

Mind, Matter and Spirit: How Berkeley Confronted the Philosophical Gaps of His Predecessors

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Abstract:

This paper examines how Irish philosopher George Berkeley attempted to resolve the philosophical issues left behind by René Descartes and John Locke, situating his immaterialism as a resolution to their theories, but also a simplification of them. René Descartes' dualism, which distinguished the mind and body as fundamentally different substances, lacked a true explanation of their interaction. This fueled unwanted skepticism of certainty around knowledge. John Locke, who rejected Cartesian innate ideas, grounded knowledge in experience drawn from the senses. However, he introduced the problematic idea of "material substance", which was an imperceptible "something" that ultimately undermined the gains his theories provided to the philosophical community. Berkeley rejected both Cartesian innate ideas and Lockean substance, arguing instead that objects are nothing more than groups of ideas perceived by one's mind and sustained permanently by divine perception. In collapsing the gap between object and perception, he removed the need for explanations of mind-body interaction as well as substances that were fundamentally unknowable. This offered a simplified framework grounded in immediate experience and religion. While his reliance on God relocates skepticism rather than fully dispelling it, his immaterialism proved a significantly more coherent foundation for understanding both knowledge and reality. By emphasizing perception as the basis of knowledge, he created a controversial ideology that offers deep insights into both the historical and contemporary struggle to establish certainty when faced with doubt.

The fear that people may be wrong about everything they believe they know has haunted philosophy since the discipline's birth. This anxiety has remained pervasive for centuries, taking on a new force in the 17th century with René Descartes. We often have this same worry in the 21st century, as AI generated videos on Tiktok continue challenging the public's view on what is genuinely real. Unfortunately, these videos have led to actual consequences for entirely innocent individuals, highlighting the importance of distinguishing reality. Descartes was disturbed by skepticism, as the simultaneous growth of science and decrease in religious belief made objective truth increasingly unclear in his time. In response, he created a clear system to achieve undeniable truths in which he doubted every potentially questionable belief of his. However, even though Cartesian dualism identified the mind-body problem, it remained unsolved, since the divide between mind and body was left ambiguous. In response, John Locke proposed a more experience-based ideology, declaring that knowledge results from perceptual experiences of the natural world. Unfortunately, Locke introduced a new problem: the strange and mysterious "material substance" that he claimed supported perception, a belief that was refutable and abstract. In the midst of these debates, Irish bishop George Berkeley added his perspective. Reacting with a bold simplicity, he rejected both material substance and innate ideas, believing that objects were nothing more than a group of ideas. In his view, knowledge is not secured through something physical, but through the constant perception of God. This essay will begin by exploring Descartes' dualism, focusing on his attempt to secure philosophical clarity through a specific mind-body separation, and the ensuing interaction issue. Then, it will shift to Locke's empiricism, zeroing in on his contradictory concept of material substance. To conclude, it views Berkeley's immaterialism through the frame of a strategic simplification that rejects both Lockean unknowable substance and Cartesian innate ideas. It should help not just clarify historical debates, but modern folk who are navigating the digital world in which truth can be manipulated and presented as a subjective concept. This was done to resolve key problems in his predecessors' ideologies by grounding existence solely in divinely-maintained perception. Reacting to issues within Cartesian dualism and Lockean ideas of substance, Berkeley tactically simplified the relationship between knowledge and perception by rejecting the existence of matter and innate ideas

entirely. By arguing that objects and perceptions were identical and proclaiming knowledge as stemming from enduring divine perception, he resolved issues of overcomplication in the nature of reality and basis of knowledge, which were symptoms of the unclear foundations of substance and perception inherent to both other philosophies.

