Berkeley
Dedication to Archbishop Felix Alaba Job
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Berkeley is popular in the philosophical tradition as the philosopher who denied the existence of matter in favour of spiritual substance. His esse est percipi thesis is understandably seen as a recipe for subjective idealism. While there is a point to this reading of Berkeley, it remains to be seen whether it does justice to the full significance of Berkeley’s opposition to philosophical materialism. In this book, essentially a sympathetic reconstruction of Berkeley’s philosophy, we approach his immaterialism from the standpoint of the philosophical issues raised by the emergence of modern science in the seventeenth century. When approached in this manner, Berkeley’s opposition to philosophical materialism not only emerges as an attempt to overcome false abstractions, but it also becomes possible to make sense of his claimed alliance with common sense in his battle against philosophical materialism. While the realist portrait of Berkeley that emerges from this exercise is not free from difficulties, it arguably offers us a fuller conspectus of Berkeley’s philosophy of immaterialism.

At this point I acknowledge the assistance received from various agencies in writing this book. I am grateful to God who made possible the successful completion of this project and of course my Local Ordinary, Most Rev. Dr. F. A Job, the Metropolitan Archbishop of Ibadan, for his support and inspiration. I am also grateful to Professor Carlos, Steel, Professor Herman De Dijn, Professor William Desmond, Professor James Bradley and Dr. Darren Hynes for their help in various ways. I thank Professor De Dijn especially for writing a recommendation for the book despite his tight schedule. I owe similar appreciation to Dr Hynes who provided critical comments which enabled me to improve the quality of the book. There is nothing perfect under the sun. Yet we are obliged to strive for perfection. I certainly cannot say this work is perfect. However, I take responsibility for whatever inadequacies remain after all due effort. Finally I thank the authors whose works I consulted.
GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1. The Problem

This book is a study of Berkeley’s philosophy of immaterialism. Berkeley was one of the central figures in the evolution of early modern philosophy. His immaterialism, which effectively abandons the notion of matter as a viable philosophical category, was one of the early attempts to appraise the ‘new philosophy’ that had formed in the wake of the emergence of modern science. Berkeley could see immediately that if the corpuscular philosophy were correct, it had pernicious implications for morality and religion and the respective values they both promote. Little wonder then that his early writings, *The Principles of Human Knowledge* and the *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* were chiefly in defense of religion against atheism and skepticism.

Born at Kilkenny in Ireland on March 12 1685, Berkeley came quite early to philosophy. He entered the Trinity College in Dublin at the age of fifteen; and, here he studied among other subjects, Mathematics, Latin and Philosophy. As his notebooks in which he recorded his occasional philosophical rumination indicates, at this early stage of his formation, he came in contact with key figures of early modern philosophy such as Descartes, Locke, Malebranche and Bayle. These thinkers contributed in various ways in shaping his emerging philosophical perspective. A study of Berkeley’s ‘notebooks’ indicates that he had already developed his system while he was a student at Trinity College. The result of this became evident soon after his graduation in 1704, as he published a number of books within the next couple of years. Indeed, the philosophical works that secured Berkeley’s fame as a philosopher were all published during this period.

Unfortunately, Berkeley’s philosophy as summed up in his aphorism, *esse est percipi* has been seen as a recipe for subjectivism and solipsism. This assessment is based on at least two assumptions. First is the

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supposition that Berkeley’s denial of material substance amounts to the
denial of the physical world. To this extent he gives up the material world
only to affirm the spiritual nature of reality. The second is the assumption
that the definition of sensible objects relative to their being perceived
disrupts the categorical distinction between object of perception and act of
perception. Consequently, if we cannot maintain this basic distinction, it
means we cannot sustain the objectivity of the world of common sense.3

The subjective idealist reading of Berkeley has remained the dominant
perception of Berkeley in the philosophical tradition. However, twentieth
century philosophy and indeed recent philosophy have witnessed various
tries to project a different image of Berkeley. The subjective idealist
reading is not only challenged but attempt is also made to develop an
alternative reading of Berkeley as a realist—a common sense realist. This
realist understanding of Berkeley is associated with such names as Jessop,
Luce, Ardley and more recently, Yolton and Grayling.

Relying on some of Berkeley’s early and later writings, Berkeley’s
thought is interpreted in such a manner that radically departs from the
traditional subjective idealist image that defines the place of Berkeley in
the philosophical tradition.4

This is no doubt an interesting development. For it demonstrates that
the sense of wonder which defines the hallmark of philosophy is still very
much alive, and as such, no case is completely close. Luce, Jessop and
their cohorts invariably suggest that the case against Berkeley is not
closed. Yet the pertinent question here is whether there is anything really
new in the perspective they urge the philosophical community to consider.
Could it be true that Berkeley has really been misunderstood? Is Berkeley
a sceptic? Does his philosophy undermine the objectivity of the common
sense world of trees and stones?

