

# A Response to Armstrong on Berkeley

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David M. Armstrong, in his “Editor’s Introduction” to *Berkeley’s Philosophical Writings* (1965), criticized George Berkeley on a number of points regarding subjective idealism. A defender of idealism myself, I respond to Armstrong’s objections, and outline what I think is a workable form of Berkeley’s view.

Armstrong characterizes Berkeley’s “first argument” thusly:

- (i) Sensible qualities of objects are nothing but “ideas” in the mind
  - (ii) Physical objects are nothing more than their sensible qualities.
- So, therefore:
- (iii) Physical objects are nothing but “ideas” in the mind.<sup>1</sup>

Armstrong complains that Berkeley fails to distinguish between *sensible qualities* and *sense impressions*, presumably under the assumption that while sense impressions may be ideas in the mind, sensible qualities are not. He gives the example of catching sight of a blue book. Is the blueness of the book just an idea in the mind? Armstrong reminds us that book can “be” blue without actually having the appearance of blueness. The blueness itself may be a sensible quality, but the associated idea in the mind is merely the appearance of blueness, which is a sense impression and not a sensible quality. That Berkeley equivocates between these two concepts, Armstrong claims, means that Berkeley’s first premise is false.

Now, Armstrong’s criticism seems too sharp, here, since the existence of a bad argument for some premise does not mean the premise is false. More importantly, however, I do not believe Berkeley is guilty of the equivocation of which Armstrong accuses him. For consider what it means to say that a book *is* blue, as opposed to saying that it merely appears blue: In the former, we are suggesting that in the most familiar contexts, the book has the appearance of blue; in the latter, we reference only one particular context, and say that the book appears blue therein. So, for example, if we say that a book *is* blue, we typically mean that in normal light (e.g. daylight, moderately bright incandescent light, etc.) and under normal circumstances (e.g. excluding unusual optical handicaps on the part of the observer), a person looking on the book will have a particular kind of experience, namely the experience of seeing blue. What else

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<sup>1</sup>Armstrong, David M., “Editor’s Introduction,” from *Berkeley’s Philosophical Writings* (1965, 1980), pp7-8. ISBN 0-02-064170-2.

could we mean? The only way I can find to avoid that interpretation is to appeal to science. So, Armstrong might want to say that blueness is characterized by certain wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation. The eighteenth-century Bishop Berkeley could not have responded to such a point, but from our own day we can notice that even a scientific interpretation of “blueness” connects ultimately to experience. After all, empirical hypotheses are confirmed through *observation*, which of course depends on experience.

Armstrong goes on to claim that Berkeley has a sort of burden of proof which remains unmet. According to Armstrong, Berkeley has promised to “establish” the first premise, and so to deliver anything short of that “invalidates the whole line of argument.”<sup>2</sup> However, Berkeley does not promise so much to prove the first premise as he invites the reader to enlighten himself of its truth—an appeal which serves as a common theme throughout *The Principles*. From the first edition:

To make this appear with all the light and evidence of an Axiom, it seems sufficient if I can but awaken the reflexion of the reader, that he may take an impartial view of his own meaning, and turn his thoughts upon the subject itself, free and disengaged from all embarras of words and prepossession in favour of received mistakes.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, Berkeley wants us to think carefully about our objects of reference. Just what is a material substance? He challenges us to defend to ourselves, when we point to such objects, that we imagine anything divorced from sense experience. Berkeley could not do so, and neither can I. If we discover that we never had a coherent idea of material substances in the first place, then we ought to feel the force of the idealist argument, even if we think we can remedy our error.

Berkeley’s first argument sets the stage for his second:

But, say you, surely there is nothing easier than for me to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them. I answer, you may so, there is no difficulty in it; but what is all this, I beseech you, more than framing in your mind certain ideas which you call books and trees, and at the same time omitting to frame the idea of anyone that may perceive them?<sup>4</sup>

According to Armstrong, Berkeley’s point in this passage centers on the fact that whatever objects might exist *unthought of*, we could never recognize them, since to do so would violate the very criterion of mind independence we wish to confirm. Yet though Armstrong believes this second argument to be “even

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<sup>2</sup>Armstrong, p9.

