a carbon copy is related to the original. In terms of Locke's representational theory of perception, the *Ideas* of which we are conscious are caused by and are therefore representative of physical objects. In *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* Berkeley outlines his opposition to Locke's representational theory on the basis that such a theory led ultimately to scepticism regarding physical objects and as such contradicted common sense. It was Berkeley's contention that Locke had imposed a detrimental dichotomy between the perceptible world of ideas and the imperceptible world of objects; as Warnock comments, it appeared to Berkeley that "Locke's picture of the world embodied an absurd and quite needless duplication" (Warnock, 1953 101). It was the indirect and inferential nature of Locke's model that posed the most significant problem for Berkeley, since anyone adhering to such model of perception has to concede that they have access to the mental copy only. From this copy they may infer the existence of the physical object, but never have direct epistemological access to it. The type of difficulty that is associated with a representative model of perception is outlined by Russell as follows:

If such objects are to be verified, it must be solely through their relation to sense-data: they must have some kind of correlation with sense-data, and must be verifiable through their correlation alone... But in our case, only one term of the correlation, namely the sensible term, is ever found: the other term

seems essentially incapable of being found (Russell, 1917 108).

Since on Locke's own analysis the object is itself epistemologically inaccessible Berkeley concludes that such a viewpoint inevitably lead to skepticism and offered its subscriber nothing more than inferential knowledge of physical objects. Berkeley goes on to effectively undercut Locke's claim to materialism by demolishing the two components of his ontology on which it rests: primary qualities and material substance.

Firstly, the ontological distinction between the primary and secondary qualities of Locke's system was in Berkeley's view untenable, and is an example of how the philosopher having become enchanted by abstract thinking is lead to formulate an inaccurate account of perceptual experience. Locke states that while the primary qualities of his system are "modifications of matter" and the secondary qualities are "ideas or perceptions in the mind" (Locke, 1959 168), Berkeley demonstrates that Locke has no basis for this distinction, which he believes is the result of the philosopher's abstraction and nothing more. Berkeley's method of attack is to propose that we examine our direct sensory awareness and determine if in fact we can find any evidence to accord with such a distinction.

In short, let anyone consider those arguments which are thought manifestly to prove that colours and tastes exist only in the mind, and he shall find they may with equal force be brought to prove the same thing of extension, figure and motion (Berkeley, 2006 7).

Berkeley points to the fact that on Locke's own analysis primary qualities are that which inhere in the physical object, they are that which gives rise to our *Ideas* and from these *Ideas* we may infer their existence, but they are never themselves known directly. However, as Berkeley quite correctly points out this simply is not the case, for if we examine the contents of our perceptual awareness we find that we have *Ideas* of extension, solidity and figure just as we have *Ideas* of colour, taste and smell, and that there is no grounds for any distinction whereby one set of qualities are considered subjective and mind dependent and the other set are considered objective and mind-independent. Furthermore, Berkeley maintains that there can be no such thing as any quality or *Idea* that exists independently of the mind. He says that when in truth and strictness we try to imagine "objects really existing without the mind or having subsistence distinct from being perceived" (Berkeley, 2006 26), this simply cannot be done, and that it is an absurdity to contend as Locke had done that we can have knowledge claims pertaining to a realm that is epistemologically sealed off from the subject of experience. Berkeley regards

the notion of mind-independent objects as 'a manifest repugnancy' (Berkeley, 2006 11) and formulates his immaterialist hypothesis with a firm commitment to establishing the mind-dependent character of perceptual objects. Berkeley determines that even the prospect of imagining an object as existing unperceived involves a contradiction, a point which in the *Dialogues Hylas* is made to articulate:

I was thinking of a tree in a solitary place, where no one was present to see it, methought that was to conceive a tree as existing unperceived or unthought of, not considering that I myself conceived it all the while. But now I plainly see, that all I can do is to frame ideas in my own mind. I may indeed conceive in my own thoughts the idea of a tree, or a house, or a mountain, but this is all. And this is far from proving, that I can conceive them existing out of the minds of all spirits (Berkeley, 1975 158).

