A Reconstruction of Berkeley’s Challenge Argument:

Berkeley, in Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge (1710) argued that there were no physical objects. That is, there are no objects that exist outside of a mind (unperceived). He gave many arguments for that thesis , but he believed that the only argument he really need was “the challenge”. Here’s the argument in his words from sections XXII and XXIII:

This easy Trial may make you see, that what you contend for, is a downright Contradiction. Insomuch that I am content to put the whole upon this Issue; if you can but conceive it possible for one extended moveable Substance, or in general, for any one Idea or anything like an Idea, to exist otherwise than in a Mind perceiving it, I shall readily give up the Cause: …But say you, surely there is nothing easier than to imagine Trees, for instance, in a Park, or Books existing in a Closet, and no Body by to perceive them. I answer, you may so, there is no difficulty in it …But do not you yourself perceive or think of them all the while? …it doth not show that you can conceive it possible, the Objects of your Thought may exist without the Mind: To make out this, it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest Repugnancy.

Berkeley challenges you to try and think of a counterexample to his thesis; you’ll see quickly that it cannot be done. Any object you think of will not be unperceived (you thought of it). **Since it is not logically possible to perceive of an object that exists unperceived, there aren’t any unperceived objects.** In other words, since demonstrating his position is false leads to contradiction, his position must be correct.

Here’s a simple way of stating the premise: It is logically true that you do not perceive any object that exists unperceived. Since we don’t have a way of saying ‘It is logically true’ with symbols, we have to be satisfied with leaving it off. Let Pxy represent x perceives y. Also, let i stand for you.

It could also be represented with the easier to understand but equivalent:

Here’s a proof of the (first half) of the equivalence:

1. QN,1
2. UI,2
3. DeM, 3
4. Imp, 4
5. QN, 5
6. UG, 6.

To prove two sentences are equivalent you have to show that the first implies the second and the second implies the first. I leave the other direction of the proof to the reader. The steps are just reversed.

The conclusion of Berkeley’s argument is: There is no object that exists unperceived.

That’s equivalent to:[[1]](#footnote-2)

So the argument is:

1. ∴

But that’s not valid. Here’s one interpretation that makes the premise true and the conclusion false (because <a,i> ∉ P):

**D**: {i,a}

P:{<i,a>}

So, to reconstruct Berkeley’s argument we should add a premise. First, try *cheap validity*. An argument is made cheaply valid when a conditional premise is added that has the conjunction of the premises as antecedent and the conclusion as consequent. Some books call this an argument’s *corresponding conditional*.[[2]](#footnote-3) For example, no matter what A, B and C represent you can ensure the validity of

A

B

∴ C

by adding the premise,

(A∙B) ⊃ C

For our argument the cheap validity premise is

This isn’t a very charitable premise to add since it is just equivalent to the conclusion. The antecedent of the conditional is a logical truth—it is not false on any interpretation—so the truth value of the conditional is the same as the truth value of its consequent. If we added the cheap validity premise, we’d be adding a premise equivalent to the conclusion and in so doing, making the argument circular.

So we should move beyond cheap validity, actually think about the argument, and figure out what to add. The fact that you could not, without contradiction, think of a counterexample is supposed to be evidence that there is no counterexample. So, Berkeley seems to be relying on a premise like: If some counterexample exists then something could perceive it. That’s an instance of the more general: if something exists then something could perceive it. We can’t say ‘could’ in our language, so we’ll have to settle for representing this sentence: If something exists then something perceives it. In other words, everything that exists is perceived by something.

That’s just Berkeley’s conclusion!

We could keep trying to find a premise to add to Berkeley’s argument, but by now we have already discovered the difficulty we face in doing that. Since his premise is logically true and the conclusion is contingent, we’ll have to add a contingent premise (or else there would be a possibility for the argument to have all true premises and a false conclusion). The contingent premise we add will have to be false whenever the conclusion is (otherwise the argument could have all true premises and a false conclusion). So that premise ALL BY ITSELF would validly imply the conclusion. That would mean that whatever premise we add makes the argument is circular.

Berkeley might not be giving a circular argument; at two points we were unable to completely represent Berkeley’s premises (because we can’t say ‘is logically true’, or ‘could’ with the symbols we have). So *maybe* his argument could be presented in a stronger language that doesn’t make it circular, but we’ve got a strong suggestion that Berkeley is begging the question he’s trying to answer.

Notice that what we discovered is true in general when trying to infer some contingent claim from a logical truth—the argument is invalid unless you add a premise that *all by itself* implies the conclusion. It’s why tautologies are uninformative and why you should be skeptical when someone tries to draw a substantive conclusion from a logical truth.

1. To prove the equivalence use QN twice. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Logic books mention corresponding conditionals because an argument is valid whenever its corresponding conditional is a logical truth. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)