<sup>3</sup>Berkeley, George, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, sec. 6 (1st edition only), 1878, p197. <http://books.google.com/books?id=RzsHAQAIAAJ>

<sup>4</sup>Berkeley, sec. 23, p206.

less satisfactory” than the first,<sup>5</sup> he apparently accepts its main thrust as trivially true, objecting only to the way in which Berkeley delivers it. For example, he accuses Berkeley of poorly handling the distinctions between sense impressions, perception and thoughts. He also denies that, contrary to Berkeley’s assertion, the notion of referencing a mind-independent object is not precisely self-contradictory, but merely absurd, such as it would be to say aloud “nobody is speaking right now.” However, these criticisms seem not to upset Berkeley’s key insight that mind-independence only ever makes sense in the context of a conceptual scheme which is itself mind-dependent. In modern language, we may say that when we posit objects existing independent of a mind, we do so only through the framework of those experiences we can imagine, that is, what we might expect to encounter under some given set of circumstances. A book, to borrow Berkeley’s own example, we characterize by those book-experiences either we ourselves or some other agent, whether real or hypothetical, might conceivably have. We might *frame in the mind* a book existing unperceived by individual agents, but in so doing we by no means avoid making sense of that framework through a model of experience.

Consider what we can say about a book with no perceiver: Suppose we claim its cover is leather. In that case, we have suggested that, if only an agent would perceive it, then he should have experiences consistent with seeing, touching, smelling, etc., leathery stuff. Suppose we charge it to have three hundred ninety-five pages. Then the substance of our assertion consists in that, were a perceiver to encounter the book, he might have the experience of counting three hundred ninety-five pages, or the like. Indeed, whatever we say about an object we must interpret in terms of experience, even if our interpretation specifies that certain experiences are absent, or only possible in principle. This is the deeper point of Berkeley’s second argument.

The preceding may bear a close resemblance to the Phenomenalism Armstrong outlined later in his essay, in his discussion of object permanence: If physical objects are just elements in a conceptual scheme, he wonders, then how can we make sense of the idea that books, cups, trees and the like exist in their respective shelves, cupboards and parks, even when no minds are about to perceive them? Phenomenalists, according to Armstrong, answer that when we say that “the cup is in the cupboard,” at a time when nobody is in a position to perceive it, what we really mean is that *if* we were to go open the cupboard *then* we would perceive the cup; and indeed everything we say about the cup is reducible to a collection of that and similar counterfactual statements. So unperceived objects exist only in the sense that there is an “unfulfilled possibility” of perception. Armstrong criticizes this view by noting that it requires two different notions of existence, one for perceived objects and another for unperceived objects.<sup>6</sup> On Phenomenalism, unperceived objects are only said to *exist* because the Phenomenalists have manufactured their own meaning for the word in order to avoid the unwelcome conclusion that they do *not* exist! However,

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<sup>5</sup>Armstrong, p9.

<sup>6</sup>Armstrong, p23.

perceived objects exist in a more direct sense not shared by the existence of unperceived objects. Can we tolerate these two different concepts of existence? Armstrong observes, and I agree, that this would-be solution only linguistically disguises the nonexistence of unperceived objects, whereas in fact, for the Phenomenalist, only those objects which we perceive really exist in the fullest sense; therefore the problem of object permanence remains on this interpretation of Phenomenalism.

In contrast, Berkeleyan idealism parts from the Phenomenalist view by denying multiple notions of existence. Yet it is not that we dispense with the counterfactual account; instead, we suggest that something like it (but not identical to it) is the only notion of existence which can really be coherent. Perceived objects don't exist in a fuller sense than unperceived objects, not because unperceived objects have a more real existence than the Phenomenalists have allotted to them, but rather because no physical object is really "perceived" in the first place. Armstrong comes close to addressing this in his discussion of Berkeley's view of science, where he likens gravity, space, time and other scientific entities (of a sort) to "conceptual devices."<sup>7</sup> His charitable treatment of this account suggests he finds great promise in it, but he stops short of endorsing or developing it further. I myself would like to tie together both of these views—counterfactuals on one hand and conceptual devices on the other—under the umbrella of models of experience. Such models are composed of objects and relations between them, and we use them to predict subjective experience and thereby construct meaningful counterfactual statements. So, what does it mean on this view to say that the book is on the shelf? Indeed, the book is an object in our model of experience, which informs us of what we can expect given particular varying decisions on how to act—and this is so whether or not we actually carry out any of those actions. From this perspective I think we can best appreciate Berkeley's idealist philosophy.

After dispensing with Berkeley's second argument, Armstrong turns to the arguments against what he calls Representative theory, which he describes as distinguishing between *mediate* and *immediate* perception. This theory posits that while ideas are indeed the only objects of direct perception, there are such things as material objects, independent of minds, which are able to cause the perception of those ideas.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps too easily, Armstrong proceeds to admit that the only readily-available alternative to Representative theory is Berkeleyan idealism. Although I'm unwilling to insist that only Representative theory can ever compete with idealism, I certainly share Armstrong's difficulty in imagining any other account. As long as that remains to be the case, then if we agree with Berkeley's objections to Representative theory, or construct our own, we should have no place else to turn but idealism.

