

BERKELEY'S ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD IN THE *THREE
DIALOGUES*

Samuel C. Rickless

[Penultimate version: to appear in *Berkeley's Three Dialogues Between Hylas and
Philonous: A Critical Guide*]

Readers of George Berkeley's two major works, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* ("*Principles*") and *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* ("*Dialogues*"), cannot help but be struck by the fact that his argument for the existence of God in the former appears to be significantly different from his argument for the existence of God in the latter. The argument from the *Principles* appears designed to establish the existence of God as the *cause* of the sensible world, while the argument from the *Dialogues* appears designed to establish the existence of God as the *continuous perceiver* of the sensible world when no finite mind is perceiving it.¹ My aim in this chapter is to analyze these arguments, focusing particularly on the latter, with a view to determining how similar or dissimilar they in fact are.

1. The Argument in the *Principles*

To fix ideas, it helps to recapitulate the main lines of the *Principles* argument for the existence of God. In the early sections of the *Principles*, Berkeley assumes that the world is composed of substances and their qualities, and that sensible qualities (whether

¹ Partly for these reasons, many Berkeley scholars follow Jonathan Bennett (1965; 1971; 2001) in calling the former, "the passivity argument", and the latter, "the continuity argument". For others, though, these monikers are tendentious or unjustified, and I will try to avoid them.

primary, such as shape, size, motion, and number, or secondary, such as colors, sounds, tastes, and smells) are nothing more than ideas (PHK 1).² He argues that sensible objects (such as houses, mountains, and rivers) are collections of ideas, given that sensible objects are no more than collections of sensible qualities (PHK 4). Understanding “material substance” to mean “an inert, senseless substance, in which extension, figure, and motion, do actually subsist”, Berkeley argues that the very notion of such a thing is self-contradictory, inasmuch as extension, figure, and motion are ideas, and ideas cannot subsist in anything other than a mind that perceives them (PHK 9). Given that the only things in existence are substances and their qualities, it follows that the world is composed entirely and solely of minds (active, immaterial substances) and the ideas (or collections thereof) that they are needed to support (by perceiving them).

Berkeley notes that ideas themselves are all “visibly inactive”. This is because ideas “exist only in the mind”, and hence “there is nothing in them but what is perceived”. And given that we do not perceive our ideas to be active, activity is not “contained in them” (PHK 25). Being inactive, ideas (or collections thereof) cannot serve as causes of

² The standard reference for Berkeley’s writings is: *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, 9 vols. Edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson, 1948-1957). Passages from the main text of the *Principles* are cited as “PHK” followed by the relevant section number. Passages from the Introduction to the *Principles* are cited as “I” followed by the relevant section number. Passages from the *Dialogues* are cited as “DHP” followed by the relevant page number from *Works*. Passages from *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* are cited as “NTV” followed by the relevant section number. And passages from the (unpublished) *Notebooks* (sometimes called “*Philosophical Commentaries*”) are cited by the relevant section number.

For the one quotation from Hume below, see *David Hume: A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, with text revised and notes by P. H. Nidditch, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978). Passages from the *Treatise* are cited in the form: (T Book.Part.Section.Paragraph: Page; SBN Page).

themselves or of other ideas (or collections thereof). But our sensible ideas are constantly changing, and every change has a cause. So sensible ideas must be caused by a mind or minds (PHK 26). But my sensible ideas cannot be caused by my mind, because they are produced there whether I will them or not. So my sensible ideas must be caused by a mind or minds that are distinct from mine (PHK 29).

Thus far, Berkeley's argument is deductive, valid, and based on his previous arguments for the idealistic claim that the only things in existence are minds and their ideas, and for his claim that ideas cannot have any causal powers. Having established that there must be at least one, and possibly more than one, mind other than his that is the cause of his sensible ideas, Berkeley's task is to show that there is no more than one such mind, and that this unique cause of his sensible ideas is "eternal, infinitely wise, good, and perfect" (PHK 146).

Berkeley's argument for this conclusion is based on the assumption (established by observation) that his ideas of sense exhibit a perfect order and regularity and a perfect harmony of an infinite number of parts integrated into a whole universe of unsurpassed beauty (PHK 30-33, 146-147—see also DHP 210-211). But the best (perhaps the only) explanation of perfect order and harmonization of infinite complexity is that its cause is itself both unitary and perfect in itself. Berkeley realizes that a committee of (essentially free) minds would never have produced anything as orderly and harmonious, and nothing short of an infinitely perfect cause could itself be responsible for the existence of an infinitely perfect effect. The cause of the sensible world, then, must be a unique and infinitely perfect mind, that is, God.

It is unclear from Berkeley's presentation of it whether the argument for the uniqueness and perfection of the cause of his sensible ideas is meant to be deductive or abductive. It is clear enough that he takes our knowledge of God's existence derived from the observed properties of his "effects or concomitant signs" to be mediated by the ideas of sense that testify to his existence (PHK 145). And mediate knowledge of this sort, for Berkeley, is knowledge based on inference. Beyond this, Berkeley stays mum, because he does not possess the conceptual machinery to distinguish clearly between deduction and abduction. But we can, on his behalf, guess that he would likely have endorsed the following analysis. The claim that the cause of one's ideas of sense is unique cannot be established deductively. The uniqueness of the cause of one's sensible ideas is derived from the fact that they are orderly, rather than chaotic. But orderliness (even *perfect, exceptionless* regularity) could, in principle, be produced by a committee of minds working together. However, it is extremely unlikely for (free) minds never, under any circumstances yet experienced, to disagree sufficiently to cause even minor deviations from perceived regularities. That the cause of his ideas is unique therefore follows abductively from (i.e., as the best explanation of), rather than deductively from, perceived regularity. The same seems true of the argument for the goodness of the (unique) cause. The fact that nature, and nature's predictability, is useful for all sorts of human purposes does not *entail* that its cause must be *perfectly* good. But it is reasonable to suppose that, for Berkeley, the best explanation for the *extent* to which nature serves human purposes is that its creator is supremely beneficent. On the other hand, the fact sensible ideas are infinitely numerous yet harmonized seems to *entail* that their cause must be omniscient and omnipotent. For only an infinitely knowledgeable and powerful being could

successfully produce infinitely numerous and mutually harmonious effects. If these speculations, based on what it is reasonable to suppose Berkeley would have recognized if it had been pointed out to him, are correct, then the step from the existence of at least one mind numerically distinct from his own to the uniqueness and perfection of that mind in the *Principles* argument for God's existence is partly abductive and partly deductive.³

2. The Important Passages from the *Dialogues*

On the surface of the text, at least, the contrast between the causation-based *Principles* argument and the argument of the *Dialogues* could not be greater. The relevant passages are scattered throughout the *Second* and *Third Dialogues*, and it will be useful to refer to them later, so I have identified them in order by tagging them with a letter of the alphabet:⁴

Passage A

To me it is evident, for the reasons 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

³ I therefore find myself in disagreement with Fields (2011, 224-225), who reads this part of the argument as wholly deductive, Jesseph (2005, 193-194), who reads it as wholly abductive, and Dicker (2011, 261-262), who reads it as wholly inductive. For more on Berkeley's argument for the existence of God in the *Principles*, see Bennett (1971, 165-169), Dicker (2011, 230-232 and 261-263), Ksenjek and Flage (2012), and Rickless (2013b).