René Descartes' response to the pervasive philosophical skepticism that characterized Europe during the seventeenth century was the creation of substance dualism, an ideology that posited the mind and body as two separate entities that have causal interactions with each other. In *Meditations on First Philosophy*, he famously begins by employing his method of doubt, removing belief from every assumption he had that could be called into question. He did this because he believed our everyday experience to be unreliable as our dreams can seem real and our eyes can deceive us. Because of this, he felt the need to clear away every possible false belief. In doing so, Descartes sought a foundation for knowledge that was truly certain. Interestingly, men like John Locke would later follow suit with the same goals but entirely opposite beliefs. Because Descartes believed true understanding could only come from *a priori* knowledge, meaning knowledge that precedes experience, he looked towards the mind for answers. Eventually, this methodology caused him to conclude that the mind's existence was the one certainty he could truly believe. He proclaimed "I think therefore I am" and emphasized the body as a spatial extension while the mind remained abstract. To him, the mind was an immaterial substance and the body was a physical one, substance being defined as an essence that solely requires God for its existence and exists outside of anything else. As he writes in Meditation VI, "I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing, and a clear and distinct idea of body, in so far as it is simply an extended, non-thinking thing" (Descartes Meditations 29). This clear distinction in which the body is a physical extension separated from the self and the mind is the immaterial core of one's essence is the foundation of Cartesian Dualism. However, due to the nature of Descartes' separative theory, he needed an explanation for the undeniable interactions between a non-physical mind and a physical body. Descartes explains this interaction in *The Passions of the Soul*, arguing that the soul exerts its influence through "a certain very small gland... situated in the middle of the brain," so that "the

slightest movements” of this gland are able to change the direction of bodily processes” (Descartes Passions 9). Essentially, Descartes posits that the brain’s pineal gland is the point of interaction between the mind and body. Specifically, he asserts that this small structure allowed the non-physical soul to dictate the flow of “animal spirits”, thereby controlling bodily forces, thereby allowing this interaction. However, this explanation was later met with widespread skepticism, as many philosophers viewed the interaction between an immaterial mind and a material body to be unclear. They saw the pineal gland hypothesis as a convenient but ultimately untrue one that sidestepped reason and failed to provide an actual justification for the interaction of two substances of different physical natures. Descartes even acknowledged this interaction as difficult to explain, proclaiming that “Nature also teaches me by these sensations of pain, hunger, thirst, etc., that I am not merely present in my body as a sailor is present in a ship, but that I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it” (Meditations VI). Even though he never truly justified this interaction, Cartesian Dualism served as a key springboard that permitted philosophers to continue to ponder mental philosophy within a clearer framework.

Decades after the peak of Descartes’ career, philosopher John Locke openly critiqued the Cartesian belief in ideas unrelated to experience, yet reshaped Descartes’ “substance” in a deeply polarizing manner. Locke sought to critique Descartes specifically because his mind-body dualism had become the dominant framework for philosophy of mind at the time. Because of Locke’s firm beliefs in knowledge stemming from experience, he viewed Descartes’ conclusion, which heavily relied on assumption, as unsatisfactory. In his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke compares the mind to a “dark, empty room”, proposing ideas as the light that enters it through small cracks, something he believed was gained only through experience. By characterizing the mind as "white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas" and emphasizing that all ideas originate "from experience," either through a type of sensation or reflection, he famously expands on this viewpoint (Locke, Essay, 104). This broke away from the Cartesian belief in knowledge being *a priori*. Furthermore, in book one of this essay, he not only argued that Descartes’ universal truths aren’t ingrained in the mind at birth, but gained through experience, but also pointed out that moral principles aren’t innate. To prove the second point, he

highlighted that different societies have preached opposite moral rules, which would be impossible if these rules were imprinted on the mind, undermining Cartesian ideals (Locke 9). Evidently, like Descartes, Locke sought clarity around knowledge, he just came to the opposite conclusion. He also introduced his idea of “material substance” as the backbone of the observable qualities of objects, contradicting Cartesian Dualism by avoiding grounding knowledge in the “innate ideas” Locke didn’t believe in. Evidently, both philosophers understood knowledge as fundamentally dependent on ideas formed in one’s mind, but disagreed on how those ideas were derived. Even so, its obscure nature baffled other philosophers of mind during the time, foreshadowing George Berkeley’s critiques. The idea complicated his legacy by highlighting that although his beliefs were consequential and significant, many of them rested upon presumptions he didn’t have the means to justify. More importantly, Locke’s insistence that ideas all originate experientially directed contradicted with the idea of material substance, which was defined as existing outside of perception. Evidently, this wasn’t just confusing, but a genuine gap in Lockean theory. Locke even acknowledged this gap himself, writing in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, “...if any one will examine himself concerning his notion of pure substance in general, he will find he has no other idea of it at all, but only a supposition of he knows not what support of such qualities” (Essay, 295). This exposes this concept as deeply ad hoc, having only been introduced to complete Locke’s explanation without even having to be able to be logically justified through his own framework. When paired with his own beliefs that experience was necessary to gain knowledge, his concept of a material that cannot be experienced was seen as ironically contradictory and illogical by later thinkers like Berkeley and Hume.