Is it the case, then, that Representative theory has been refuted? According to Armstrong, Berkeley succeeded in pointing out grave difficulties in Locke's position. For Locke had argued that there is something which we might call a

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<sup>7</sup>Armstrong, p33.

<sup>8</sup>Armstrong, p12.

*material substance* out of which physical objects are somehow formed. What is this substance, however, Locke denies he knows; instead, he suggests that “*substance*, without knowing what it is, is that which supports *accidents*,”<sup>9</sup> or, in more familiar parlance, that which supports primary qualities of physical objects. Yet what does Locke mean by this? Berkeley observes that we cannot take him literally when he uses terms such as “support,” for instance. Indeed, Locke speaks entirely too evasively for Berkeley, who retorts,

when I consider the two parts or branches which make the signification of the words *material substance*, I am convinced there is no distinct meaning annexed to them.<sup>10</sup>

Armstrong echoes Berkeley on this point, and remarks that philosophers largely agree with his criticisms of Locke. Nevertheless, Locke’s is not the only avenue available to Representative theorists. Armstrong suggests we develop instead an account of the material world which satisfies two key conditions: First, it cannot appeal to unknown substances, since to do so would repeat Locke’s mistake of emptying words of their meaningful content. For if a substance is unknown, then to what are we referring when we would mention it? Second, it must comprise more than just a plan for packaging qualities or properties, since otherwise we can never discuss pairs of identical physical objects, a task to which Armstrong apparently has some commitment. Aside from declaring these two conditions, however, he declines to pursue the matter further, excusing himself by noting that “it would take us too far” to do so in his brief essay.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to my considerable disappointment that Armstrong declined to at least outline a potentially workable case for mind-independent physical objects, his treatment of the issue draws my attention to a serious problem regarding our motivation for defending their existence. For it seems to me that the chief impediment to accepting Berkeley’s central thesis that every object is mind-independent takes the form of our powerful intuition that there are real physical objects which exist completely free from the aid of or dependence on minds. Armstrong, however, evidently acknowledges that even if our intuition agrees with the truth in that narrow regard, the natural defense of mind-independent objects remains fundamentally flawed. In other words, a great deal of what our intuition has to say about mind-independence is patently false, even if some of it happens to be true. So, if we persist in accepting the existence of mind-independent objects, we must not suggest that it is an obvious position, since much of what we might have presumed uncritically on the subject is demonstrably incorrect.

Armstrong goes on to address another of Berkeley’s arguments: Even if it were possible to somehow conceive of mind-independent objects, the only reason we could have, Berkeley tells us, for thinking that any of them exist would

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<sup>9</sup>Locke, John, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 2.13.19 (1801 edition, p149). <http://books.google.com/books?id=lcMIAAAAQAAJ>

<sup>10</sup>Berkeley, sec. 17, p203.

<sup>11</sup>Armstrong, p16.

be that they explained in some way our sense experience. However, given the failure of considered Representative theories, and the absence of competing theories, no such explanation is available. Therefore, until some non-idealist causal connection between ideas and physical entities is proposed and adopted, then the existence of mind-independent objects shall remain a superfluous hypothesis at best.<sup>12</sup>

Armstrong relies on two defenses against this charge: Firstly, he points out that if we assume for the sake of argument that Berkeley is correct that we have no reason to think mind-independent objects exist, then we can apply similar reasoning to show that the existence of other minds is likewise unexplanatory, and therefore in serious doubt. Since other minds clearly do exist (a fact to which Berkeley himself readily agrees), then Berkeley's reasoning must be flawed in some way.<sup>13</sup> However, I do not see how one might adapt Berkeley's argument to doubt the existence of other minds. For in order to do so, we must claim that there is no well-understood relationship between minds and ideas, which seems to me quite false. Armstrong might reply that we need only point out that we lack an available explanation for the interaction between a person's *own* ideas and *other* minds. However, even then we have the assurance of our own mind's existence, which is enough to make, at the very least, a weak inductive argument for the existence of other minds. Consider a brief overview of such an argument: We use a model of experience, and our own mind is represented by an element in the model, and so we infer inductively that similar elements in the model also have associated minds. Whether or not one wishes to accept that or some similar argument, or perhaps develop a stronger one, it should be sufficient to show that the analogy between minds and mind-independent objects breaks down fairly quickly. Neither should we dismiss too hastily the possibility that our intuition is simply mistaken about the existence of other minds—just as it was wrong about mind-independent objects. In any case, the analogy does not obviously function as a defeater for Berkeley's argument.