⁴ In each passage, the speaker is Philonous, who is clearly Berkeley's spokesperson in the *Dialogues*.

therefore as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite, omnipresent spirit who contains and supports it. (DHP 212)

Passage B

Men commonly believe that all things are known or perceived by God, because they believe the being of a God, whereas I on the other side, immediately and necessarily conclude the being of a God, because all sensible things must be perceived by him. (DHP 212)

Passage C

Besides, is there no difference between saying, *there is a God, therefore he perceives all things*: and saying, *sensible things do really exist: and if they really exist, they are necessarily perceived by an infinite mind: therefore there is an infinite mind or God*. This furnishes you with a direct and immediate demonstration, from a most evident principle, of the *being of a God*.⁵ (DHP 212)

Passage D

But that setting aside all help of astronomy and natural philosophy, all contemplation of the contrivance, order, and adjustment of things, an infinite mind should be necessarily inferred from the bare existence of the sensible world, is an advantage peculiar to them only who have made this easy reflection: that the sensible world is that which we

⁵ Note that, by contrast, Berkeley writes that “[i]t is granted we have neither an immediate evidence nor a demonstrative knowledge of the existence of other finite spirits” (DHP 233).

perceive by our several senses; and that nothing is perceived by the senses beside ideas; and that no idea or archetype of an idea can exist otherwise than in a mind. You may now, without any laborious search into the sciences, without any subtlety of reason, or tedious length of discourse, oppose and baffle the most strenuous advocate for atheism. Those miserable refuges, whether in an eternal succession of unthinking causes and effects, or in a fortuitous concourse of atoms; those wild imaginations of Vanini, Hobbes, and Spinoza; in a word the whole system of atheism, is it not entirely overthrown by this single reflection on the repugnancy included in supposing the whole, or any part, even the most rude and shapeless of the visible world, to exist without a mind? Let any one of those abettors of impiety but look into his own thoughts, and there try if he can conceive how so much as a rock, a desert, a chaos, or confused jumble of atoms; how any thing at all, either sensible or imaginable, can exist independent of a mind, and he need go no farther to be convinced of his folly. (DHP 212-213)

Passage E

Take here in brief my meaning. It is evident that the things I perceive are my own ideas, and that no idea can exist unless it be in a mind. Nor is it less plain that these ideas or things by me perceived, either themselves or their archetypes, exist independently of my mind, since I know myself not to be their author, it being out of my power to determine at pleasure, what particular ideas I shall be affected with upon opening my eyes or ears. They must therefore exist in some other mind, whose will it is they should be exhibited to me. The things, I say, immediately perceived, are ideas or sensations, call them which you will. But how can any idea or sensation exist in, or be produced by, any thing but a

mind or spirit? This indeed is inconceivable; and to assert that which is inconceivable, is to talk nonsense...But on the other hand, it is very conceivable that they [i.e., ideas or sensations] should exist in, and be produced by, a spirit; since this is no more than I daily experience in myself, inasmuch as I perceive numberless ideas; and by an act of my Will can form a great variety of them, and raise them up in my imagination: though it must be confessed, these creatures of the fancy are not altogether so distinct, so strong, vivid, and permanent, as those perceived by my senses, which latter are called *real things*. From all which I conclude, *there is a mind which affects me every moment with all the sensible impressions I perceive*. And from the variety, order, and manner of these, I conclude the Author of them to be *wise, powerful, and good beyond comprehension*. Mark it well; I do not say [as Malebranche does], I see things by perceiving that which represents them in the intelligible substance of God. This I do not understand; but I say, the things by me perceived are known by the understanding, and produced by the will, of an infinite spirit. (DHP 214-215)

Passage F

When I deny sensible things an existence out of the mind, I do not mean my mind in particular, but all minds. Now it is plain they have an existence exterior to my mind, since I find them by experience of be independent of it. There is therefore some other mind wherein they exist, during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them: as likewise they did before my birth, and would do after my supposed annihilation. And as the same is true, with regard to all other finite created spirits; it necessarily follows, 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*. (DHP 230-231)

Passage G

Farther, from my own being, and from the dependency I find in my self and my ideas, I do by an act of reason, necessarily infer the existence of a God, and of all created things in the mind of God. (DHP 232)

Passage H

But then to a Christian it cannot surely be shocking to say, the real tree existing without his mind is truly known and comprehended by (that is, *exists in*) the infinite mind of God. Probably he may not at first glance be aware of the direct and immediate proof there is of this, inasmuch as the very being of a tree, or any other sensible thing, implies a mind wherein it is. (DHP 235)

Passage I

I assert as well as you, that since we are affected from without, we must allow powers to be without in a being distinct from ourselves. So far we are agreed. But then we differ as to the kind of this powerful being. I will have it to be spirit, you matter, or I know not what (I may add too, you know not what) third nature. Thus I prove it to be spirit. From the effects I see produced, I conclude there are actions; and because actions, volitions; and because there are volitions, there must be a will. Again, the things I perceive must have an existence, they or their archetypes, out of my mind: but being ideas, neither they

nor their archetypes can exist otherwise than in an understanding: there is therefore an understanding. But will and understanding constitute in the strictest sense a mind or spirit. The powerful cause of my ideas, is in strict propriety of speech a *spirit*. (DHP 240)

3. Interpretive Issues

In these passages, the dominant theme, particularly in passages A, E, F, G, H, and I, is that God exists because (a) sensible things, being ideas, must exist in some mind, yet (b) sensible things exist independently of *my* mind, and hence (c) sensible things exist in a mind that is distinct from mine.⁶ If existence in a mind is different from being caused by a mind, it follows that the main train of thought of the *Dialogues* argument differs markedly from the main train of thought in the *Principles* argument. But there are complications relating to numerous themes in the texts other than the dominant one, some of which have led scholars to see greater overlap or similarity between the two arguments.

First, there is the issue of the relation between existence in a mind and perception by that mind, for Berkeley also says, in passages B and C, that God exists because

⁶ Stoneham (2002, 154-157) takes the argument's conclusion here, as expressed both in passage A and in a stretch that includes or overlaps with passage E, to be, not (c), but the claim that sensible things *ontologically depend on* a mind that is distinct from mine. Stoneham understands ontological dependence to be "the dependence of a thing created upon its creator" (2002, 156), where this kind of dependence is a kind of need to be sustained in existence (2002, 155). But this is not an accurate representation of Berkeley's conclusion in any passage (including A and E). In passage A, for example, Philonous tells us that his conclusion is that "*there must be some other mind wherein [sensible things] exist*", and in passage E, Philonous concludes that "[the things by me perceived] must therefore exist in some other mind". Claims about dependence—which, I should add, are not best understood as claims about *ontological* dependence—appear as *premises* in the arguments of A and E, but no statement involving the concept of dependence, ontological or otherwise, appears as the conclusion of the reasoning in either passage.

sensible things are perceived by him. Second, if, as Berkeley says in passage I, mind or spirit is composed of a will and an understanding, it is a question whether the (a)-(b)-(c) train of reasoning could be reasonably thought to establish the existence of an infinite *mind*, rather than merely an infinite *understanding*. Third, there is the abiding continuity-related question of whether, and, if so, how, this train of reasoning is supposed to establish, as Berkeley suggests in passage F, that God perceives sensible things when I fail to perceive them. Fourth, there is the issue of whether what is proved to exist in God's mind are sensible things (as passages A, B, C, F, G, and H suggest) or, possibly, their divine archetypes (as passages D, E, and I suggest). Fifth, there is the issue, raised explicitly by passage F, of whether the proof of God's existence depends on the (a)-(b)-(c) train of reasoning being applied not just to one finite mind, but to *all* finite minds. Sixth, there is the issue (most explicitly raised in passages D and E) of whether the mind (other than mine) in which sensible things exist has to be unique and perfect, i.e., the mind of *God*. Seventh, there is the question, raised especially by passages B, C, G, and H, of whether Berkeley thinks that his proof of God's existence is deductive or abductive. Eighth, and finally, there is the question of just how similar or different the arguments from the *Principles* and *Dialogues* really are at the end of the day.