Overall, Descartes sought to answer skepticism by doubting what he gained from experience, posing knowledge as preceding it and separating the mind from the body substance wise. However, Locke rejected Cartesian logic, pointing out the weakness of his explanation regarding how the immaterial mind interacts with the material body and using examples like the subjectivity of values to prove that many forms of knowledge must be gleaned from experience. Unfortunately, Locke introduced the inherently imperceptible “material substance” as the “stuff” that underpins sensory qualities, whose confusing nature

undermined his own philosophy. Both men relied on the triangular relationship between the object one views, their mental image and their knowledge of it, which ultimately fed skepticism since the gap between the object and the mental image of this object remained unable to be bridged. Like Locke, Berkeley strongly opposed Descartes' concept of "innate ideas", because he believed that all knowledge came from sensory experience. In this belief, he collapsed the triangle, arguing that the object and mental image were one and the same. Berkeley saw the Cartesian notion of innate ideas as unprovable and antithetical to combating the skepticism he sought to address. Specifically, Berkeley believed that the mind acquires ideas only through perception and that there are no ideas that can exist in the mind prior to birth. However, like Descartes and Locke, all he desired was freedom from skepticism and clarity around both the mind and knowledge. In a Letter to Reverend Samuel Johnson, Berkeley noted "Descartes proceeds upon other principles. One square foot of snow is as white as a thousand yards; one single perception is as truly a perception as one hundred" (Berkeley, Correspondence, 172). Berkeley here openly criticizes Descartes, challenging his reliance on "other principles", meaning innate ideas. He argues that all perceptions are equally acceptable sources of knowledge, grounded in sensory experience, rather than a factor outside of it. Clearly, he regarded perception as the only possible origin of ideas while Descartes and Locke both relied on different foundations, innate ideas and material substance. Because they grounded knowledge in innate principles rather than true sensory experience, he also saw innate ideas as one source of the philosophical skepticism he wanted to fight. To Berkeley, this was deeply troubling, as the 18th century Europe he lived in had begun to become riddled with skepticism around whether it was possible to truly possess knowledge. Even though they had similar goals, Descartes posing the existence of innate ideas, a notion that Berkeley saw as so fundamentally problematic, served only to convince Berkeley that knowledge must be firmly rooted in tangible sensory experience. In *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, he declared "It is evident to any one who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses; or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind..." (Berkeley Principles 12). As demonstrated, Berkeley rejected the Cartesian theory of innate ideas not because he dismissed

Descartes outright, but because he believed that without grounding knowledge in either experience or mental operations, his theories of knowledge would fail to truly address skepticism.

George Berkeley vehemently rejected the Lockean obscure notions of material substance and the existence of abstract general ideas because he saw them as catalysts for skepticism and products of clear philosophical fallacies. In his *Commonplace Book*, the philosopher scrawled "I take not away Substances. I ought not to be accused of discarding Substance out of the reasonable world. I only reject the philosophic sense, which is in effect nonsense, of the word Substance" (Berkeley Essays 31). In making this assertion directly attacking Lockean theories of an unknowable, imperceptible substance, he made a powerful rejection, instead asserting that perception is the limit of existence and "substance" is just a group of sensory qualities binded together by one's perceiving mind. This quote reflects his formation of a belief in immaterialism as a direct response to flaws in logic in Locke's philosophy. Evidently, even though Locke had tried to avoid Descartes' fallacious innate ideas and mind-body relationship, he had repeated a similar mistake. Because Berkeley believed that something had to be perceptible in order to exist, he regarded the concept of an imperceptible substance as especially absurd. Berkeley also rejected the notion of an "abstract general idea", meaning a vague idea of something that has all its specific qualities stripped away, like a shape with no specified size or color. However, Locke posited that these types of ideas can be formed by stripping away qualities from an object until a barer version is achieved. Berkeley responded, writing to colleague Jean Le Clerc in 1711 "I cannot in any way form an abstract idea of a triangle or of any other figure whatsoever." Specifically, he justified this inability, writing "I have often attempted to achieve [this] but to no avail, employing to that end the power and capacity of all my mind, whatever this may be or by whatever name one calls it" (Berkeley, Letter to Le Clerc). Evidently, he didn't just not believe in this concept Locke had founded with similar goals to him, but had attempted to test it using his own mind which he found very difficult. For Locke, Berkeley's inability poses quite a dilemma, since his account of knowledge relies on the brain's ability to strip an object of particular qualities. For Berkeley to label this impossible would truly derail Lockean framework around knowledge and how humans generalize, leaving his entire philosophy vulnerable. By grounding this