3 Anthony Flew, An Introduction to Western Philosophy: Ideas and Argument from
4 See for example A. A. Luce, Berkeley’s Immaterialism (London: Thomas Nelson,
1945); see also R. H. Popkin, “The New Realism of Bishop Berkeley” in The
Highroad to Pyrrhonism edited by R. Watson and J. E. Force (San Diego: Austin
Hill, 1980), Harry Bracken, George Berkeley: "The Irish Cartesian" in Richard
Kearney (ed.), The Irish Mind: Exploring intellectual Traditions (Dublin:
Wolfhound Press, 1985); and Gavin Ardley, Berkeley’s Renovation of Philosophy
(Hague: Martins Nijhoff, 1968), p.11. Indeed, as Ardley says: “For the most part,
Berkeley has been thought an ingenious sophist, a subjective idealist or lately a
positivist and a forerunner of the positivist interpretation of the sciences. Only in
our days have the labors of Luce and Jessop broken through the crust and almost
for the first time revealed the true Berkeley.”
Those who propose a realist reading of Berkeley's philosophy maintain that these questions cannot be answered affirmatively, as is done in tradition, without misunderstanding Berkeley. In fact, it is maintained that Berkeley has been misunderstood. The whole plea for a new understanding of Berkeley is governed by the fundamental assumption that the subjective idealist image is a misinterpretation of Berkeley's philosophy.

2. Aim and Methodology

In what follows we shall examine the respective claims of both readings of Berkeley as well as provide answers to the foregoing questions. One might question the justification in appraising the subjective idealist reading and advocating for its reversal. One possible reason that grounds the relevance of this sort of exercise is the fact that Berkeley himself maintained he had been misunderstood. He denies the two assumptions which are implicated in the subjective idealist reading. He does not accept that the denial of matter is the same thing as the denial of the physical world. More importantly, he also denies that this disrupts the categorical distinction between sensation and object of perception.5

These denials are explicit in the *Principles of Human Knowledge*. Following the poor reception received by the *Principles*, Berkeley did not give up his cause. He continued to press his point. The result of this effort was the publication of another work: the *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*.6 Here Berkeley tries to emancipate himself from the technicalities characteristic of his presentation of his thesis in the *Principles*. He re-presents his views in a more popular fashion with the hope that his point would be understood.

As Andre-Louis Leroy observes "the persistence of an interpretation which is apparently contrary to the opinion of the philosopher himself suggests that we look at the philosophical situation of Berkeley's times."7

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5 See for example M. R. Ayer, "Substance, Reality and the Great Philosophers" in *American Philosophical Quarterly*. Ayer shows a good understanding of Berkeley's doctrine of substance. We take up this issue in the context of the traditional estimation of Berkeley's philosophy in Chapter Two. See below pp. 36-46

6 Hereafter we refer to this work as *Dialogues*. Though the *Dialogues* are more elegant and accessible than Berkeley's *Principles*, many commentators believe that the *Principles* remains the authoritative statement of Berkeley's Immaterialism. See G. Berman, *George Berkeley: Idealism and the Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 6

If Leroy is correct, then Berkeley had quite a different estimation of the import of his philosophy. And it is only by taking into account Berkeley’s intent and meaning that we can begin to evaluate his philosophy fairly. The disparity between Berkeley's own assessment of his philosophy and the subjective idealist reading certainly invites a reappraisal of his philosophy.

In developing the argument of this book, we follow the expository and critical approach. We try to develop the realist interpretation against the background of the subjective idealist reading. Our strategy is to locate what presuppositions inform the subjective idealist reading and to show why it is a misinterpretation of Berkeley's philosophy. To do this we focus on two influential early assessments of Berkeley: those of David Hume and Thomas Reid. The subjective idealist reading is a legacy of these two assessments of Berkeley. Our goal is to show that Hume and Reid did not always understand Berkeley's overall purpose and to this extent the portrait of Berkeley which they paint is suspect. We concentrate on two problematics in order to make good this claim: first, Hume's celebrated deconstruction of Spiritual substance; and second, Reid's critique of the doctrine of ideas.

To show that Hume and Reid both miss Berkeley's point on these matters, we evoke the views of Daniel Garber and S. A. Grave. Garber's thesis is that Berkeley's doctrine of substance is not an extension of Locke's conception but its complete replacement. On the traditional view, Hume's rejection of spiritual substance is taken to be a consistent realization of the empiricist programme of Locke. It also assumes that Berkeley is only a half way house between the austere empiricism of Locke and the more thorough-going empiricism of Hume. If Garber is correct, then Hume's critique is of no serious consequence for Berkeley's system. Moreover, the categorization of Locke, Berkeley and Hume as the triumvirate of classical British empiricism becomes questionable.

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10 This issue is treated in Chapter Two, see below pp. 49-59
11 This is not a new thesis. The picture of Locke-Berkeley-Hume and the enterprise of British empiricism have come under severe attack in recent times. See, for instance R.H. Popkin, "Randall and British Empiricism" in The Highroad to Pyrrhonism edited by R.A Watson and J. Force, pp. 39-53. See also Harry
Similarly, it becomes difficult to sustain Reid's objections against Berkeley, since Reid presupposes that Locke, Berkeley and Hume were all concerned with the task of realizing a consistent empiricist agenda in the same manner.