4. Existence in the Mind

Let us consider these issues in order in order to see what picture of the argument as a whole emerges from our investigation. First, Berkeley argues in passage A that an infinite omnipresent mind exists because sensible objects *exist in* that mind. In passages B and C, by seeming contrast, he argues that there is an infinite mind (or God) because

sensible objects are *perceived by* that mind. But the contrast is merely apparent, not real. As Philonous insists when Hylas worries about there being sufficient “room for all those trees and houses to exist in” a finite mind: “Look you, Hylas, when I speak of objects as existing in the mind...; I would not be understood in the gross literal sense, as when bodies are said to exist in a place...My meaning is only that the mind comprehends or perceives them” (DHP 250—see also PHK 2). So although Berkeley uses different words in passages A and B-C to refer to the provable relation between God’s mind and sensible things (“existing in”, “perceiving”), the meaning attached to those words is the same. And this means that it is all the same whether Berkeley argues from (a) and (b) to (c), or whether he argues from (a’) and (b) to (c’):

(a’) Sensible things, being ideas, must be perceived by some mind.

(b) Sensible things exist independently of my mind.

So, (c’) Sensible things are perceived by a mind that is distinct from mine.

5. Will and Understanding

Second, there is the question of whether (a’) and (b) could reasonably be thought to entail that sensible things exist in (in the sense of being perceived by) some *mind* other than mine. For Berkeley distinguishes between will and understanding, claiming that the mind is constituted by the combination of both will and understanding (passage I—see also PHK 27). As Berkeley emphasizes, the mind is active when it wills and passive when it understands or perceives. Indeed, as he sees matters, it is impossible to conceive of any action besides volition (DHP 217), and hence the mind “is to be accounted active in its

perceptions, so far forth as volition is included in them” (DHP 196). By contrast, in the perception of ideas such as smells and colors (and, by parity of reasoning, in the perception of all ideas of sense), the mind is “in these respects altogether passive” (DHP 196). It follows, then, that, logically speaking, the conjunction of (a’) and (b) establishes *at most* the existence of an *understanding* that is distinct from mine, one that perceives sensible objects that exist independently of my mind. Whether there is a *will* distinct from mine is something that the conjunction of (a’) and (b) cannot establish.

Why, then, does Berkeley represent his argument in passages A, C, E, F, G and H as establishing the existence of an infinite *mind* from the fact that there must be something distinct from my mind that perceives sensible objects? The reason is that the argument, as represented in these passages, is truncated. What Berkeley has given us in these passages is only *part* of his argument for God’s existence. The other part, as passage I makes clear, is a piece of reasoning designed to establish the existence of a divine will. The relevant words from passage I are these:

From the effects I see produced, I conclude there are actions; and because actions, volitions; and because there are volitions, there must be a will. (DHP 240)

Berkeley’s reasoning, spelled out slightly more fully, is this. Our ideas of sense are constantly changing, and for every change there must be a cause of that change (see PHK 26). But since inert things (such as ideas) can’t be causes, only active things can be causes. But active things perform actions, and actions proceed from the volition to act. (If you raise my arm, I do not act if I do not have a volition to act. But if I raise my arm,

I act, and the fact that my arm rises is a direct consequence of the fact that I will to raise my arm.) It follows, then, that the change in my ideas must be produced by some substance that wills to produce this change.

So Berkeley has an argument for the existence of an understanding other than his own that perceives sensible things that exist independently of his mind, as well as a *separate* argument (not stated in most of the passages in which he draws the conclusion that the relevant understanding belongs to a mind or spirit) for the existence of a substance whose will it is that his ideas of sense should change in the way they do. What should be noted here is that this pair of arguments, on its own, is not sufficient to establish that the relevant understanding and will belong to the *same* mind or spirit. For all Berkeley has told us *thus far*, the understanding that perceives the sensible objects that exist independently of his mind might belong to one mind, while the will that causes him to perceive the sensible objects he does might belong to another.

However, as Winkler (1989, 207 ff.) helpfully points out, Berkeley commits to the principle, popular among his philosophical predecessors and contemporaries, that blind agency is impossible. This principle is explicitly stated in his *Notebooks* (sections 674, 841, 842, and especially 812, where he writes that “in truth a blind Agent is a Contradiction”), and there are signs of the principle in several places in his published works. As he puts it in a sentence that immediately precedes passage I: “[A] thing which hath no ideas in itself, cannot impart them to me” (DHP 239). The reason for this, we may reasonably presume, as Winkler does, is that it is impossible for X to will that Y have an idea that X does not perceive. And this is because volitions have content, and anyone with a volition must perceive the content of that volition. So if the content of X’s

volition is that Y perceive idea Z, then X must perceive Z.⁷ From the denial of blind agency and the claim that my ideas of sense are caused by the volitions of another mind, it follows that the latter mind must perceive the ideas that it wills that I perceive. So if Berkeley's argument in passage I to the existence of an external will is successful, the denial of blind agency guarantees that the mind to which this will belongs also possesses an understanding by which it perceives the sensible ideas it is willing that I perceive. And the combination of will and understanding, by Berkeley's own lights, constitutes a single mind or spirit, by definition.

One interesting consequence of reading Berkeley's argument for an external mind causing one's ideas of sense as dependent on the denial of blind agency is that it helps to clarify the meaning of (b) and the nature of the inference from (a') and (b) to (c). Premise (b) states that sensible things exist independently of my mind. This is *not* the claim that sensible things exist in a mind other than mine, because that is a conclusion Berkeley is trying to establish, and thus not something he is entitled to assume in his argument for it. Rather, to say, as Berkeley does, that sensible things exist independently

⁷ McDonough (2008, 589) argues that if blind agency were impossible, then, when a mind conjures up a new idea of imagination Z, it would have to have an idea of Z as part of the volition to perceive Z. This principle, worries McDonough, would lead to infinite regress. I myself do not see the danger of infinite regress, for regress beckons only if conjuring up a new idea of imagination requires *conjuring up* an idea of that idea. But it is unclear that Berkeley is committed to this.