As Dancy points out, Berkeley in this passage provides more than a reference to realism; he offers a diagnosis of the realist mistake (Dancy, 1987 20). He argues that, while the realist assumption that mind-independent objects can exist is a prevailing viewpoint, this assumption clearly cannot be maintained once we have considered the fact that all knowledge is necessarily and inextricably conditioned by the observer.

Berkeley's second point of attack on Locke's materialism is the doctrine of material substance. He says that

If we thoroughly examine this tenet, it will, perhaps be found at bottom to depend on the doctrine of abstract ideas. For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived (Berkeley, 2006 3)

For Locke, as we have seen, the qualities represented by the *Ideas* that we perceive must inhere in something substantial, therefore he reasoned that there must be a material substance underlying them. On Berkeley's analysis the postulation of material substance as the support of the qualities of Locke's system involves a contradiction on two significant grounds.

Firstly, as Berkeley correctly asserts, our knowledge claims are applicable only within the sphere of perceptual awareness, the realm to which we as subjects of experience have epistemological access. Now, on Locke's analysis material substance was an entity whose existence is *inferred* from the fact that qualities by definition must be qualities of something. Yet he admits that we may never access the material substance itself, as such. Berkeley

justifiably concludes that we can have no legitimate grounds for inferring its existence.

Secondly, it was clear to Berkeley that Locke had no basis for his assertion that the substance in which his qualities inhered was in fact a *material* substance. When Locke himself endeavoured to define material substance the only definition at which he could arrive was that it was “a something, I know not what” (Locke, 1959 392). Berkeley was quite right in pointing out that Locke did not have grounds for basing his theory on the existence of such a material substance. His jump from positing that his qualities inhered in something to the assumption that this something was a *material* substance is completely without foundation. Since Locke could not define it he had no grounds for asserting that it was material or otherwise, for, as Wittgenstein was subsequently to point out, albeit in a different context, “a nothing would serve just as well as a something, about which nothing can be said” (Wittgenstein, 1953 87).

Locke’s material substance is, therefore, according to Berkeley merely an abstract idea, and as such is totally unfounded. In making his system dependent upon an entity that can never be experienced, he allows a terrible inconsistency within his epistemological system. On Berkeley’s analysis Locke’s system was opposed to a common-sense viewpoint as it affronted our general beliefs about the world, i.e. that we have direct and immediate access to physical objects. Locke had become enchanted with the framing of general notions or abstract ideas, to the detriment of the particulars that gave rise to them in the first instance as such his system did not offer an accurate account of the nature of our perceptual experience. Berkeley’s immaterial hypothesis is built upon the requirement of providing a philosophical account that embodies an unequivocal commitment to our direct sensory awareness. As such he maintains that his philosophical system will not become corrupted by the type of abstractionism that had wreaked havoc in Locke’s system. He outlines the essence of the common sense nature of his immaterial hypothesis:

My endeavours tend only to unite and place in a clearer light that truth, which was before shared between the vulgar and the philosophers: the former being of opinion that those things they immediately perceive are the real things; and the latter, the things immediately perceived are ideas which exist only in the mind. Which two notions put together do in effect constitute the substance of what I advance (Berkeley, 1975 207).

Berkeley, championing the case of common sense, is determined to offer an account of perceptual experience that would not lead to scepticism and which would offer an account of perceptual knowledge that is both direct and non-

inferential. Where Locke had failed in this regard Berkeley would succeed by becoming completely consistent in his empiricism. As opposed to Locke's theory, Berkeley's subjective idealism promised a direct relationship between the mind and the physical world. Berkeley arrived at his epistemological theory along the same path as Locke, by accepting the Cartesian axiom that what is perceived immediately in the act of perception is an *Idea* in the mind of the perceiver, and by determining that experience is the foundation of all our claims to knowledge. Berkeley, wishing to overcome the absurdities of materialism, had to offer an alternative account of perception that was not reliant on the existence of a material substance.

It should be noted that there is a sense in which Berkeley can be considered to be a *reluctant* immaterialist, insofar as he does not simply set out to validate the authenticity of his immaterial hypothesis, rather it is the invariable result of his analysis of the concept of material substance as postulated by Locke. Since such an entity was unknowable and undefinable, in the terms of Locke's own system, it constituted an absurdity. By dispensing with Locke's material substance and by assimilating primary and secondary qualities with *Ideas* Berkeley then considers what is left: *Ideas* and the minds in which they occur, this then becomes the basis of his immaterial hypothesis.