Our work also has a historical dimension. This is inevitable since our thesis turns on an historical consideration: The claim that the realist interpretation is more accurate than the subjective idealist reading is based on a historical reconstruction of Berkeley's philosophy. First, we will take into account the background that gave rise to Berkeley's thought; and second, the specific philosophical influences that suggested the directions Berkeley eventually followed in grappling with these problematics.

With regard to the first, we will focus on the birth of modern science and the difficulties it engendered. Only then do we stand a better chance of appreciating the import of the realist interpretation of Berkeley. With regard to the second, we will show that early in Berkeley's career, he became involved in the refutation of scepticism, and that this was a constant problematic in all his subsequent works. To develop this we rely on Gavin Ardley's work: Berkeley's Renovation of Philosophy.12

3. Structure of Work

For sake of convenient treatment of the themes set out in the preceding paragraph, and especially to argue for the realist interpretation, our work is divided into four chapters. The first chapter provides a background for the discussions in subsequent chapters. It is an expository chapter, where our concentration will be on exposing the fundamentals of Berkeley's philosophy. Our exposition is based on three important works of Berkeley: the Principles, Dialogues and the Philosophical Commentaries. Berkeley's other works like the Siris, Alciphron and the Motu are also important. But the most crucial from the point of view of our project are the first three. Though our goal in this chapter is expository, occasionally, we introduce critical comments to properly situate Berkeley's views. We should also mention that, being a background chapter, we constantly refer back to this chapter as we examine the claims of the realist interpretation vis-à-vis the subjective idealist interpretation. The back and forward movement also points to the continuity between the various chapters.

Bracken, "George Berkeley: The Irish Cartesian" in Richard Kearney (ed.) The Irish Mind: Exploring Intellectual Traditions, pp. 105-119
12 G. Ardley's reading of Berkeley's philosophy is extensively treated in Chapter Three. It is the platform we use in projecting the features of the realist interpretation of Berkeley's philosophy. See below, pp. 81-101
Chapter Two examines the image of Berkeley as portrayed in tradition. The chapter is built around three themes all of which are various attempts to articulate the subjective idealist reading. These themes are Reid's and Hume's appraisal of Berkeley and how they inform the subjective idealist reading. The third theme is the legacy of Reid and Hume's appraisals and certain objections in contemporary Berkeleian literature.

Chapter Three is the most crucial chapter of our work. It examines the new portrait of Berkeley that is implicated in the realist interpretation. To argue against the subjective idealist reading, we follow the strategy of exposing the features of the new interpretation. Two main themes are dealt with in regard to the question of the historical context of Berkeley's philosophy. We discuss Ardley's rendition of Berkeley's relation to the exact sciences and how this sets in perspective Berkeley's realism and his claim to defend common-sense. The second theme is the sources of mistaken interpretation of Berkeley's philosophy. Here the emphasis is on the difficult dialectical style that Berkeley adopts and the complexity of Berkeley's terminology.

Chapter Four assesses the credibility of the realist reading. It gives reasons why the new interpretation is privileged. Moreover, attention is drawn to certain difficulties in Berkeley's philosophy especially his account of mind and the denial of secondary causation. In spite of these difficulties, we conclude that Berkeley's realism is not threatened.

4. Pitfalls to be Avoided

Before we proceed to expose Berkeley’s philosophy, we wish to draw attention to certain pitfalls that need to be avoided in order to appreciate the positive insight of the realist interpretation of Berkeley's philosophy. We realize that the thesis we argue for is a controversial one. This is easily seen in the fact that the subjective idealist reading is the official interpretation of Berkeley's philosophy. Moreover, it is well established, going back to first few decades of the publication of Berkeley's works. For this reason some remarks are necessary in order to preclude a possible misunderstanding of our purpose.

Our first remark concerns the character of our thesis. The thesis we defend is a modest one. We want to show that Berkeley's denial of material substance is not the same as the denial of the physical world nor does it amount to the mentalisation of the physical world. If anything Berkeley's purpose was to avoid this extravagant philosophical position. If we are able to show that the world of common-sense is left intact by Berkeley's immaterialism, then we would have accomplished our task. We
must mention here that the issue is not so much the extent to which Berkeley succeeds in justifying common-sense but whether he justifies it at all. The question of "the extent" is also important but it is outside the scope of our work. Admittedly, Berkeley's attempt is less successful relative to other attempts that seek to accomplish the same goal. However, this does not necessarily undermine the realism of Berkeley.

One serious obstacle that militates against the appreciation of the new insights revealed by the realist reading of Berkeley's philosophy is Berkeley's methodology. Berkeley is a dialectician. His mode of rhetoric involves a combination of persuasion with playful spirit of mimicking and mockery. But this makes him difficult to understand and leaves him open to misinterpretation. Yet, if one would go beyond the literal expressions of Berkeley, as he himself suggests, there is hope of capturing the real message that lies behind the words of Berkeley.