Besides the worry about infinite regress, there appears to be a more serious problem. For it appears that Berkeley is committed to the view that a necessary condition of a mind's conjuring up a *new* idea is that the mind possess the idea prior to its being conjured up. But this is incoherent. Luckily, I believe, Berkeley is not forced into incoherence. For he does not take the conjuring up of a new idea in one's own mind to happen by willing that *that very idea* be perceived by oneself. Conjuring up new ideas happens only when the imagination combines already perceived ideas into new collections (as it does when it combines the ideas of a goat, lion, and snake to form the idea of a chimera). And combination does not require antecedent perception of the result of the combination.

of my mind is to say that these things exist independently of my *will*. As Berkeley makes clear in passage E, it is sufficient for ideas of sense to “exist independently of my mind” that “I know myself not to be their author, it being out of my power to determine at pleasure, what particular ideas I shall be affected with upon opening my eyes or ears”. This is easily explained on the supposition that Berkeley is thinking of mind-independence here strictly in terms of *will*-independence. I perceive the ideas of sense that I do whether I will to do so or not. The fact that I perceive these ideas is therefore, in some recognizable sense of “independent”, independent of my will. And this is all that Berkeley *means* when he says that ideas of sense exist independently of his *mind*.⁸ The right way to read premise (b), then, is as (b’): Sensible things exist independently of my

⁸ Atherton (1995, 243) rightly points out that many sensible things, qua collections of ideas, are mediately perceived, because some of the ideas that make up the collections are suggested to the mind by ideas that are immediately perceived (that is, perceived but not by perceiving something else to which they are related). Inasmuch as the suggested, mediately perceived ideas are dependent on regular and reliable correlations in our experience, and these correlations are based on standards that are distinct from my own existence and independent of my mind, Atherton takes the collections partially constituted by these ideas to have “a distinct existence, independent of any particular finite perceiver”. This suggestion is clever, but I find myself disagreeing with it. The fact that the standards for associating ideas via suggestion are independent of my mind does not entail that the collection that comprises the suggested ideas must exist independently of my mind. Even if the rules and laws that govern idea association have an existence distinct from my existence, it might still be that all ideas that are governed by these laws depend for their existence on my mind. After all, when I perceive a cherry, even if I perceive some of its parts only mediately, I still perceive them. And if I perceive them, it may well be that their existence is tied to my existence, in the sense that they would cease to exist if I ceased to exist. The fact that cherries exist independently of my mind does not simply fall out of Berkeley’s metaphysics of sensible objects combined with a claim about the mind-independence of the laws governing suggestion. What we find instead, in places such as passage E, is the claim that cherries exist independently of my mind by virtue of the fact that they (and hence, their components) exist independently of my will.

will. The inference from (a') and (b) to (c), then, is really just the inference from (a') and (b') to (c'):

(a') Sensible things, being ideas, must be perceived by some mind.

(b') Sensible things exist independently of my will.

So, (c') Sensible things are perceived by a mind that is distinct from mine.

As should now be clear, the road from (a') and (b') to (c') is complex and enthymematic, in a way that relies on premises of the *Principles* argument for God's existence. According to (a') and (b'), sensible things are ideas that exist independently of my will. Since these ideas are produced in me by some cause that must be an action effected by a volition to produce those very ideas, and since that volition does not belong to me, it follows that they are produced in me by volitions issuing from a will that is distinct from mine.⁹ By the denial of blind agency, any being that wills that I perceive ideas must perceive those same ideas. Thus, the will that is distinct from mine must be allied with an understanding, thereby constituting a mind external to mine, a mind that perceives the sensible ideas that exist independently of my will. This is the most reasonable way of filling out Berkeley's otherwise severely truncated argument from (a') and (b') to (c').

⁹ This part of the argument is similar, but not identical to, the part of the *Principles* argument that establishes that the cause of my sensible ideas is a substance distinct from my mind. It shares the assumptions that sensible ideas are independent of my will and that they must be caused by something, and uses these assumptions to establish, deductively, that something that is external to my mind is causing my sensible ideas. But it departs from the *Principles* argument inasmuch as it relies on assumptions about actions and volitions, rather than on an assumption about the impossibility of material substance.

6. Continuity

At this point, it is worth asking what role, if any, the continuity of sensible objects plays in the *Dialogues* argument for God's existence. Thus far, it should be clear that continuity plays no role, and it may be something like this fact that explains, at least in part, why some scholars have been drawn to the interpretive hypothesis that the appeal to continuity in passage F is not much more than a "momentary aberration" (Bennett 1971, 171; Tipton 1974, 323) or as "tenuous evidence" that Berkeley argues for God's existence on the basis of continuity (Botterill 2007, 92). And yet, Berkeley could not be clearer in passage F that he takes the premises of the *Dialogues* argument to be sufficient to establish that sensible things exist in (i.e., are perceived by) the mind of another "during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them", as well as "before my birth" and "after my supposed annihilation". For scholars such as Bennett, Tipton, and Botterill, Berkeley is just making an unfortunate mistake. I believe we can do better.

There have been numerous efforts on Berkeley's behalf to explain or to justify the step to the continued existence of sensible objects in an external mind. One view, suggested by Warnock (1953, 113), is that Berkeley simply assumes at the outset, as a matter of common sense, that sensible things continue to exist when unperceived by finite minds. And it may be thought, as Winkler (1989, 212-213) suggests, that this assumption can be "carried down to the argument's conclusion", in such a way as to establish that the mind external to mine in which sensible things exist perceives them even when I do not. But there are several problems with this suggestion. The first is that Berkeley is somewhat selective when it comes to endorsing the deliverances of common sense. On the one hand, he is ready to "vindicate" the following commonsensical claims: that

sensible qualities really are on sensible objects, that we must believe our senses, that we know something of the real nature of sensible things, that we can be assured of their existence, that colors and sounds are not identical to shapes or motions, that motions in themselves are either swift or slow, that all bodies must have some determinate size and shape, that thoughtless and inactive things cannot operate on a mind, and that the smallest particle does not contain infinitely many parts (DHP 244). Yet, at the same time, he famously insists, when discussing the question whether it is fire or spirit that heats (or whether it is water or spirit than cools), that “in such things we ought to *think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar*” (PHK 51). Common folk, as Berkeley recognizes, want to say that fire heats. But “in a strict and speculative sense”, this statement is false, just as it is false to claim that the sun rises (PHK 52). Moreover, Berkeley takes it to be true in a strict and speculative sense that “we eat and drink ideas, and are clothed with ideas”, even though he acknowledges that this is a form of “expression which varies from the familiar use of language” (PHK 38). So, even if Berkeley styles himself, as he sometimes does, as a champion of common sense (I 1), it is really impossible to know whether he would treat the proposition that sensible objects continue to exist when unperceived by any finite minds as an article of common sense to be vindicated or as a vulgar and familiar mode of expression that is strictly and speculatively false.