rejection in firsthand mental experience, Berkeley sought to expose Lockean ideology as resting upon notions that were impossible to realize, not just because they were near impossible to conceive, but because to remove specific qualities from an object would revoke the features that define it. To him, it didn't matter that Locke had set out with the similar goals of correcting the mistakes of the past and defining knowledge, because he had been too hasty about it. Overall, this underscores that to Berkeley, obscure Lockean concepts that relied on invalid premises undermined and directly went against the certainties they claimed to perpetuate. His assertion ultimately foreshadows his reformist motives for the creation of his own immaterialism.

Berkeley's immaterialism solved the classic Cartesian problem of the mysterious interaction between a physical body and a supposed non-physical mind by dissolving a need for this interaction. In *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley states most clearly that "all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world..." have no subsistence without a mind, and that their existence consists in being perceived, either by finite minds or "in the mind of some Eternal Spirit" (Berkeley, Principles §§3–6). René Descartes had gone as far as to claim the body and mind were not just separate, but made of two different substances. However, he struggled to explain how they influenced each other, tentatively placing the point of this causal interaction at the small pineal gland, an assertion that was widely seen as lacking. Differing from Descartes, Berkeley believed that the body was a collection of ideas perceived by the mind. Because he also denied the existence of matter at all, an explanation for how a physical body could interact with an immaterial mind became unnecessary, as he believed the "body" to not be separate from the mind, but rather a plethora of ideas perceived by it. He saw Cartesian mind-body dualism as fundamentally impossible because it proposed an immaterial substance causally interacting with a physical organ. Because this interaction is imperceptible, to Berkeley, it couldn't possibly occur, and dualism wasn't plausible. He seemed to present a symmetrical rejection, where he believed both Cartesian dualism and innate ideas and Lockean "material substance" equally implausible. In his *Commonplace Book*, the philosopher jotted "There is nothing active but spirit..." (Berkeley Essays 31). By "spirit", Berkeley referred to the immaterial mind, which he believed

was the only true substance. There was no “mind-body problem”, because to him, the body was a subject of perception within the mind, not a separate physical substance that interacted with it. Building on his rejection of material substance, in a letter to John Percival on September 6th, 1710, Berkeley explained how aspects of the world existed before humans were there to perceive them: “They existed from all eternity in the Divine intellect, and then became perceptible (*i.e.* were created) in the same manner and order as is described in Genesis...Hence it follows that the act of creation consists in God's willing that those things should be perceptible.” (Berkeley to Percival, 6 Sept. 1710). By grounding the existence of ideas in God's mind, Berkeley continued to avoid the confusions of the mind-body problem and Cartesian dualism. To Descartes, this would have likely been seen as a sidestep, but this remained irrelevant to Berkeley because of his deep religiousness. He was able to create greater certainty around the interactions between the mind and the body, not only because they were not independent of each other, but the “body” is said to be sustained in the mind of God. This view caters to the common intertwinement between theology and philosophy that characterized Berkeley's time, offering a more acceptable view around the human mind and body. Overall, by rejecting the existence of matter and grounding all of the physical world in the immaterial mind, Berkeley resolved the mind-body problem by abolishing the need to pursue the question it ponders. His ideology redefined the physical “body” as a cluster of ideas perceived and tied to the mind and sustained divinely, destroying the Cartesian gap between the mind and body. Contrasting Descartes, he offered a more coherent and theologically-aligned view that progressed a philosophical problem that had troubled dualists for decades.

Berkeley also directly addressed and simplified the Lockean issue of an unknowable “material substance” that is said to underpin the perceivable qualities of objects, yet remains beyond human understanding. He did this by sidestepping any need for a substance outside perception itself. Locke's notion of “material substance” as an entity that joins sensory properties was not just vague, but intentionally so. Because Locke's empiricist explanation of perception relied on such an undefinable thing that maintains perceptible qualities but he had no real conception of this thing, he was forced to propose a substance that had no discernable features. He justified this by claiming that because different qualities

