

THE REALITY OF BERKELEY'S OBJECTS

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One of the difficulties common to any idealist metaphysics – of any metaphysics which makes physical objects mind-dependent – is the intersubjective identity of objects: if the desk I perceive is ‘in my mind’ in some essential way, while the desk you perceive is similarly essentially ‘in your mind’, is there any way we can numerically identify the two phenomenal desks as one mind-dependent object we are both perceiving? My intention in this paper is to explore this problem in a specific Berkeleian context, considering first Berkeley’s notion of objects and then a potential resolution of the difficulty. My ultimate conclusion is that this resolution does not actually work; however, this is not the problem it might first appear to be.

1

Let me start with the following preliminary definition: an object is a congeries or bundle of sense perceptions.

Since it is not a being distinct from sensations; a *cherry*, I say, is nothing but a congeries of sensible impressions, or ideas perceived by various senses: which ideas are united into one thing (or have one name given them) by the mind; because they are observed to attend each other.¹

In the Kantian language I’m more comfortable with, the manifold of my intuitions is given immediately, and my mind unifies that manifold into mediate experiences of objects. Though, in contrast to Kant, Berkeley does not explicate this unifying action of the mind.

Berkeley’s objects include also not just the actual sense impressions I am having at the moment, but anticipated future and recalled past sensations: the idea of the car I perceive only by hearing it includes anticipations of what I would see were I to go out and look at it, based on my previous experience with similar sounds, though there is obviously the possibility that these anticipations are incorrect². The inclusion of these anticipations of experience means some active faculty

¹3D III 249, his emphasis; citations to Berkeley are given by the standard pagination of the *Dialogues* and section numbers of the *Principles*

²cf 3D I 204

of my mind must be involved; and I follow George Stack³ in taking an active faculty of imagination, as in the A version of the Transcendental Deduction of the Categories from Kant's first *Critique*, as that which unifies all these sensations. However, if the reader does not want to read this much into Berkeley without argument, this particular explication of our unifying faculty will not be crucial in what follows. I will need only the distinction between the immediately perceived sensations and mediately perceived object, a bundle of those sensations.

It is important to note that the Berkeleian manifold is heterogenous, as Philonous explains to Hylas:

Strictly speaking, Hylas, we do not see the same object that we feel; neither is the same object perceived by the microscope, which was by the naked eye. But in case every variation was thought sufficient to constitute a new kind of individual, the endless number or confusion of names would render language impracticable. Therefore to avoid this as well as other inconveniences, which are obvious upon a little thought, men [sic] combine together several ideas, apprehended by divers senses, or by the same sense at different times. . . .⁴

Also, this passage includes an aspect of objects that will be come up again later: they are a feature of finite cognition, necessary for us to get around, but they will not be features of God's infinite cognition, which is limited neither by the necessary generalities of using language nor the epistemic limitations of finite acquaintance with the world.

Now we have the following definition: an object is a bundle of heterogenous actual, anticipated, and recalled sense perceptions, unified by an active faculty of imagination. With this background, the puzzle is how to identify the bundle my mind has made of my sense impressions, which I call, eg, 'my desk', with the bundle your mind has made of your sense impressions, which you call 'Dan's desk'. There are two solipsistic aspects of Berkeleian objects which make this puzzle non-trivial: we do not have the same collection of sense impressions, and our minds play a crucial role in the process, bundling our individual sense impressions together into our actual perceptions of the object of the desk.

One obvious possible fix is to include all the potential sense impressions of other finite beings into my idea of the object: my bundle

³Stack, 1967, 11

⁴D III 245; cf PHK 1 and NTV 49

includes not just what I am perceiving now, and what I expect to perceive in the future, but what I expect I would perceive were I in your place or what I believe you are perceiving. However, this clearly requires enough prior familiarity with objects and interaction with other conscious beings to anticipate what sense impressions I would have, and then attribute them to you. In a more metaphysical and less epistemological phrase: if we appeal to the active faculty of the imagination to explain our ability to anticipate experiences, we still have not explained why experiences can be anticipated at all.

The problem can thus be generalized and phrased even more metaphysically: how, in Berkeley's system, do we account for the reality of the world, if it is entirely ideal?