The difficulty which Berkeley's complex methodology raises is easily seen in the traditional tendency to treat him as sceptic. If one takes Berkeley's contention that sensible objects are collections of ideas and they exist only in mind, the inevitable conclusion is that he is a sceptic. Reid and Hume could not resist this conclusion. Yet the fact is that Berkeley's refutation of scepticism has a dialectical structure. Once it is understood that Berkeley's strategy involves the use of the classical reductio-ad-absurdum technique we are more careful in judging Berkeley's moves. This point will become clearer as we proceed. The purpose of this hint is to suggest that as our exposition proceeds, Berkeley may momentarily appear as a sceptic but in the long run he emerges as one whose fundamental preoccupation was the refutation of scepticism. What

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14 In the Preface of the Principles Berkeley warns the reader to be on guard against the error of misinterpretation. He says: "For as there are some passages that, taken by themselves, are very liable (nor could it be remedied) to gross misinterpretation, and to be charged with most absurd consequences, which nevertheless, upon an entire perusal will appear not to follow from them: so likewise, though the whole should be read over, yet, if this be done transiently, 'tis very probable my sense may be mistaken; but to a thinking reader, I flatter myself, it will be throughout clear and obvious" See Preface, The Principles

15 In a reductio-ad-absurdum argument, one proves a position by assuming for the sake of argument the opposite of what he intends to prove. He then goes on to derive a contradiction from the assumed premise. The emergence of contradiction disproves the assumed premise while it vindicates its opposite. See A. P. Martinich Philosophical Writing: an Introduction (Englewood Cliff, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1989), p. 78
allows for this of course is the background offered by his peculiar mode of exposition.

Apart from the complexity of Berkeley's methodology, there is another level of complexity, which would easily make Berkeley appear as a sceptic and a subjective idealist. This concerns his entire project, which is expressly the refutation of philosophical materialism. The matter raises several other issues: First, the question of the ontological foundation of science; second, the philosophy of perception; and third, the implication of the mechanistic conception of the world for religion.

Berkeley thinks all these problematics are related and the common ground for them is the belief in material substance. Berkeley addresses these various issues implicated in this metaphysical assumption almost simultaneously. However, if these issues are not viewed in their interrelatedness, we miss the coherence of Berkeley's project. Similarly there is also the risk of distorting the import of the position that Berkeley advocates on each of them and the role they serve in Berkeley's system. The contemporary attempt to assimilate Berkeley's immaterialism into the phenomenalist tradition is a case in point of this sort of selective treatment. These points are dealt with extensively in the main body of the work. The above information is meant to serve as a caution for the reader so that he may be aware of the dialectical unfolding of Berkeley's project.
CHAPTER ONE

THE PHILOSOPHY OF IMMATERIALISM

1. Preliminary Remarks

Generally speaking, Berkeley’s immaterialism is the most crucial aspect of Berkeley’s philosophy. Negatively understood, it denies the existence of material substance1, while in the positive sense immaterialism asserts that the nature of reality is spiritual. Berkeley recognizes two basic ontological types: mind and ideas. Mind is further classified into two divisions: finite mind or spirit (such as ourselves) and infinite mind or Spirit (that is God). On Berkeley’s view, therefore, ideas belong to the mind and do not exist independent of mind, so that we can say indeed, that all there is in the universe is mind and its ideas.

The ontological dependence of ideas on mind is central to Berkeley’s assertion of the spirituality of the universe.2 Indeed it is in this context that Berkeley considers his immaterialism as a philosophical response to two challenges: the question of the ontological status of the physical world and the related issue of its intrinsic nature.

In formulating his immaterialism, Berkeley’s target is another contending philosophical theory, namely materialism. Fundamental to the materialist world-view is the thesis about the absolute independent existence of the physical world. On this view, the world will not cease to exist were all minds annihilated.3 Berkeley believes that the materialist position constitutes

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1 T. E. Jessop suggests that Berkeley’s immaterialism “may be roughly described as a logical purification of the Cartesian ‘way of ideas’ or subjectivism, in the large form given to this by Malebranche and Locke”. See his "Editor’s Introduction" The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne. volume 2 Reprint (London: Thomas Nelson, 1949), p. 8.
a potential threat to religion and morality since it undermines the notion of a world sustained by divine providence.⁴

Berkeley’s stated aims of refuting scepticism and atheism in the subtitle of the Principles point to the deep religious motivation of his philosophy. Yet it is interesting that Berkeley goes about refuting philosophical materialism in a philosophical manner.⁵ His strategy involves the attempt to establish the converse of the materialist assumption: that the physical world is mind-dependent, and not mind independent. Berkeley believes that to defend successfully the mind-dependence of the physical world is also to undermine the materialist foothold for atheism.⁶

In exposing the salient features of Berkeley's philosophy of immaterialism, our aim is to provide a background for an understanding of Berkeley's image in the tradition, a subject that is addressed in chapter two. In view of the breadth of Berkeley’s philosophy, it is impossible to consider all the various ramifications of his thought. Our exposition, therefore, will focus on aspects of his philosophy that bear on his thesis concerning the spiritual nature of reality.

For sake of convenient exposition, the Chapter is divided into a number of sections, each of which examines various aspects of Berkeley’s immaterialism such as the New Principle and its credentials, especially as it relates to the problem of scepticism, Berkeley’s refutation of matter and his phenomenalist account of sensible objects.