Now given that Berkeley concludes that only minds and *Ideas* exist, how then are we to understand his claim to be a champion of common sense? For as Tipton quite reasonably points out,

...the mob, then and now, would probably think itself better represented by Dr. Johnson, who expressed his conviction about the corporeality of a stone by kicking it to show that it had a real & independent existence, exclaiming as he did so, "I refute it thus" (Tipton, 1974 15).

The important point to note is that when Berkeley says that all objects are mind-dependent this does not necessarily entail a skeptical conclusion, as he is not saying that the sensible world becomes an illusory entity, vanishing every time it is not perceived by a finite observer. Berkeley's immaterial hypothesis does not negate the notion of corporeality, but challenges and subsequently refutes the notion that this corporeality is itself predicated on an inexperientable substance, as Locke maintains.

Berkeley's philosophy has often been misinterpreted as denying corporeality when in fact what it actually denies is the Lockean notion of material substance, this point has been repeatedly overlooked and as such few theories in the history of philosophy have been more misunderstood. Furthermore, it is my contention that Berkeley's immaterial hypothesis offers no threat to corporeality on an experiential level, he merely wishes to point

out that when we think about our perceptual experience we have no grounds for asserting the existence of anything that does not present itself directly as part of that experience. As he apprehended no inherent duality in his viewpoint that gave any credence to the distinction between mental *Ideas* and physical objects, his ontology would reflect the singularity of his perceptual experience. As such we may understand the essence of Berkeley's common sense approach to be a sustained attempt to offer a metaphysical analysis of what it means to say that a physical object exists

When Berkeley says that ideas are mind-dependent, he does not mean that the existence of the sensible world is in any way being doubted, but that it must be understood in the terms in which it is presented to us; as a collection of sense-data present in the consciousness of a perceiving mind. In terms of which the positing of an unperceivable substratum is clearly unfounded. Berkeley's immaterial hypothesis offers no threat to the corporeality of the physical world, as it is Locke's material substance that he denies and not the existence of physical objects. As Luce comments, the material substance which Berkeley denied is not sensible body or sensible parts of body is not an actual or possible object of sense, is nothing that we see or touch...but is a "something we know not what" a guess-substance (Luce, 1945 24). In Berkeley's view, the only accurate method of accounting for the world of perceptual experience is one in which the mind-dependent character of this world is emphasised. He is deeply anxious not to convey a viewpoint that suggests that he is denying the existence of physical objects and he accordingly devotes the greatest effort to the attempt to show that he is not a skeptic, and that his only concern is to set down the natural views of any man who has not been confused or corrupted by philosophy. He does not seek to change the status of the objective world, maintaining that "the horse is in the stable, the books are in the study as before" (Berkeley, 1975 290) According to Berkeley's maxim, *esse est percipi*, there are no grounds for inferring the existence of any entity that is imperceptible to the subject. Thus he maintained that objects were not as Locke had imagined, composites of sensible qualities supported by an underlying substratum, but were in fact reducible to the simple *Ideas* acquired in perception. It is important to note that Berkeley completely redefines the term *Idea* which in terms of his theory becomes synonymous with the physical object that is presented to the senses. As Professor Martha Bolton comments, "Berkeley radically revises the idea tradition by stripping ideas of essential intentionality. For Berkeley, ideas (in the first instance) are not "of" real things or qualities, but rather they are real things or qualities" (Bolton, 2003). Where for Locke the term *Idea* signifies a representation or copy of a physical object, for Berkeley the term *Idea* signifies a presentation which is direct and immediate. While Locke's theory of

perception is representational, Berkeley's by contrast is unequivocally a-representational, in terms of which our sensory perceptions are understood to provide us with direct and non-inferential knowledge of physical objects. Essentially, by championing common sense, Berkeley is taking the opposing view from that of the philosopher who has been led away from the reality of his perceptual experience. His task is to interpret what is actually presented to the senses; just as the vulgar man is not led to conclude that his sensory perceptions provide him with a mere copy or representation of a more fundamental underlying reality, neither should the philosopher, and it is to this that he refers when he says that he is "eternally banishing metaphysics ... and recalling men to common sense" (Berkeley, 1975 324).

