

Topic 1

Berkeley's Solution to Scepticism in Natural Philosophy

Introduction

Berkeley dissolves the sceptical threat to natural philosophy by denying that perceptible qualities stand behind hidden real essences. As he argues in *Principles* §101, scepticism arises only when philosophers posit an inaccessible reality beyond what is perceived. By rejecting this assumption and rooting natural philosophy in the order of appearances, Berkeley removes the basis for sceptical doubt and reconceives the discipline as the study of appearances rather than hidden causes. His view aligns in outcome with Newton's focus on phenomena while opposing Leibniz's appeal to inner essences, although he also rejects Newton's willingness to admit imperceptible theoretical structures such as absolute space. I argue that Berkeley's strategy successfully saves natural philosophy from scepticism because the sceptical problem stems from a mistaken explanatory ideal rather than from perception. I begin by outlining the diagnosis of scepticism and Berkeley's conception of natural philosophy, then compare his view with Newton and Leibniz before turning to an evaluation of his success.

I. Abstract Ideas and Scepticism

Berkeley believes that scepticism arises from a mistaken way of explaining phenomena, namely, the attempt to locate their true causes in hidden natures beyond perception. Since experience offers only phenomena and never the principle behind them, the mind resorts to reasoning in order to supply what perception cannot provide. Attempts to explain phenomena hence usually rest on the assumption that every observable effect must have an underlying cause beyond what is given in sense. Confronted with what they take to be the limits of perception, philosophers

introduce abstract vocabularies such as real essence, substance, or internal qualities, since the reasoning they engage in requires names. These terms are not drawn from experience but are created to label the hypothetical items that philosophical explanation presupposes.

However, once such abstract ideas are treated as referring to actual entities behind appearances, scepticism emerges. As Berkeley notes in Principles §86, this error stems from “supposing a twofold existence of the objects of sense, the one intelligible or in the mind, the other real and without the mind.” If the real nature of things is placed beyond perception, then the sensible world is reduced to a superficial “outside and shew of things,” while the truth is placed in a realm inherently inaccessible to us. This is precisely the situation Berkeley describes in Principles §101: the sceptic triumphs by insisting that “the real essence, internal qualities, and constitution of every the meanest object, is hid from our view,” and that our senses amuse us only with appearances. And as §86 emphasizes, “for so long as men thought that real things subsisted without the mind,” they could not be certain “they had any real knowledge at all,” since ideas could not be compared with an unperceived reality.

Therefore, scepticism is the conclusion that human faculties are incapable of reaching the supposed real nature behind perception, and that no reasoning directed at these hidden natures can ever secure confirmation. The entire problem arises because philosophers assume a reality distinct from what is perceived.

II. Berkeley’s conception of natural philosophy

Since scepticism arises only when natural philosophers posit a reality that lies beyond what can be perceived, Berkeley argues that the only way to avoid scepticism is to restrict natural philosophy to what can be verified through perception itself. Since our senses are the sole

medium by which we access the world, anything that cannot be rendered in perceptible terms cannot be part of natural philosophy. On this view, natural philosophy must concern itself entirely with the order, regularity, and correlation among ideas, for these are the only elements of nature available to human understanding.

This becomes clearer once we consider what some philosophers believed they were studying. They took themselves to be investigating the hidden causes or “real essences” of things, as if behind every appearance there were an unperceived nature explaining it. But Berkeley insists this supposed thing itself is nothing more than the idea of an external object held in the human mind. As he writes in Principles §3, “the various sensations or ideas imprinted on the sense...cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them.” Since human beings can think only in ideas, it is impossible for us to conceive or investigate anything beyond perception. His discussion of motion in Principles §58 makes this point vivid: “For motion being only an idea, it follows that if it be not perceived, it exists not.” Although offered as an example about motion, Berkeley intends it to apply universally to all notions: if even motion cannot be conceived apart from perception, then no alleged “internal qualities” or hidden essences can exist independently of ideas.