Armstrong next objects by assuring us that we really do have enough evidence to infer the existence of external, mind-independent objects. According to him, we could “argue that the existence of the physical world is an hypothesis that is indirectly confirmed by” sense experience.<sup>14</sup> He gives the example of molecules, which though we never directly observe them, we confirm their existence through scientific research. If Berkeley had lived to hear this objection, he might remind Armstrong that while molecules certainly do exist, they do so as objects in physics models, and are thusly *model-dependent*. Similarly, the existence of otherwise tangible entities such as tables and chairs are, at bottom, mind-dependent, since they appear as objects in our conceptual schemes. Beyond that, however, Armstrong takes for granted that we really do have a viable explanation for the existence of mind-independent objects, that is, an understanding of the alleged causal connection between such objects and our ideas. Before we can really consider such an objection, though, we must know what

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<sup>12</sup>Berkeley, sec. 19, p204.

<sup>13</sup>Armstrong, pp16-7.

<sup>14</sup>Armstrong, p17.

is the explanation being offered. Regrettably, as mentioned previously, Armstrong declines to outline whatever case he has planned, and this handicaps his argument as presented in his essay. So even assuming we can coherently talk about mind-independence in the way Armstrong wants—and I do not believe we can—without an explanatory context the existence of mind-independent objects, whatever they might be, appears to me extremely doubtful.

In the remainder of his essay, Armstrong discusses a number of topics somewhat distantly-related to idealism, among them Berkeley's attack on abstractions and his theory of vision, and which I shall not address here. In addition to those, Armstrong also levies a serious criticism on Berkeley's treatment of the nature of minds, and how they relate to ideas. Is the mind a separate entity from ideas? Berkeley seems at times to think that it is, but in doing so, risks falling into the same Lockean trap of positing an inscrutable "substance" in place of some meaningful explanation. At the same time, however, if the mind is just a "bundle" of ideas, then does the absurdity not follow that ideas can exist outside the mind? For my own part, I'd like to say that minds, as with physical objects, are just elements in our models, and that experiences, or *ideas*, are the only irreducible entities. However, this view requires some significant development, which I will leave for another occasion.

Finally, I should address the subject of causation: Berkeley holds to the view that "it is impossible for an idea to do anything, or, strictly speaking, to be the cause of anything."<sup>15</sup> He goes on to argue that the only entities with such causal powers are *spirits*, that is, agents capable of understanding, and especially which possess some kind of will, which acts for each spirit as a sort of causal engine.<sup>16</sup> Armstrong expresses skepticism towards these conclusions, insisting that Berkeley's reasoning is "not conclusive."<sup>17</sup> He suggests we look to the alternative picture of Humean causation, whereby we generalize on observed regularities, and refer to each as an explanation for some individual instance thereof. So, for instance, when we say that one billiard ball impacting another *causes* that ball to follow a particular path, we merely point out that what we specifically observe is what we should have expected given the behavioral regularities that billiard balls have previously exhibited. Armstrong suggests that this view encounters difficulties when we attempt to apply it to more "intimate" operations, namely the relationship between our will and our action, both bodily and mental. Hume ignored this problem, Armstrong tells us, but it puzzles me that Hume should have done anything else. Armstrong implies that Hume's proposed explanation for the operation of the will somehow falls short, but in what way does he find it deficient? If our ideas follow discernable regularities, then, as with physical systems, we may treat the regularities as a larger context in which to frame individual acts and observations. After all, on my view of idealism—very much simplified for the moment—all entities are either objects in models of experience, or else ideas which we may represent in said models; and we construct them based on observed regularities

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<sup>15</sup>Berkeley, sec. 25, p207.

<sup>16</sup>Berkeley, sec. 27, p208.

<sup>17</sup>Armstrong, p19.

of experience. Although it might be challenged on other grounds, I can't find any reason to suppose that the mere intimacy of the subjective experience we wish to model should threaten this view.

In sum, I have attempted to show that Armstrong's objections, as reviewed here, have serious problems, and I hope my responses have effectively communicated them. Although Berkeley may not have presented a flawless account of idealism, he has handed down to us some striking insights which deserve great attention, materialist opposition notwithstanding. We would do well to read him carefully, and take his points where we can.