Worse, perhaps, is the fact that this proposition, even if “carried down to the argument’s conclusion”, is insufficient to establish the result, explicitly drawn in passage F, that sensible objects are continuously perceived by the *same* external mind when I and other finite minds fail to perceive them. For even if it is the same external mind that is producing and perceiving the sensible ideas that I *actually* perceive, the assumption that

those ideas continue to exist when I am not perceiving them, combined with the axiom that no idea can exist unperceived, establishes no more than that *something or other* must be perceiving each of them during that time. The assumptions, such as they are, do not rule out the possibility that when I leave the kitchen, the kitchen table continues to exist because it is perceived by mind M1, while the kitchen chairs continue to exist because they are perceived by mind M2, and so on.¹⁰

Another view, proposed by Dicker (2011, 259-260), is that Berkeley uses the “passivity” argument of the *Principles* to argue for God’s existence, uses the fact that God exists and continuously perceives all sensible objects to establish that these objects exist continuously even when unperceived by finite minds, and then uses the continuous existence of sensible objects, conjoined with their ideality, to establish that there must be an infinite perceiver of those objects, i.e., God. On this picture, Berkeley’s continuity argument for God’s existence “is superfluous, and Berkeley shouldn’t have used it”: the upshot is that both the claim that sensible objects exist continuously and the claim that there is an infinite perceiver of those objects rest on the passivity argument, which is “the fundamental one of Berkeley’s overall system” (2011, 260). But this strikes me as a

¹⁰ Winkler (1989, 213) suggests that the continued existence of sensible objects when not perceived by me, rather than simply being assumed at the outset as an article of common sense, “could perhaps be thought to follow from the immutability of the mind in which sensible things have been proven to reside”. Unfortunately, such a move on Berkeley’s behalf would be question-begging, for he explicitly *infers* the existence of an “*omnipresent eternal Mind*” (and hence, the existence of an immutable God) *from* the assumption that sensible objects continue to exist when unperceived by any finite mind. Logically, there may be room for Berkeley to make the argument Winkler offers him if he repudiates what he says in passage F. For he might claim that premises (a’) and (b’), perhaps supplemented by assumptions distinct from the proposition that sensible objects exist when unperceived by finite minds, are sufficient to establish the existence of an immutable God, from which that proposition might then be reasonably thought to follow. Still, it is worth considering interpretive options that make sense of passage F before retreating to an interpretation that implicitly or explicitly repudiates it.

singularly uncharitable reading of Berkeley's strategy for overthrowing atheism. It is clear that Berkeley is attempting to take a different, non-superfluous road to God's existence in the *Dialogues*, one that does not merely presuppose that the *Principles* argument to the same conclusion is successful. There are no signs in passages A-I to suggest that Berkeley rests the claim that sensible objects exist continuously on the claim that God perceives them continuously. Indeed, the argument goes precisely the other way in passage F. First, Berkeley argues that sensible objects exist continuously in a mind external to his own, and then, because this is also true "in regard to all other finite spirits", he draws the conclusion that "there is an *omnipresent eternal Mind*, which knows and comprehends all things". The textual evidence, such as it is, therefore speaks against Dicker's "superfluity" interpretation.¹¹

It might be suggested, as Ayers (1987, 119) does, that Berkeley's move from the ontological independence of sensible ideas (i.e., their existence exterior to his mind) to their continuous existence even when he does not perceive them "is less a formal step in argument than his simply making explicit one of the things involved in ontological independence". This "making explicit" what the concept of ontological independence already contains, Ayers (1987, 121) says, "would seem a very minor enrichment of the argument". In support of these claims, Ayers (1987, 119) points out, rightly, that David Hume later takes ontological independence and continuity to be "intimately connected

¹¹ The same textual evidence (from passage F) speaks just as strongly against the interpretation, suggested by Aschenbrenner (1957, 57) and quoted with approval by Tipton (1974, 322), that Berkeley's "continuity" argument in the *Dialogues* is straightforwardly circular. Aschenbrenner claims that Berkeley "has no reason to believe that remote sensibles exist except on the supposition that God perceives them" and yet uses the continuous existence of those sensibles to prove that God exists. But no passage of the *Dialogues* of which I am aware suggests that Berkeley would have sought to base the continuous existence of sensible things on the existence of an infinite perceiver.

together”, writing that if the existence of the objects of our senses “be independent of the perception and distinct from it, they must continue to exist, even tho’ they be not perceiv’d” (T 1.4.2.2; SBN 188). But this is a rather striking error on Hume’s part, and it is worth asking whether Berkeley himself would have been taken in by it. After all, it just does not follow from the fact that an object’s existence does not depend on my perceiving it, or even from the fact that the object’s existence depends on someone else’s perceiving it, that the object continues to exist when I am not perceiving it. For it is fully compatible with the object’s ontological independence that it simply ceases to exist (at least for a time) when I am not perceiving it. If we follow Ayers’ suggestion, then, we must read Berkeley as having committed the same blunder that Hume committed. Although it must be admitted that the fact that a genius of Hume’s caliber made this mistake suggests that a genius of Berkeley’s caliber might have made it too, it is worth considering whether a more flattering reconstruction of Berkeley’s reasoning might not fit the texts equally well, if not better.

It might then be suggested, as Dancy (1987, 48) does, that Berkeley’s claim that sensible objects continue to exist when unperceived by finite minds “is central to our view of the world as objective”. As Dancy sees it, we experience the world as spatial, we experience sensible objects as being in places, and “such experience is incoherent if the world is not continuous”. For if the world were not continuous, we would not be able to make sense of “the difference between returning to the same place and reaching a new one which we cannot distinguish from the first”. It follows, then, that “[o]n pain of distorting our experience, ... we are constrained to think of our world as continuous”. But there are two problems with this suggestion. The first is that, as it seems to me at least, it

would still be possible to *make sense of* the difference between returning to the same place and reaching a new place indistinguishable from the first on the assumption that places exist only intermittently. For it is perfectly coherent to suppose that object O1 is at place P1 at time T1 and then again at place P1 at time T2, even if P1 does not exist during the interval between T1 and T2. What may be impossible is to *tell the difference* between O1 being at P1 at T2 and O1 being at P2 at T2 if it is impossible to distinguish between P1 and P2. But this is an epistemic point distinct from the metaphysical claim of continuity that is the object of Berkeley's concern. Second, even if it is true that we have no choice but to distort our experience if we deny that the sensible world is continuous, Dancy does not offer us any reason to deny that the best way out of this difficulty involves the distortion of our experience. It may be, indeed, that the way in which we experience the world is not indicative of the way the world actually is. What Berkeley needs is not the claim that our experience would be misleading if the world were not continuous, but rather a good reason to believe, independently of how we experience, that the world does not merely cease to exist when we close our eyes or stop our ears.

Jacquette (1985, 5) claims that it would have been open to Berkeley to use his independently formulated distinction between mediate and immediate perception to non-question-beggingly and non-superfluously defend the claim that sensible objects exist continuously even when unperceived by finite minds. As Jacquette rightly points out, Berkeley tells us that whereas some qualities (such as primary and secondary qualities: motion, extension, shape, size, number, color, taste, smell, sound, and so on) are *immediately* perceived, other qualities (such as distance, magnitude, and situation) are only *mediately* perceived. According to Jacquette, “[m]ediate perception is an inductive

inference based on experience of the constant conjunction of what is immediately perceived at one time or by one of the senses with what may be expected to be immediately perceived at another time or by a different sense” (1985, 5). For example, claims Jacquette, although we immediately perceive the outside of an apple, we mediate perceive the inside, “in the sense that we expect on the basis of our empirical experience of the world that if the apple were cut open in our presence at another time we would see and thereby immediately perceive the inside” (1985, 6). Jacquette concludes that there is “reliable inductive evidence” that the inside of the apple exists continuously, and that this provides “adequate noncircular support” for Berkeley’s assumption that “at least some sensible things continue to exist when they are not perceived by any finite minds” (1985, 6-7).