like color and size were understood to exist, it was necessary to assume an underlying force supported them, even if it was identified as imperceptible. Berkeley dramatically responded in his *Commonplace Book*, writing “The philosophic neguid, negunquantum, nequale, whereof I have no idea, I discard if a man may be said to discard that which never had any being, was never so much as imagined or conceived” (Berkeley Essays 31). Essentially, Berkeley argued that notions as abstract as substance which remain outside of human perception, “neguid[s]”, were not even ideas, but illusions construed through language. Berkeley understood just how illogical this substance was and that for it to truly function as perception’s backbone, it would have to be a paradox, both unknowable and very familiar in the sense that it was clearly responsible for uniting all sensory qualities. “Material substance” truly violates every rule of what it means to be an object: it can’t be sensed, described or pictured, yet Locke insists that it must exist and even goes on to say that it can be cut infinitely despite lacking physicality. Unfortunately, it wasn’t important to Berkeley that Locke had the same end goals as him because he had made such a poor conclusion. To Berkeley, this understanding framed “material substance” as deeply ad hoc, only invented to patch a gap in Locke’s theory. Unlike scientific ideas and theories, Locke’s material substance was a concept that was unable to be confirmed in any tangible way. As stated, this made it ad hoc philosophically, having been invented solely to save the theory without enhancing the explanatory power of said theory. In the same book, Berkeley went on to assert: “A thing not perceived is a contradiction” (Berkeley Essays 32). This reinforced both Berkeley’s lack of understanding in his commonality with Locke and exactly how he went about solving Locke’s issue of a substance that lacks proof of its own existence: by denying anything that anything beyond perception could be said to exist in any capacity. To the philosopher, if something cannot be perceived or conceived, it held no place in reality. Berkeley didn’t seek to invent any backbone for perception, but rather stated that objects were nothing more than collections of sensory experiences. At the time there was a common debate around the nature of an object, one’s mental image, and one’s knowledge of the object. He drastically simplified this debate by fusing the object and one’s mental image of it. In doing so, he eliminated the core issue of Locke’s philosophy by erasing the need for the one variable that decreased its clarity and consistency, substance, which was said

to support the physical properties of an object. This can be seen as an attempt by Berkeley to eradicate philosophical skepticism by increasing clarity, fusing one's mental image and the object being perceived into one and lessening the amount of questions to be asked. Berkeley gets more specific in a letter to Reverend Samuel Johnson, stating "'I have no objection against calling the Ideas in the mind of God archetypes of ours. But I object against those archetypes by philosophers supposed to be real things, and to have an absolute rational existence distinct from their being perceived by any mind whatsoever; it being that this notion of them will lead us into an inextricable scepticism" (Berkeley, Letter to Samuel Johnson). Here, Berkeley reinforces his position that claiming that a "real" object lies outside of perception leads directly to philosophical confusion. To him, only that perceived either by humans or in the mind of God can truly exist. In contrast, Locke was unable to appeal to God to support his obscure notions of "material substance", since his framework rejected theological justifications since they couldn't be grounded in sensory experience. This quote encapsulates his broader goal: to eliminate the unknowable entities that had been accepted by previous philosophers. He believed that by doing this, he could restore coherence to knowledge of humans as a whole.

Overall, Berkeley's immaterialism served as both an explicit and enlightening reaction to the skepticism that had characterized both Locke and Descartes. Descartes sought to achieve certainty through rationalism while Locke did the same through empirically-grounded substance, both ending up relying on entities that their own frameworks could not fully justify. Although Berkeley's solution, cause for controversy at the time, was to remove these confusing elements fully by equating objects to perception itself, sustained by constant divine awareness. Interestingly, this move has direct relevance to contemporary worries surrounding videos generated by AI. Just as Locke's material substance was created in order to stabilize perception even though it remained inaccessible, modern day viewers often assume that there are real events behind images that are generated by artificial intelligence. Berkeley's ideology challenges this notion by proclaiming that the coherence of perception, rather than unseen substance, is conducive to true certainty. Videos and images created by artificial intelligence underscores how fragile our trust in representation truly is, just as early modern skepticism unveiled how weak the

grounding of knowledge in imperceptible entities truly was. The insistence of Berkeley that perception must ground true knowledge rather than unverifiable material causes provides a philosophical lens for evaluating the modern day digital reality without appealing to foundations that are fundamentally unverifiable. Even though his reliance on divine perception seems to work around skepticism rather than truly solve it, Berkeley still provides a much more coherent framework than those who came before him. In removing the obscure past means of explanation, the philosopher offered a way to fight a lack of epistemic certainty that is both highly relevant and useful in an age when technology itself has the capacity to warp perception.

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