The Existence of Material Substance

A Response to George Berkeley’s *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*
It certainly seems that the majority of people believe in the existence of matter. George Berkeley, however, contends that the more sensible view is that matter does not exist, and that the universe consists solely of minds and ideas. In his *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley pits his speaker, Philonous, against Hylas with the stipulation that whoever avoids skepticism wins. Defining skepticism as a view in opposition to the one that the common man believes, Berkeley posits that accepting the existence of matter leads to this very skepticism. As I have already stated, the vast majority of people accept the existence of matter, and I believe that they are justified in this view.

It is important to define the terms that Berkeley employs in his *Dialogue* before we begin our discussion on the validity of his claims. By ideas, Berkeley simply means “things…perceive[d]” (Berkeley 16). So, ideas are perceptions, whether visual, auditory, tactile, etc. The crux of the conversation, matter, is also defined in a particular way in the discussion: it is something mind independent with primary, but no secondary qualities. These qualities are defined by Locke as follows: primary qualities are “ones that a body doesn’t lose…however finely it is divided” and are those that resemble the experiences that they cause while secondary qualities are those “that are really nothing in the objects themselves” (Locke 7). Lastly, physical objects are composed of a complex collection of perceptions.

Through the words of Philonous, Berkeley postulates that the theory that physical objects are made of matter rather than ideas leads to skepticism. First attacking naïve representationalism, Berkeley focuses on pain which arises from a great degree of heat. The naïve view is that all perceptions (pain) represent the inherent properties of the matter that we perceive. Berkeley easily debunks this, though, as an intense degree of heat results in pain. Yet, matter was termed an “unperceiving thing,” and an unperceiving thing is not capable of pain
So, the effect of touching a very hot object, pain, cannot resemble the cause of that pain, the presupposed hot “matter.” Additionally, Berkeley appeals to Locke’s own variance argument. When you take one hand out of a hot bath and one hand out of an ice bath, and then put the former into a warm bath, it feels cold, yet when you put the latter into the warm bath it feels hot (6). The water cannot be both cold and hot, yet these are our perceptions, so it must be that the perceptions do not resemble the “matter” itself. Though this successfully defeats naïve representationalism, it doesn’t argue against matter as we have defined it above, as heat would be considered a secondary property. To prove that the belief in primary qualities also leads to skepticism, Berkeley merely extrapolates the variance argument. Take the primary quality size. When a human being regards a marble, it appears quite small. Yet, to a mite crawling on the outer surface of the marble, it is enormous. Also, bringing the marble very close to the eye of a human will lead to the perception that the marble is quite large. The marble can’t be both large and small, and therefore the size of the marble is not an inherent quality of the “matter” making it up (12). By believing that the marble is made up of matter, we must conclude that the matter occupies both a large volume and a small volume depending on one’s relation to it, which is contrary to popular belief, or a skeptical viewpoint. Berkeley also strikes the issue at its core by stating that Lockean resemblance is an absurd concept, as only ideas can resemble ideas, but matter and ideas are incomparable.

The first objection that presents itself, and is indeed anticipated by Berkeley, is that if there would be no mind perceiving a physical object, then it would go out of existence. This is because in Berkeley’s theory, physical objects are actually created by perceptions of them. Berkeley answers this objection with an omniscient God. God always perceives every object in the Universe, therefore even when no living creature on the Earth perceives a certain object, it
does not necessarily go out of existence, since it may still be perceived by God (15). Thus, Berkeley concludes the existence of God after his arguments for the non-existence of matter by saying that God, or an omniscient being, is necessary to avoid the skeptical view that objects go out of existence when nobody perceives them (16). A strong objection to Berkeley’s theory may be formed if one were able to disprove the existence of God. Another problem seems to be implied, though, when we use the language that physical objects are “created” by perceptions. Is it enough for one hallucinatory man to perceive a flying pig in order for that physical object to actually be considered real and a part of our world? Even worse for Berkeley, though, is the possibility of a collective hallucination. Let us suppose that a whole town or even a whole nation collectively perceives a flying pig over their land, does it become a real physical entity then?

Berkeley might have been quite shocked by the first argument as a Bishop, and since the existence of God was well accepted at that time. He might argue that the worldview is much simpler with the theory that he proposed. For instance, the Newtonian laws of gravitation govern how material objects react with each other at a distance, yet as to why these laws work, Newton would have to turn to God, who put them in place. In Berkeley’s world, the same laws still apply for predictive empirical power, yet Berkeley has God’s perception creating the physical objects, and the laws by which they react. The idealist theory removes the intermediary, matter. The second argument seems to be harder to defend against. Suppose we had a community of people who are stricken with an odd communicable neurological disorder. For many years, these people collectively perceive disasters such as burning trees, tornadoes ripping their buildings apart, and wild animals attacking their town. However, a cure for this disorder is eventually produced, and these people find out that their community actually hasn’t been harmed at all. This observation would seem at odds with the continuity of their own experiences that they would expect.
Berkeley would probably simply respond that these people were unwell, and their perceptions were not real physical objects, because the rest of the world outside of the community would not perceive the atrocities that their diseased minds engendered. But, if it is possible for a community to be fooled into thinking hallucinations were real, could not all conscious thinking things on Earth similarly be fooled? Berkeley might respond that God could never be fooled, and therefore the real physical objects would still remain in God’s perception, and the deluded perceptions of the people are merely the old problem of evil newly applied.

The question of whether our perceptions reflect the true nature of the material objects that we see is certainly important. If our perceptions of an object correlate to the nature of the object, then we can use our perceptions to learn about the world that we live in. I think that the matter theorists have the stronger case in the debate that Berkeley focuses his *Three Dialogues* on. For idealists, God is necessary to create the physical objects that we perceive by perceiving them Himself, which seems to provide God with much more power over our lives than we might like. For a matter theorist, although God may have created matter and the laws that matter obeys, He may have left the world to proceed after his divine creation, which seems to allow for much more autonomy for humans. I have agreed with Berkeley that we can’t depend on our perceptions to reflect the cause of them, which satisfies his goal of disproving matter, as he defines it, but the collective hallucination problem strikes Berkeley’s theory at the same point. In fact, this problem is worse for Berkeley, since a collective hallucination would presumably produce a physical object by his theory, a skeptical viewpoint. Matter theorists, of course, are also susceptible to hallucinations, yet a matter theorist believes that a physical object’s existence does not depend on their perceptions: if the matter that would produce their deluded perceptions is not there, then the physical object does not exist. This does not satisfy the question of how we can learn about
the world around us, but I think it defeats Berkeley’s theory that the universe consists only of minds and ideas. I maintain that there are external corporeal objects, which would continue to exist should every conscious mind in the universe suddenly shut off.
Bibliography

Berkeley, G. 1713. Selections from: Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous. 4-16.