There are two main problems with this suggestion. The first is that not all mediate perception is based on inference, inductive or otherwise. For example, Berkeley tells us that we mediate perceive the meanings of words by (immediately) perceiving the words themselves (DHP 174). But this sort of mediate perception is not grounded in any inductive inference. Rather, as I have argued elsewhere (Rickless 2013a, 10-58—see particularly 49), to perceive something mediate is to perceive it by perceiving something else to which it is related. For example, as Berkeley tells us in the *New Theory of Vision*, “[w]e often see shame or fear in the looks of a man, by perceiving the changes of his countenance to red or pale” (NTV 9). Sometimes the relevant relation is grounded in inductive (or deductive) inference; but at other times, the relevant relation is grounded in custom or resemblance. The second, and far more important, problem is that if, as Jacquette insists, we mediate perceive the inside of the apple before the apple is

sliced open, then, even if it is granted that the inside of the apple exists continuously, this provides *no* evidence for the existential claim that some sensible objects continue to exist when unperceived by finite minds. This is because anything that is mediately perceived is, *ipso facto*, perceived.¹²

¹² Jacquette anticipates this criticism, but his responses to it are unpersuasive. His first response is this: “Berkeley denies that we automatically perceive or have an idea of whatever we know by reason or mediate perception to exist. God, for example, according to Berkeley, is known to exist by reason. But in the third dialogue and elsewhere he explicitly holds that no one can perceive or have an idea of God...This indicates that the term ‘mediate perception’ is somewhat infelicitously chosen and that by mediate perception Berkeley does not mean a special kind of perception but something rather different” (1985, 11). The problem here is that Berkeley never says that we *mediately perceive* God. (What we perceive instead, when we perceive the word “God”, is the notion of God, or what the word “God” means—see DHP 174.) So there is no reason to think that Berkeley’s use of “mediate perception” misleads us into thinking, mistakenly, that all mediately perceived objects are perceived. In every case of mediate perception that Berkeley discusses (including mediate perception of distance, magnitude, situation, word-meanings, and the emotions and passions in the minds of others), it is clear that Berkeley means us to infer from the fact that something is mediately perceived that it is perceived.

Jacquette’s second response is that, on Berkeley’s view, we do not really perceive the inside of an (uncut) apple, because all that we can infer from our (immediate) perception of the outside of the apple is the mere fact that it has an inside, and this is not sufficient to give us a determinate particular idea of the fruit’s interior. Because Berkeley denies the possibility of abstract (indeterminate) ideas (see I 6-10), it follows that the relevant inference does not result in the perception of *any* idea, even though the inference grounds the mediate perception of the inside of the apple. But this response reveals a misunderstanding of Berkeley’s conception of inference. As Berkeley sees it, it is impossible to infer the existence of an *indeterminate* sensible thing (such as the inside of an apple). This is because such an inside would be a collection of ideas; and since every idea is determinate, every collection of ideas is determinate; and hence any inside whose existence is inferred would also have to be determinate. Besides, true mediate perception of the inside of an apple occurs as a result of custom or habit. In the past, I have seen apples sliced open, and I have seen insides composed of white, crunchy, sweet, and sweet-smelling flesh. Looking at the outside of a newly picked, uncut apple, I mediately perceive, not an indeterminate idea of its inside, but a very determinate collection of ideas: particular colors, tastes, smells, and tangible qualities. The situation is no different in Berkeley’s well-known example of a coach, which is a collection of particular ideas mediately perceived by perceiving the sound of its wheels rolling along cobblestones (DHP 204).

But if all these different ways of understanding or explaining Berkeley's appeal to the continuity of sensible objects in passage F ultimately fail, then how should the passage actually be read? Recall that Berkeley infers from the fact that sensible objects have an existence exterior to his mind that they exist in an exterior mind when he is not perceiving them (before his birth, after his death, and when his eyes are closed, vision directed elsewhere, ears stopped, and so on). Thus far, though, we have managed to produce valid reasoning only to the conclusion that sensible objects are perceived by an exterior mind (i.e., a mind that is distinct from his). On what basis does Berkeley conclude that these objects must be perceived by that mind *continuously*, even when they are not perceived by *him*?

As we have already seen, Berkeley sometimes appeals to abductive arguments in reasoning to God's existence. This occurs, for example, in the *Principles* argument, where Berkeley argues from the orderliness of the sensible world to the uniqueness of its cause. My suggestion, admittedly underdetermined by, though consistent with, passage F, is that Berkeley takes the continued existence of sensible objects when unperceived by finite minds to be justified by an inference to the best explanation of our experience. As I write, I am looking at a computer screen and typing on a keyboard. Let me now close my eyes and lift my fingers off the keys. There, done. I neither see the screen nor feel the keys. Have they disappeared? Possibly. But now I open my eyes and place my fingers where I take the keys to be. Sure enough, a remarkably similar screen appears in my field of vision, with the same words I remember having written moments before, and the tangible sensations that I experience as I tap on the keys are, again, very similar to tangible sensations I experienced when I was tapping a few moments ago. Although it is

possible that the computer screen and keyboard disappeared “between the times of my perceiving them”, it is, surely, highly unlikely. This remains the case even if the screen and keyboard are nothing but collections of ideas. For consider that if I ask my daughters to stay in the room while I close my eyes and stop tapping, and I ask them whether the computer has disappeared, they will tell me that the computer is still there (and that I need to have my head examined). If this happens enough times, over and over again, the most reasonable explanation of these phenomena is that the screen and keyboard continue to exist even when I am not perceiving them. The basic point here is that our experience of the world, even taking into account the way it (predictably) changes, is remarkably *stable*; and the best explanation of this stability, better than the main competing alternative explanation according to which an exterior mind just happens to feed us remarkably consistent and similar ideas intermittently, at just the moment when we open our eyes and other senses, is that these ideas continue to exist (mostly) just as they are when we are not perceiving them. So many of the judgments we make about the world rely on this kind of abduction that it boggles the mind to think of them all. If I get up and walk out the door of my kitchen, I can safely predict that I will not fall into a hole or see the Queen of England. Rather, I will simply walk into the family room. If I leave my cell phone in the car and then return to the car, I can safely predict that the cell phone will be exactly where I left it. And on and on. If the world of sensible objects did not exist continuously, our experience could not be understood as anything other than a series of remarkably and inexplicably fortuitous coincidences (at least, in the absence of an omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent deity). This is abductive reason enough to conclude that sensible objects do indeed exist even when we are not perceiving them.