2. The New Principle and Its Credentials

The esse est percipi principle or the New Principle, as Berkeley calls it, is a pivotal principle in Berkeley’s argument for the spiritual nature of reality. Berkeley discovered the new principle when he was Twenty two.

⁶ More recently, Sigmund Bonk has suggested that Berkeley’s argumentation for immaterialism is at the same time a case for the existence of God. See his We See God: George Berkeley’s Philosophical Theology (Berlin: Peter Lang Europaischer Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1999), pp. 17-32. See also A. C. Grayling, “Berkeley’s Argument for Immaterialism” in Kenneth Winkler (ed.) Cambridge Companion to Berkeley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 166-189
In the *Principles* and *Dialogues*, the *esse est percipi* doctrine plays two related roles. It serves as a fundamental tool for refuting the doctrine of material substance; and secondly, it is used by Berkeley in showing that the physical world is necessarily mind-dependent.7

In its literal connotation, the aphorism means “to be is to be perceived”. In Berkeley’s conceptual scheme, it encapsulates Berkeley’s metaphysics of existence. Berkeley believes the crucial issue in his disagreement with the materialists concerns the meaning of existence.8 For him, the *esse est percipi* thesis, summarizes the meaning of existence.

Berkeley recognizes two different domains of reality: the domain of thinking things and the domain of unthinking things. Existence does not mean the same thing in both domains. In the domain of unthinking things, the meaning of existence is to be perceived, whereas, in the domain of thinking things, the meaning of existence is to perceive.9 Things like tables, trees, chairs and landscape in general belong to the domain of unthinking things. Their *esse is percipi*. So, when we ascribe existence to a table or a tree, Berkeley says, what we mean is that the table is being perceived. However, the existence of spirit or mind cannot be understood in this manner. To say that mind exist is to say that mind perceives.10

In view of Berkeley’s recognition of two domains of reality, some commentators suggest, albeit with ample foundation in Berkeley’s text, that the complete formulation of Berkeley’s new principle is *esse est percipi aut percipere*, that is, “to be is to be perceived or to perceive.”11 The complete formulation accentuates the importance of the contrast between the *esse* of unthinking things and the *esse* of mind for a proper grasp of Berkeley’s immaterialism. The *esse* of unthinking things is *percipi* while the *esse* of mind is *percipere*. However, it is clear from the *Principles* that Berkeley’s attention is directed towards the domain of

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7 It should be mentioned that for Berkeley, the refutation of matter and the thesis of the mind-dependence of the physical world are related. The former provides a foundation for the latter. This connection will become clear as our exposition progresses. However, it is possible to grant Berkeley’s refutation of matter without granting his mind-dependence thesis. One of the consequences of dissociating Berkeley’s refutation of matter from his thesis concerning the mind-dependence of sensible objects is the sort of Phenomenalism we find in A. J. Ayer.
8 Cf. *Principles*, 3
10 Cf. *Principles*, 3
unthinking things. This is what he needs to clarify in order to undermine
the materialist thesis.

Now, it may be supposed that Berkeley denies the reality of sensible
things by saying that their being is to be perceived. But Berkeley quickly
corrects this impression in the Philosophical Commentaries: “‘tis on the
discovery of the nature and meaning and import of existence that I chiefly
insist... This puts a wide difference between the sceptic and me.”12 Thus,
the issue in contention, for Berkeley, is the question of the mode
of existence of sensible objects, and not their existence qua existence. Can
we speak of the existence of sensible things without reference to their
being perceived? Whereas, the materialist answers yes, Berkeley says no;
the existence of sensible objects makes sense only when conceived in
relation to the perceptual context. He offers an example in the Dialogues
to illustrate his point:

Ask the gardener, why he thinks yonder cherry-tree exists in the garden,
and he shall tell you, because he sees it and feels it; in a word, because he
perceives it by his senses. Ask him why he thinks an orange tree not to be
there, and he shall tell you, because he does not perceive it. What he
perceives by sense, that he terms a real being, but that which is not
perceivable, the same he says, has no being.13

**Berkeley’s Anti-Abstractionism**

We should quickly add that Berkeley takes the above explication of the
meaning of existence, as it pertains to unthinking things, to be in accord
with the vulgar understanding. It is the materialist who contravenes the
vulgar opinion. When the vulgar thinks of the existence of such things as
trees or landscapes, he does not go beyond what can be encountered in
experience.14 Berkeley does not stop at showing that the materialist

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12 *Philosophical Commentaries*, 42

13 Third Dialogue. For further discussion of this theme, see A. C. Grayling,*Berkeley: The Central Arguments* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1986), p. 81

14 A. C. Grayling compares Berkeley’s *esse percipi* to certain recent discussion on
the theme of existence. The issue is whether existence could be treated as a
predicate. Grayling observes that Berkeley’s point like that of Moore and Passmore
is that it amounts to referential tautology to speak of existence as a predicate for
the very talk about things already implicate their existence. Grayling presents
Berkeley’s foreshadowing of the idea of referential tautology as follows: “An
essential ingredient of ‘X exists locution’ is the fact that talk of X (in all cases
other than express denial of there being X) carries this contained commitment to
X’s existence shows that there are not two conceptions in hand, namely the
assumption is wrong; he tries to unravel the foundation of the error. In section four of the *Principles*, Berkeley associates the doctrine of the absolute existence of sensible things with abstract ideas.