There is however one major point of criticism that can be brought to bear against Berkeley's immaterial hypothesis that must be addressed; his supposition of the divine mind as the sustainer of his metaphysical world. Berkeley's central maxim, *esse est percipi*, dictates that *Ideas* always require a percipient, stating that "neither the particular bodies perceived by sense, nor anything like them, exists without the mind" (Berkeley, 2006 22). This begs the question as to whether the objects of Berkeley's system do not just simply fall out of existence when they were not in the process of being actively perceived. Anticipating this difficulty Berkeley states that, "wherever bodies are said to have no existence without the mind, I would not be understood to mean this or that particular mind, but all minds whatsoever" (Berkeley, 2006 23). In order to prevent the threat of solipsism from undermining his entire enterprise Berkeley introduces the notion of the infinite mind as the sustainer of his perceptual world. Given that God is 'always about in the quad', as it were, the continued existence of the world is guaranteed. As we have seen, Berkeley harshly reprimands Locke for his doctrine of material substance on the basis that it is an entity whose existence cannot be epistemologically apprehended, however having done so Berkeley makes his own system dependent upon the participation of an entity that he admits he can have no idea of (Berkeley, 1975 183). It can be contended, then, that while Locke makes his system dependent upon the existence of an imperceptible *material* substratum, Berkeley with equal fortitude, makes his system dependent upon the existence of an imperceptible *immaterial* substratum. As such, it is highly dubious that Berkeley can be considered to be any more consistent in his empiricism than his predecessor on the grounds that he himself becomes guilty of precisely the same type of paradoxical inference with which he had charged Locke.

However I would contend that this does not serve to completely undermine his claim to have presented a common sense viewpoint, as his common sense claim depends upon the nature of his perceptual theory, which is far more consistent with a common sense viewpoint than Locke's. While

Locke's account of perceptual representationalism controverts the basic general belief that what we have direct and immediate access to are the physical objects of the world, Berkeley's a-representational theory offers an account of perceptual awareness whereby we have direct and non-inferential knowledge of physical objects and is in accordance with a common sense viewpoint. Furthermore, when considered on an experiential level Berkeley's account of the nature of our perceptual experience becomes very difficult to refute, a point which Russell concedes saying that "I do not see how to refute it, though temperamentally I find it repulsive" (Russell, 1967 433). While there is a general difficulty associated with such an overt form of idealism and an intellectual repugnance stemming from our reluctance to accept an account that the world as we know it exists as a mind-dependent entity, this should not prohibit us from giving Berkeley's immaterial hypothesis serious consideration. Berkeley offers a challenge to the abstractionist and having exposed a fundamental flaw of philosophical analysis he goes on to demolish the Lockean dichotomy between mental *Ideas* and physical objects, and subsequently refutes the representationalist model which denies the common sense viewpoint. Berkeley becomes the defender of the vulgar man in offering an account of perceptual experience that agrees with the common sense belief that that which we apprehend directly and immediately is the physical object. As such Berkeley's theory of perception can be seen to be far more consistent with a common sense viewpoint than Locke's.

Another point that lends support to Berkeley's common-sense claim is his requirement that the philosopher must remain true to the nature of his perceptual experience. The central point that he emphasises throughout his polemic against abstractionism is the notion that the philosopher should reassess his *modus operandi*, and just as the common man has no cause to query the fact that he exists in a world surrounded by real physical objects, neither should the philosopher. Berkeley's mission to return men to common sense, then, is predicated on his insistence that philosophy must become the handmaiden of sensory experience, and his message is that in our quest for knowledge, we cannot let our powers of abstraction lead us away from the immediacy and reality of our experience. Just as the man in the street accepts the primacy and indubitable nature of his experience so too should the philosopher. As such, one's sensory experience becomes the paradigm of all philosophical investigation, whereby there is a fundamental and unequivocal acceptance of one's common sense perceptual experience as the criterion of all certainty.

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