7. Archetypes and Ectypes

The next question to consider concerns the role of divine archetypes in Berkeley's *Dialogues* argument for God's existence. Thus far, such archetypes, if taken to be distinct from the sensible objects finite minds perceive, have been absent from our reconstruction. The argument up to this point has been that because sensible objects (continuously) exist when they are not perceived by finite minds, it follows that they are continuously perceived by one or more infinite minds. But the issue of divine perception raises some uncomfortable questions for Berkeley, who holds, first, that God's ideas "are not convey'd to Him by sense, as ours are" (DHP 241), and, second, that there is a "twofold state of things, the one ectypal or natural [and created in time], the other archetypal and eternal [i.e., existing outside of time, "from everlasting"]" (DHP 254). Since God is purely active and in no way passive, his ideas are produced by his own mind (in a way that resembles, at some level, the way that finite minds produce ideas by means of imagination) and do not exist in time. But if the ideas that we finite minds perceive exist in time, then it would appear that they are distinct from the ideas that God's mind conjures up beyond time: our sensible ideas are ectypes, or copies, of the archetypes, or models, that exist in the divine understanding. But then, it seems, any mind, even an infinite mind, that can be shown to perceive the sensible collections of ideas that exist in time when finite minds are not perceiving them cannot be the mind of God. This is the problem that Berkeley's references to divine archetypes in passages D, E, and I are designed to address.

In each of these passages, discussion of archetypes of sensible ideas appears in the context of a disjunction: “no idea or archetype of an idea can exist otherwise than in a mind” (passage D), “these ideas or things by me perceived, either themselves or their archetypes, exist independently of my mind” (passage E), and “the things I perceive must have an existence, they or their archetypes, out of my mind: but being ideas, neither they nor their archetypes can exist otherwise than in an understanding” (passage I). And the disjunction produces a significant wrinkle in the argument. Berkeley seemingly uses the disjunction to pull back from the claim, made in passages A, F and G, that it can be shown that the sensible things that *he* perceives exist in a mind other than his. What he says in passages D, E and I is something apparently *weaker*, namely, that what can be shown is that *either* the sensible things that he perceives *or* archetypes of which these sensible things are copies exist in a mind other than his. This feature of the argument extends to the reasoning for this disjunctive claim. In passages A and F, Berkeley says that the reason why sensible things exist in the mind of another is that *those very sensible things* exist independently of his mind because he finds them by experience (that is, experience of their non-responsiveness to his volitions) to be independent of his “thought” (that is, independent of his will). But in passage E the argument is different:

Nor is it less plain that these ideas or things by me perceived, either themselves or their archetypes, exist independently of my mind, since I know myself not to be their author, it being out of my power to determine at pleasure, what particular ideas I shall be affected with upon opening my eyes or ears. [underlining added]

This passage is ambiguous, because the antecedent of the underlined occurrence of “their” is syntactically undetermined. Option 1 is that “their” refers back to “these ideas or things by me perceived”, but Option 2 is that “their” refers back to “either themselves or their archetypes”. Is Berkeley saying that he knows himself not to be the author of his sensible ideas, or is he saying that he knows himself not to be the author of either his sensible ideas or their archetypes? Context here helps to disambiguate. The evidence Berkeley gives for his claim is that he does not have the power to determine what he sees when he opens his eyes or what he hears when he opens his ears. This is evidence for the claim that he is not the author of his sensible ideas, not for the claim that he is not the author of either his sensible ideas or their archetypes. The best reading of the underlined “their”, then, is Option 1.

But this requires us to abandon the simplest way of adding a wrinkle to Berkeley’s reasoning. Berkeley wants to show that either sensible ideas or their archetypes exist in the mind of another. The simplest way to get this result validly is to infer it from the following trio of propositions:

- (1) Either the sensible ideas I perceive or their archetypes exist independent of my will.
- (2) Archetypes of sensible ideas are ideas.
- (3) Ideas that exist independent of my will exist in the mind of another.

The problem is that the sentence we have extracted from passage E with the underlined instance of “their” does not support ascribing (1) to Berkeley. Rather, what the extracted sentence supports is the ascription of (1’):

(1’) The sensible ideas I perceive exist independent of my will.

How, then, to get from (1’) to (4)?

(4) The sensible ideas I perceive or their archetypes exist in the mind of another.

The most reasonable interpretive hypothesis, I submit, is this:

(1’) The sensible ideas I perceive exist independent of my will.

(2’) Any ideas that I perceive independent of my will must be produced by the will of another.

(3’) There are only two ways for the will of another to produce an idea in my mind: either (i) by perceiving an idea and effectively willing that that idea be perceived by me, or (ii) by perceiving an archetype of an idea and effectively willing that an ectype of that archetype be perceived by me.

So, (4) The sensible ideas I perceive or their archetypes are perceived by (i.e., exist in) the mind of another.

This argument differs from the one that we have extracted from passages such as A and F. The simpler argument, without the wrinkle introduced by divine archetypes, supposes that there is only *one* way for the will of another to produce an idea in my mind, namely via (i): by perceiving an idea and effectively willing that that idea be perceived by me. But in passage E, Berkeley complicates the reasoning, because he wants to allow for the possibility that there is a twofold state of things, one ectypal, the other archetypal (DHP 254). This raises two questions: First, given that there are two different arguments for (4), which of them, if any, is the one that Berkeley would endorse as capturing the details of his reasoning? And second, why does Berkeley provide two different arguments without making it clear that he is doing so?

The answer to both of these questions is that Berkeley almost surely thinks that it doesn't much matter which of the two arguments one uses to establish the existence of God. The reason for this is that, ultimately, the premises of the less complex argument can be inferred from the premises of the more complex argument. And the reason for this, predictably enough, is Berkeley's denial of the possibility of blind agency. Suppose, as Berkeley supposes possible in (3')(ii), that the idea that mind M1 produces in mind M2 is an ectype of an archetype that is perceived by (i.e., exists in) M1. Although the archetype-ectype distinction means that there is a twofold state of things, the impossibility of blind agency entails that M1 perceives not just the archetype, but the ectype as well. For M1 produces an ectypal idea X in M2 not merely by willing that M2 perceive *some ectype or other*, but by willing that X *in particular* be the copy of the relevant archetype that M2 perceives. But if M1's agency is not blind, then in willing that X be the idea that M2 perceives, M1 must perceive X in addition to X's archetype.

Ultimately, then, it doesn't matter to the argument whether the external mind M whose existence it establishes produces ideas in other minds by willing that those minds perceive ideas that M perceives or produces these ideas by willing that those minds perceive ectypes of the archetypes that M perceives. Either way, because of the denial of blind agency, it turns out that M has to perceive the ideas that M produces in other minds. The answers to our two questions then, are these. First, the argument with which Berkeley probably identifies most strongly is the more complex argument that allows for a twofold state of things. But second, because (thanks to the denial of blind agency) the premises of the less complex argument follow from the premises of the more complex argument, it doesn't matter which of the two arguments Berkeley runs. Both arguments ultimately lead validly to the conclusion that the sensible ideas I perceive are perceived by the mind of another.

8. From Finite Minds to an Infinite Mind

Thus far, our reconstruction of the *Dialogues* argument has reached the following conclusion: sensible things are continuously perceived by a mind (or minds) distinct from mine. But the reference to *my* mind leaves out the part of the argument, explicitly stated in passage F, that supposes the same conclusion to be true "with regard to all other finite created spirits". How important is this part of the argument, and is Berkeley rationally entitled to it? The answers, in brief, are: very important, and yes.