If we thoroughly examine this tenet, it will, perhaps, be found at the bottom to depend on the doctrine of abstract ideas. For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them as existing unperceived?15

Because Berkeley believes the thesis concerning the absolute existence of sensible objects thrives on illicit abstraction, he devotes the whole of the ‘Introduction’ of the *Principles* to a refutation of the doctrine of abstract idea. Thus, Berkeley’s anti-abstractionism is a corollary of the new principle. While the new principle is a refutation of materialism, the anti-abstractionist path locates the source of the error. Berkeley is not issuing a global condemnation of abstraction.16 The object of his attack is a type of abstraction which makes possible the separation of things which can only be separated in thought, but not in reality. The example he offers is the colour and extension of a surface. Another sort of illicit abstraction “involves noting a feature common to many different things, and attending to only that feature and not its particular instantiations.”17

Viewed in relation to Berkeley’s anti-abstractionism, the point of the new principle becomes clearer. His endeavour is to show that the conception of X and, separately or additionally, the conception of X’s existence; and one way of this is to say that one cannot separate or abstract the conception of X’s existence from the conception of X. In Berkeley’s terminology one would say: one cannot conceive X without conceiving of it as existing anymore than one can conceive of an existence which is not the existence of something” Ibid., pp. 91-92. As we shall see in Chapter Three, this point is integral to Ardley’s reading of Berkeley which allows Berkeley to emerge as a pioneer reformer.

15 *Principles*, section 4.
relatedness of sensible objects to the perceptual context is constitutive of their being. Another way to put it is to say that the "esse est percipi" of Berkeley, expresses an axiom. In fact, he maintains that to conceive of the existence of unthinking things otherwise leads to contradiction. It can at best generate nothing more than an abstract concept of existence, which itself is a philosophical fiction.

Perhaps, to come to terms with Berkeley’s estimation of the import of his new principle, it might be helpful to consider what it does not assert. A possible misconception that may arise is to suppose that Berkeley conflates sensation and the external object. But as Grayling suggests, this is not the sense of the new principle. Berkeley does not imply there is a one to one identity between the object and the perception of it.

While the object and the perception of it are related, there remains a basic difference. Therefore, Berkeley maintains a minimal thesis that simply asserts a relation between sensible object and the perceptual context. Berkeley underlines the difference between the object and the perception of it with the introduction of an important distinction: the distinction between percipi and percipere.

This distinction is already present in Berkeley’s Philosophical Commentaries and is repeatedly emphasized in Berkeley’s subsequent published works. Percipi refers to the act of perception relative to which the being of sensible objects is defined. On the other hand, percipere refers to the subject, which Berkeley calls mind or spirit. The subject is defined by its perceptual activity, while sensible objects are characterised by their passivity in the act of perception.

However, what is important is that the subject who perceives and the object perceived both belong to the perceptual situation and are conditioned by it. Consequently, if the existence of the object is determined in relation to perception, so also must be the existence of the subject. Thus the positive thrust of the new principle also includes the existence of the subject since there can be no object perceived without a subject.

What Berkeley’s distinction between percipi and percipere suggests is the following: while the presentation of the new principle as esse est

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18 See Principles, section 21. T.E. Jessop explicitly suggests that Berkeley esse est percipi is the "a priori ground for his immaterialism, meaning that it is a contradiction in terms to speak of anything corporeal a either imperceptible or entirely unperceived". See his "Editor’s Introduction" The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne. Vol. 2 reprint edition (London: Thomas Nelson, 1949), p. 9

19 Ibid.
percipi is not incorrect, it is incomplete. It is not incorrect since it expresses the aspect of Berkeley's overall thesis that has to do with the being of sensible objects. On the other hand, its incompleteness stems from the fact that it leaves the second part of the story unexpressed: the aspect that pertains to the existence of spirit. Expressing the principle as esse est percipi aut percipere removes the ambiguity that might otherwise be generated with respect to Berkeley's doctrine of existence.20

Technical Expression of the New Principle

What we have seen so far, is a non-technical presentation of the new principle. But, as Frederick Copleston21 notes, the point of Berkeley's new principle, namely the mind-dependence of sensible objects, can be expressed technically. The technical rendition of the main thrust of the new principle is what is implicated in Berkeley's doctrine of ideas, especially his characterization of sensible objects as collection of ideas. Ideas, as everyone would readily grant, stand in a unique relation to the mind. It is impossible to conceive of ideas without implicating their relation to the mind.

Indeed it is the mind-relatedness of ideas that Berkeley exploits in formulating his idealist metaphysics. In this technical scheme, the point of Berkeley's new principle is the claim that just as ideas are related to the mind, so do sensible objects depend on mind for their being. To conceive of the absolute existence of sensible objects without any relation to the mind would give rise to a similar sort of contradiction that the existence of ideas would give rise to should it be divorced from the mind.