This line of reasoning directly undermines materialism. Materialists claim that bodies possess real qualities existing outside and prior to perception, yet Berkeley argues that such qualities are unintelligible, for we can form no idea of an unperceived object’s essence at all. The materialist’s external substratum is therefore an empty hypothesis, an illusion arising from the false supposition that we can conceive a reality beyond the mind’s ideas. Since no idea can be formed of an unperceived material essence, the notion of matter existing beyond perception is incoherent.

By rejecting the unperceived notions, Berkeley restores natural philosophy to its proper domain: the study of how the world appears to us, the laws governing those appearances, and the regular order among ideas.

III. Comparison to Newton and Leibniz

Berkeley's conception of natural philosophy aligns him in outcome with Newton, for both confine explanation to the observable order of phenomena while acknowledging that the ultimate cause of motion is not accessible to empirical or natural-philosophical investigation. As Berkeley emphasizes in *De Motu* §17, Newton used terms such as "attraction" "not as a true and physical quality, but only as a mathematical hypothesis," indicating that Newton never claimed to discover the nature of motion. Newton treats such notions merely as descriptive tools because, as §32 notes, the true cause of motion is ultimately attributed to the will of God. Both thinkers thus regard ultimate causes as real but not as objects of natural philosophy, even though Newton allows a metaphysical ground beyond experience.

Berkeley departs from Newton where the latter introduces theoretical structures that cannot be perceived, such as the notion of absolute space. In *De Motu* §53, Berkeley argues that such imperceptible abstractions "designate merely nothing," criticizing Newton's attempt to frame phenomena through an unseen spatial substrate. For Berkeley, natural philosophy must remain tied to what is observable, not to rational constructs that exceed it.

Leibniz represents the opposite tendency. In *De Motu* §8, Berkeley reports that Leibniz explains motion through "active primitive force" understood as substantial form; and in §17 Berkeley states that Leibniz is represented as holding that such principles "are not to be found in things themselves in nature but must be made by abstraction." Section §19 further shows that, on

Berkeley's account, when a principle is not evident to the senses, Leibniz holds that it is "understood by reason." On Berkeley's reading, Leibniz thereby seeks to explain phenomena through rationally postulated inner causes, which are precisely the sort of hidden natures Berkeley believes generate scepticism. In Berkeley's view, natural philosophy should not search for inner essences but attend to how the world appears and to the regular order among ideas.

These contrasts with Newton and Leibniz bring out what is distinctive in Berkeley's conception of natural philosophy. With this in view, I now turn to assessing whether his approach succeeds in overcoming the sceptical threat.

IV. Personal Stance and Evaluation

I believe Berkeley succeeds in saving natural philosophy from scepticism because he reshapes the perspective from which inquiry proceeds. Scepticism is not always problematic, for it naturally arises when appearances seem insufficient to explain their origin and thereby invite metaphysical questioning. But scepticism becomes an obstacle when inquiry aims at certainty. When a question, such as the search for hidden inner causes, admits no possible confirmation, pursuing it indefinitely leads to intellectual paralysis. Berkeley's insight therefore helps philosophers recognise that such questions arise only from a mistaken way of thinking about explanation and can be set aside rather than pursued without end.

Moreover, by revealing the limits of human cognition and pointing out that humans cannot step outside our own perspective to reach answers that no experience could ever supply, he shows that we should instead focus on the ideas we perceive as reflections of the external world when searching for certain knowledge. Recognizing this limitation allows inquiry to continue rather than collapse into sceptical frustration. By redirecting natural philosophy to the observable order

of ideas, Berkeley offers a point of view from which we can acknowledge our limitations and thus remain certain of what we can know. In this sense, his proposal genuinely succeeds in dissolving the sceptical threat.

Conclusion

To conclude, Berkeley shows that scepticism arises only from positing hidden natures beyond perception, and that natural philosophy remains secure when confined to the observable order of ideas. His contrasts with Newton and Leibniz further clarify why explanation should remain within the limits of perception. For these reasons, I conclude that Berkeley's strategy successfully secures natural philosophy against scepticism.

Citation

Berkeley, George. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*.

Berkeley, George. *De Motu*.