The fact that sensible things are continuously perceived by a mind (or minds) does not, on its own, entail that that mind (or minds) is (are) *infinite*. But if the *Dialogues* argument is to function as a valid piece of reasoning for the existence of *God*,

an “infinite mind” (passage C), then some reason must be given for thinking that any mind that is perceiving sensible objects when I am not perceiving them must be infinite. Berkeley’s reason is that the argument, up to this point, can be repeated by all finite minds. The fact that such minds are finite means that they are not perceiving numberless sensible things at every moment, and, indeed, that, at any given moment, there are sensible things that are not being perceived by *any* finite mind. But it follows directly from this that if those sensible things are ideas, then they must be perceived by some mind (or understanding), and hence that that mind (or understanding) must be infinite. This part of Berkeley’s reasoning is valid and essential to the success of the argument. Without it, the argument fails. We must conclude, then, that Berkeley’s presentation of it in passages such as A and G is *severely* truncated.

9. Uniqueness and Perfection

Suppose, then, that Berkeley has shown that the sensible things that we perceive are perceived (continuously) by another infinite mind. At this point, the question arises whether there is only one such mind and whether that mind is perfect. In short, is it possible to prove, and if so, how, that the infinite mind that continuously perceives the sensible world when we are not perceiving it is God? Berkeley clearly thinks so, but appears to give us conflicting messages about how he proposes to establish the truth of theism. On the one hand, he tells us in passage D that “the whole system of atheism [can be] entirely overthrown” by establishing that “even the most rude and shapeless of the visible world” (such as “a chaos, or confused jumble of atoms”) cannot “exist independent of a mind”, and must therefore exist in “an infinite mind”. To prove this,

Berkeley adds, it is not necessary to engage in “any laborious search into the sciences such as astronomy],...subtlety of reason, or tedious length of discourse”, nor is it necessary to appeal to “the contrivance, order, and adjustment of things”. On the other hand, he tells us just a few pages later in passage E that the fact that sensible ideas can be shown to exist independent of his mind proves no more than that “*there is a mind which affects me every moment with all the sensible impressions I perceive*”, and strongly suggests that it is not merely sufficient but also necessary to appeal to “the variety, order, and manner” of his sensible impressions to prove that the cause of these impressions is “*wise, powerful, and good beyond comprehension*”, that is, God. What is the best way of reading these seemingly contradictory passages? And what bearing does this have on the overall reconstruction of Berkeley’s argument?

As we have seen, the part of the *Principles* argument for God’s existence that corresponds to *this* part of the *Dialogues* argument (that is, the part that moves from the existence of an external cause or perceiver of sensible ideas to its uniqueness and perfection) relies quite explicitly on the assumption, established by empirical observation, that the sensible world is infinitely complex and perfectly harmonious. The orderliness and harmony of sensible ideas establishes, abductively, that the volition to exhibit such ideas to us stems from no more than one mind, and that this mind is perfectly good; and the fact that what exhibits such regularity and harmony is infinitely complex establishes, deductively, that its cause is both infinitely wise and infinitely powerful. It is therefore difficult to believe that Berkeley treats a very similar step in the *Dialogues* any differently. Surely it *cannot* be that Berkeley thinks that proving no more than that the

sensible world exists in a mind other than his is *sufficient* to establish that that mind is both unique and perfect.

How, then, to understand Berkeley's remarks in passage D? The answer is that when Berkeley tells us that his proof need not appeal to "the contrivance, order, and adjustment of things", that it needs no assistance from "astronomy" or "natural philosophy", the proof to which he is referring is not his proof of the existence of a *perfect* mind, but rather his proof of the existence of an *infinite* mind. The mere existence of "a rock, a desert, a chaos, or confused jumble of atoms" independent of my will testifies to the existence of another mind. The fact that sensible ideas are "numberless" (DHP 215) and that no finite mind can (continuously) perceive numberless sensible objects entails that this mind must be infinite. This is sufficient to confute the atheistic or quasi-atheistic systems of thought formulated by Berkeley's foils here: Vanini, Hobbes, and Spinoza. But the mere (continued) existence of a confused jumble of atoms, as Berkeley himself is well aware, does not come close to proving that the infinite mind that perceives it (continuously) is perfectly good, omniscient, or omnipotent.

10. Conclusion

Here, then, is a summary of Berkeley's proof of God's existence in the *Dialogues*. Berkeley's argument for idealism establishes that sensible things (such as tables and chairs) are ideas. But it is of the very nature of an idea that it cannot exist unperceived. Idealism, therefore, entails that all sensible things are perceived by some mind or minds. But, as experience indicates, I am powerless to create or change the sensible ideas that compose the things I perceive by sense. These ideas exist independent of my will. But

these ideas must then be produced in me by some cause that is an action effected by a volition to produce those very ideas, a volition that issues from a will distinct from mine. Because blind agency is impossible, that will perceives the ideas it reveals to me; alternatively, it perceives the archetypes of which those ideas are ectypes, but in that case it must perceive the ectypes which it imparts using its own archetypes as models. Moreover, the best explanation of the observed stability of the sensible world is that sensible things exist continuously, between the times of my perceiving them, as well as before my birth and after my death. And given that these sensible things are ideas, it follows that they are continuously perceived by some mind or minds. But the sensible world is composed of numberless ideas that no finite beings, individually or collectively, can perceive. So sensible things are being continuously perceived by one or more infinite minds. That there is only one such mind follows abductively from the fact that the sensible world is perfectly orderly and regular, for if there were many (free) minds perceiving and imparting sensible ideas to me, there would likely be at least *some* perceived disorder. That this unique infinite mind is infinitely good follows, also abductively, from the fact that there is no better explanation of just how well adjusted sensible ideas are for the benefit of human beings. And that this unique, infinite and omnibenevolent mind is omniscient and omnipotent follows from the fact that no other sort of being could think of, create, and sustain a perfectly harmonious world composed of infinitely many parts.

So understood, Berkeley's argument in the *Dialogues*, as should now be plain, is partly deductive, and partly abductive. It also overlaps with the *Principles* argument, inasmuch as there are premises (such as that all sensible things are ideas, that all ideas

must have a cause, that the perfect order of the sensible world testifies to the uniqueness of the cause, and that the perfect harmony of numberless ideas testifies to its omnipotence and omniscience) and pieces of reasoning from those premises that are shared by both arguments. But the arguments presented in these two works are distinct, inasmuch as there are propositions that function as premises in the one argument that do not function as premises in the other. The two most important differences are (i) the impossibility of blind agency (which is what drives the inference from ideas being willed to their being perceived by the mind that wills them, an inference that appears in the *Dialogues* but not in the *Principles*), and (ii) the observed stability of the sensible world (which is what drives the abductive inference to the continuous existence of sensible things, and the deductive inference from this result and the ideality of sensible things to the continuous existence of the mind that perceives them). The fact that the arguments are both distinct and overlapping may explain why some scholars see significant differences while others see significant similarities. In the end, there is really no right answer to the question whether the similarities are more important than the differences, or vice-versa. Each argument, as Bishop Butler might have said, is what it is, and not another thing.

Samuel C. Rickless, University of California, San Diego

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