To understand his philosophy, the vocabulary of ideas and Berkeley's peculiar use of it in expounding his idealist metaphysics is important. It should be mentioned here by way of preliminary, that by the time of Berkeley, the vocabulary of ideas had become fashionable as the accepted mode of intellectual discourse. But in adopting this prevalent vocabulary in working out his epistemology, which ultimately sub-serves his metaphysics, Berkeley introduces an interesting modification, which, in the final analysis, represents the substance of his thesis. He begins the Principles by declaring thus:

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It is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge that, they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind or lastly ideas formed by the help of memory and imagination, either compounding, dividing, or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways. By sight I have the ideas of light and colour with their several degrees and variation. By touch I perceive, for example hard or soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance, and of all these more or less either as a quantity or degree. Smelling furnishes me with odours; the palate with tastes and hearing conveys sounds to the mind in all their variety of tone and composition. And as several of these are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing. Thus, for example, a certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name apple. Other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and the like sensible things; which, as they are pleasing or disagreeable, excite the passions of love, hatred, joy, grief, and so forth.\footnote{Principles, section 1.}

The typical Lockean fashion of the opening section of Berkeley’s *Principles* should be noticed. The general acceptability of describing objects of knowledge in terms of ideas is implied by Berkeley’s supposition that “it is evident…” However, this may not be so evident to the contemporary reader, as this manner of speaking has become anachronistic. But to Berkeley’s contemporaries, it was certainly a safe assumption. Descartes employed the same vocabulary and Locke popularised it in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.\footnote{We refer to Locke's work hereafter as *Essay*. E. J. Lowe correctly observes that Locke's *Essay* marks a watershed in philosophical thought. More precisely, it inaugurates a new tradition in which the relationship between philosophy and Science assumes a new dimension. The new science will gradually assert its autonomy. See his *Locke on Human Understanding* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 11-14.} But Berkeley’s peculiar usage of ideas is what is relevant for the present purpose.

In both Locke and Descartes' usage, the theory of knowledge that ensues from this tends towards subjectivism\footnote{It is wrong to suggest that Descartes and Locke were solipsists. Their various attempts to offer a philosophical justification for the belief in the external world, however, do not exclude this possibility. This point is further developed in chapter three in the section dealing with Reid's critique of the ideal system. See below, pp. 63-68. In Chapter Two, it is shown that while Reid correctly perceived the danger} since it presupposes that we
can know nothing but the modification of our own mind. Though Locke had inaugurated a different approach to knowledge, the empirical approach in contradistinction from Descartes’ rationalist approach, what he had succeeded in doing was merely giving an empiricist grounding to Descartes’ “clear and distinct ideas”–the criterion of indubitability. 25 Berkeley follows Locke in using the vocabulary of ideas, but his novel contribution consists in his qualified use of ‘ideas’ with respect to sensible objects.

Whereas, in the Lockean and Cartesian framework, we cannot know sensible objects directly, but indirectly only through ideas, Berkeley holds that such a direct acquaintance is possible, and the insistence that what we see and touch is the real thing, and not mere appearance represents the shift he introduces in the use of ideas to speak about objects of knowledge. 26 He does not disagree that sensible objects are ideas, but he maintains–and this is the crucial qualification–that ideas are things and not the representation of sensible objects. 27

In view of the foregoing, it becomes easier to make sense of our suggestion that there is a technical presentation of the new principle. In its non technical sense, the new principle is rendered, using the category of perception. In its technical sense, it is rendered with the category of ideas. But each of the renditions generates the same conclusion: the mind-dependence of sensible objects. Sensible objects are mind-dependent because they are necessarily related to perception of them, or in the technical sense, being ideas, ideas cannot be conceived apart from the mind.

The whole argument of the new principle is summarized in the first six sections of the *Principles*, with the sixth section expressing conclusively the logic of the new principle:

Some truths there are so near and obvious to the mind, that a man need only open his eyes to see them. Such I take this important one to be, to wit, that all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those

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27 Cf. *Principles*, Sections 33-36
bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any substance without a mind, that their being is to be perceived or known; that consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by me or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some external spirit: it being perfectly unintelligible and involving all absurdity of abstraction, to attribute to any single part of them an existence independent of a spirit.  

3. The New Principle and Scepticism

Berkeley establishes a direct link between the New Principle and scepticism. He takes it that the reverse of the new principle, namely that esse is not percipi, leads expressly to scepticism, while the new principle avoids such a pernicious conclusion. To appreciate Berkeley’s optimism requires an understanding of the fundamental presupposition implicated in the reverse of the principle: that there is a dichotomy between appearance and reality. According to Berkeley, to say that esse is not percipi amounts to creating such a gap. The world of perception then is taken to be a world of appearance, not the real world. To discover the real world, on this assumption, involves going beyond what is given in the perceptual context. Thus, the possibility is created that what I am seeing when I am looking at a tree is not the real tree, but only an imaginary tree. The real tree is hidden under the veil of perception.