2

Berkeley proposes to use God to guarantee this reality:

there is an *omnipresent eternal Mind*, which knows and comprehends all things, and exhibits them to our view in such a manner, and according to such rules as he himself hath ordained, and are by us termed the *Laws of Nature*.⁵

Note that this is not, as it is sometimes taken to be, an argument for the existence of God: 'it is not continuity that proves God's existence, but God's existence that explains continuity.'⁶ Berkeley takes the Christian God for granted here⁷ and offers him as an explanation of that regularity or continuity which lets us anticipate experience.

Reading the above passage literally, we might then believe we can solve the problem of intersubjective identification of objects by appealing to God's ideas of them: my idea of the desk and your idea of the desk both coordinate in some way with God's idea of the desk, and we can identify all three as 'the' desk, of which you and I have only finite knowledge. But what exactly does it mean for something to exist 'in God', or for God to have an idea of it? These details should be at least partially fleshed out before we can consider the problem solved.

In fact, it is clear that Berkeley's God cannot not have any idea about the desk, or any object, at all. First, Berkeley says outright that God cannot have sensory ideas, as this is a feature of finite knowledge:

But God, whom no external being can affect, who perceives nothing by sense as we do . . . ; it is evident, such a being as this can suffer nothing, nor be affected with

⁵3D III 230-1, his emphasis

⁶Fleming, 85, 31

⁷3D III 235

any painful sensation, or indeed any sensation at all. We are chained to a body, that is to say, our perceptions are connected with corporeal motions But God is a pure spirit, disengaged from all such sympathy or natural ties. No corporeal motions are attended with the sensations of pain or pleasure in his mind. To know everything knowable is certainly a perfection; but to endure, or suffer, or feeling anything by sense, is an imperfection God knows or hath ideas; but His ideas are not convey'd to Him by sense, as ours are.⁸

Furthermore, God cannot have our ideas of objects, as they are merely bundles of sensations. Neither can God have some sort of archetype of the desk which our ideas of the desk ‘resemble’; Hylas

do[es] not understand how our ideas, which are things altogether passive and inert, can be the essence, or any part (or like any part) of the essence or substance of God, who is an impassive, indivisible, purely active being.⁹

One might try to argue that God has ‘intellectual’ or ‘purely conceptual’ ideas of objects, wherein things are represented as some sort of infinite collection of predicates or properties (I have in mind something like Leibniz’ monads), but this fails in two ways. First, on Berkeley’s account we finite beings seem to only have sensations and ideas built up from them¹⁰, so it is not clear how to connect God’s infinite purely conceptual ideas with our finite purely sensible ones – what does a collection of non-sensory properties have to do with the bundle of sensations I call my desk? Secondly, this would mean God, whose knowledge of objects is particular, knows objects as collections of general or even abstract ideas.

More generally, either God’s ideas of objects are just ‘more complete’ versions of our ideas of objects, which is anathema to the nature of God, or they are something completely alien and ineffable to us, in which case there is no reason why his ideas should correspond to ours. Charles McCracken takes a path between these two, and suggests that God’s ideas of objects might instead be decrees;

⁸3D III 241; cf McCracken, , 282

⁹3D II 213

¹⁰PHK 1

the decree, that is, that certain sensible qualities *will be* perceived in a certain order and connection by such spirits as *do* exist, or that those qualities *would be* perceived in that arrangement, *were* any spirits in existence.¹¹

So, God's ideas are, to the extent we can comprehend them, the sensations finite beings will be given by him.

However, if McCracken's proposal is read so that objects, not just sensations, are to correspond to decrees (so that my idea of the desk would correspond to God's decree that I perceive the desk, and would perceive it if . . .), it is not clear to me how this is not an occasionalist view, which Berkeley rejects¹². In particular, I'm thinking of the 'would perceive' clause, and an obvious objection which McCracken considers but does not seem to really dismiss: why does God need to decree the strictly potential perceptions? That is, God doesn't need a plan to cover those perception we (meaning all finite beings) might, but do not actually, have – rather, God needs only provide each of us with our actual sensations in a sufficiently regular fashion. In the more Kantian language, God need only decree that my manifold of sensations proceed in a fashion which allows me to anticipate future sensations with moderate success, nothing more.