We observe that there is a historical dimension to this assumption. We deal with it more extensively later in the chapter in the context of Berkeley’s appraisal of the corpuscular philosophy and the representative theory of perception. For present purpose, it suffices to consider that Berkeley believes that once the dichotomy between appearance and reality is granted, the inevitable result is scepticism. The intent of the new principle is precisely to block such a gap. In doing so, Berkeley believes himself to have taken care of scepticism once and for all. While the reverse of the principle thrives on the alleged separation between what is

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28 *Principles*, section 6.
30 It is quite possible to assume that Berkeley’s abrogation of the disjunction between appearance and reality means we can no longer distinguish between what is merely imaginary and what is real. In this case, it means there is no way we can tell between a dream event and a real life event. In section 34, Berkeley indicates this is not what he means. He insists that "whatever we see, feel, hear... remains as secure as ever, and is as real as ever. There is a rerum natura, and the distinction between realities and chimeras retains its full force." *Principles*, section 34.
real and what is given in perception, and so leads to scepticism, Berkeley’s new principle overturns this assumption.\textsuperscript{31}

Translated into the technical language of “ideas” the new principle tries to avoid the supposition that things are distinct from ideas. In \textit{Philosophical Commentaries}, Berkeley declares that “such a supposition takes away all real truth; and consequently brings a universal scepticism, since all our knowledge and contemplation is confined barely to our ideas.”\textsuperscript{32} Berkeley makes this point more explicitly in the \textit{Principles}, stressing what the new principle is meant to avoid.

We have been led into very dangerous errors by supposing a twofold existence of the objects of sense, the one intelligible or in the mind, the other real and without the mind: whereby unthinking things are thought to have a natural subsistence of their own, distinct from being perceived by spirits. This which, if I mistake not, hath been shown (sic) to be a most groundless and absurd notion, is the very root of scepticism, for so long as men thought that real things subsisted without the mind, and that their knowledge was only so far forth real as it was conformable to real things, it follows, they could not be certain that they had any real knowledge at all. For how can it be known, that the things, which are perceived, are conformable to those which are not perceived, or exist without the mind?\textsuperscript{33}

In the \textit{Dialogues}, after a protracted discussion of the implication of the doctrine of ideas, Hylas is brought to admit the sceptical potentials of the premise. But he goes on to remark in a way that apparently suggests that the new approach being canvassed by Philonous, namely, the abolition of the alleged dichotomy between appearance and reality, is bedevilled with similar sceptical consequences. Philonous’ response is relevant for clarifying the present point on the status of Berkeley’s new principle \textit{vis-à-vis} the phenomenon of scepticism. Let us begin by recalling the conversation.

Philonous has just suggested that the scepticism that the alleged separation generates flies in the face of common sense: “To be plain, can you expect this scepticism of yours will not be thought extravagantly absurd by all men of sense?”\textsuperscript{34} To this suggestion, Hylas replied: “other

\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Philosophical Commentaries}, 606.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Principles}, section 86.
\textsuperscript{34} Second Dialogue
men may think as they please but for your part you have nothing to reproach me with. My comfort is that you are as much a sceptic as I am.”

In defiance of Philonous’ protest and plea for understanding, Hylas continues: "What! Have you all along agreed to the premise, and do you now deny the conclusion, and leave me to maintain those paradoxes by myself which you led me into? This is surely not fair.”

What is important for our purpose is Berkeley’s defence of this charge of alleged complicity in desecrating common sense. It should already be clear that Hylas’ charge immediately raises question as to the relation of Berkeley’s principle to common sense. Hylas apparently suggests that Philonous as much as himself does violence to common sense. We will see in chapter three that Hylas’ misgivings express in part a great deal of what we have termed the traditional perception of Berkeley. The new interpretation of Berkeley which is articulated through the “prism” of Gavin Ardley is fundamentally analogous to Philonous’ attempt to resist the alleged imputation of desecration of common sense by the new principle.

Here is Philonous’ defence:

I deny that I agree with you in those notions that led to scepticism. You indeed said the reality of sensible things consisted in an absolute existence out of the minds of spirits, or distinct from their being perceived. And pursuant to this notion of reality, you are obliged to deny sensible things any real existence: that is, according to your own definition, you profess yourself a sceptic. But I neither said nor thought the reality of sensible things was to be defended after that manner. To me it is evident, for the reason you allow of, that sensible things cannot exist otherwise than in a mind or spirit. Whence I conclude, not that they have no real existence, but that seeing they depend not on my thought, and have an existence distinct from being perceived by me, there must be some other mind wherein they exist. As sure, therefore, as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite omnipresent spirit who contains and supports it.

We conclude this section by drawing attention to the centrality of the esse est percipi doctrine in Berkeley’s immaterialist framework. From what we have seen so far, it could be argued that the new principle is the thread that unites the various elements in Berkeley’s philosophy. Some

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35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ardley’s reading of Berkeley’s immaterialism is representative of the realist interpretation of Berkeley’s philosophy. It is treated in Chapter Three. See below, pp. 93-101
38 Ibid.