McCracken does bring up this objection, but says only that

What permits us to make deliberate choices is our ability to anticipate both the sensations we *will* have if we act in one way, and those we *would* have if we were to act in another. Such anticipations would not be possible unless ideas were produced in accordance with fixed rules – the laws of nature.¹³

This parallels Berkeley's response to the similar objection, regarding internal organs¹⁴. But both of these responses depend on an equivocation, between objects – bundles of sensations unified by the mind – and the manifold of sensations – which is completely given to me. I, a finite knower, must be able to work out Laws of Nature governing *objects* to anticipate future sensations, but this requires only a decree on God's part of regularity within *my actual sensations*, which is determined in part by my own free choices but not unknown to God. No clause regarding potential sensations is necessary, and hence should be rejected as superfluous to God's purposes.

¹¹McCracken, , 288, his emphasis

¹²3D II 219ff

¹³McCracken, , 289

¹⁴PHK §§60-66

Furthermore, the decree need only be a complicated articulation of the actual succession of my manifold of sensations, not a collection of decrees for the objects of the world nor the Laws of Nature I develop about them. Recall that my mind is unifying the manifold of my sensations into a coherent world of objects; our immediate, given perceptions are only of heterogeneous qualia, not objects. The desk I perceive is an artifact of my mind, a bundle of sensations picking out *by me* from the *complete* series given to me by God, while the desk you perceive is an artifact of *your* mind, sensations from the *complete* series God has given you; God's decree must be of the entire series itself, not the structures my mind must build out of it due to my finiteness. Berkeley (and McCracken) can invoke God only to explain the apparent regularity of sensations, not the natural laws governing objects or, equivalently, their reality – and hence God cannot be appealed to for the intersubjective identification of objects.

3

We have seen that Berkeley's God cannot guarantee the reality of the objects we perceive. Rather, he can guarantee merely the reality of the given manifold of sensations of each finite being, individually. However, I claim that this is enough, for two reasons.

First, for Berkeley, the Laws of Nature are not deep knowledge of the causal structures of existence; rather, they are pragmatic instruments, of value insofar as they are of use in getting by from day to day, individually and on the level of society as a whole¹⁵. Thus, it does not matter whether we have a complete scientific explanation of the world; we need only successively more useful instrumentalist accounts. And for this in turn we require only the regularity of the manifold, so as to extrapolate some rough and tentative predictive devices, not direct and certain intuition of the interactions of things in themselves. Berkeley considers science and mathematics subordinate to theology and ethics¹⁶; and the latter do not require direct perception of the world as it is in itself.

Secondly, Berkeley makes a distinction between thinking rigorously and acting pragmatically: one should 'think with the learned and speak with the vulgar'¹⁷. Hence I would suggest that Berkeley, strictly speaking, rejects the reification and intersubjective identification of objects. I believe this is what he is saying in sections 45-6 of the *Principles*: if

¹⁵PHK 104ff

¹⁶Ayers, 1975, xxix

¹⁷PHK 51

you are concerned whether objects exist when no-one's around to perceive them, then you are mistakenly clinging to the fallacious doctrine of the materialists; upon proper reflection, you will realize that, no, of course an 'object' does not exist when no-one's perceiving it, because its only reality is that of your perceptions of it, unified by your own mind as part of a coherent world. Berkeley's own confused wrestling with this problem for several further sections, as well as the equivocation between object and the manifold of sensations mentioned above, could be a sign that he himself is struggling to break free of the old ideas.

Furthermore, these are only concerns when we are sitting quietly by ourselves or with a few associates, pondering existence in a philosophical mode – I do not suddenly stop short and wonder whether my lecture notes have ceased to exist, as they are in my backpack and not in anyone's view. Likewise, if I want my roommate to hand me the remote for the television, I don't worry about whether the remote I perceive can correspond in some way to the remote she perceives. In our daily lives, we get along perfectly fine acting as though there really are material objects which behave in certain ways, even if we (supposing we are Berkeleian idealists, of course) know, strictly speaking, that there really are not, and when discussing philosophy we should endeavor to move beyond the language of objects; and Berkeley is happy to accept this distinction.

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