



Berkeley's God

An Examination and Critique of the Role of God
in the philosophy of George Berkeley

This short paper examines the role of God in George Berkeley's philosophy including the role it plays in his doctrine of Immaterialism, and his related proofs or the existence of God.

Betsy McCall
Fall 2010

Taking the writings of George Berkeley as a whole, he had three arguments for the existence of God. One of these arguments, the argument from design, appears only in his work *Alciphron*.¹ His other two arguments, the continuity argument and the passivity argument, appear in *Principles of Human Knowledge* and the *Three Dialogues*.² It is to these two arguments that we will turn first.

The continuity argument is not so much an argument for the existence of God, but rather the employment of the concept of God to make Berkeley's Immaterialism more palatable. It also serves to make Berkeley's philosophy compatible with prevailing theology that God creates and sustains the world. In the continuity argument, Berkeley means this quite literally.

In the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley asserts:

Fourthly, it will be objected that from the foregoing principles it follows, things are every moment annihilated and created anew. The objects of sense exist only when they are perceived: the trees therefore are in the garden, or the chairs in the parlour, no longer than while there is somebody by to perceive them. Upon shutting my eyes all the furniture in the room is reduced to nothing, and barely upon opening them again, it is again created.³

Here Berkeley argues for a strong version of his Immaterialism. Objects of sense literally only exist as a mind or spirit perceives them—and here Berkeley uses perceive much as Locke does to mean both perceive with the senses and to mentally perceive or think of the object. When we cease to perceive them, for instance, when we walk out of the room, or turn our minds to something else, the objects of sense, being only ideas in our minds, cease to exist.

Berkeley backs off this strong implication only slightly a bit later in Section 48:

¹ (King, 1970)

² (Bennett, 1965)

³ (Berkeley, 2004) Section 45 of *Principles*, pg. 68

For though we hold indeed objects of sense to be nothing else but ideas which cannot exist unperceived; yet we may not hence conclude they have no existence except only while they are perceived by us, since there may be some other spirit that perceives them, though we do not. Wherever bodies are said to have no existence without the mind, I would not be understood to mean this or that particular mind, but all minds whatsoever. It does not therefore follow from the foregoing principles, that bodies are annihilated and created every moment, or exist not at all during the intervals between our perception of them.⁴

Berkeley wisely backs away from his initial ego-centric perspective, but here allows that other minds, or *spirits* as he calls them elsewhere, persist in existence whether they are perceived by others or not. Material objects don't have that level of persistence. They persist only for the time they are perceived. And if that should mean they should wink out of existence when unperceived? Berkeley argues this is to be expected, for the idea of them, which is the same as their existence, depends on our perceiving them.

This is a strange world Berkeley thinks we inhabit. Since I live alone, my body must wink out of existence as I sleep, together with the whole room, and pop back into existence again when I awaken. The riddle about the tree falling in the woods with no one around to hear it makes no sense in Berkeley's world since the tree does not even exist. Instead, it is standing when someone perceives it, and the next time someone perceives it, it is already on the ground. The unperceived tree cannot fall; it only changes.

God enters the picture for Berkeley to explain the apparent persistence of objects. Indeed, this is our common sense: that objects exist when we walk out of the room, and though we are unconscious and unseen, our bodies remain while we sleep. Berkeley achieves this persistence in Section 48: through the perception of other spirits. But to achieve ongoing, permanent existence in the way we usually think of it, Berkeley invokes the eternal spirit of

⁴ Ibid. pg. 70.

God. As long as God perceives an object, as long as the idea is an object of thought in God's mind, the object exists. In the Third Dialogue, Philonous responds to Hylas' objection about objects being annihilated when they are not perceived:

HYLAS: Supposing you were annihilated, can you conceive it possible, that things perceivable by sense may still exist?

PHILONOUS: I can; but then it must be in another mind. 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 to 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 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 has ordained, and are by us termed the *laws of nature*.⁵

Through Philonous, Berkeley argues that it is God that maintains the continuity of existence from moment to moment, even when we are not there to perceive it. The tree in the forest can fall, but only God knows whether or not it makes a sound (though if it is to follow God's own laws of nature, it should). This is nowhere near as strong a claim as Berkeley's first claim that the whole world winks in and out of existence as we walk out of the room, like a giant holodeck from *Star Trek*. His claim here, though, that it is God that maintains the world when we cannot think of it, is consistent with Berkeley's Occasionalist tendencies.⁶

All is not well with how God fits into Berkeley's overall program here, since exactly how God maintains the world as we perceive it. Does he perceive it merely by thinking of it? Or through some other means? For example, God's ideas are supposed to be eternal, just as God

⁵ (Berkeley, 2004) Third Dialogue, pg. 178 [italics in original]

⁶ (Lee, 2008)

is eternal and unchanging, but then how can things appear to be created and destroyed, as they seem to be in our everyday existence? How are objects themselves not eternal, as God and his ideas are eternal? This problem is rooted in a theological question that predates Berkeley, but with which he must contend or be considered a heretic: admittedly, not something a future bishop wants to be accused of.

A second problem arises with considering whether God shares our ideas or not. If so, this contradicts more theology that Berkeley must surely be committed to. But if not, how can his thinking of objects be in any way like the objects that we perceive; and if not like what we perceive, then God cannot lend reality or persistence to ideas he does not share.⁷ This point is driven home by Gotterbarn when he considers whether God feels pain⁸. Pain for Berkeley and for Locke is key to their arguments about ideas. For Locke, it helps him to distinguish between primary and secondary qualities, but for Berkeley, he uses it to show that all ideas are in ourselves. While the idea of pain being a passive experience for us is essential to the passivity argument (which we will discuss briefly below), the issue Gotterbarn turns his paper on is this idea that God must share our ideas, and if so, in what way must he share them? For surely God cannot feel pain since God is perfect.⁹ One possible solution is to suppose, as in Malebranche, that it is “God’s will” that is at work.¹⁰ However, this is treading again too far into theological matters, so I will leave the continuity argument here.

Berkeley’s second argument for God that appears in the *Principles* and *Dialogues* is the passivity argument. This is more properly an argument for God than the continuity argument

⁷ (Downing, 2008)

⁸ (Gotterbarn, 1975)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Course notes, December 1, 2010, Philosophy 303 OSU

appears to be. Here, Berkeley argues that ideas are inherently passive: we perceive them and we cannot cause ideas of reality to be on our own. And these passive ideas have no causal powers. Objects that are real we perceive without any power to stop them. Berkeley lays the foundations of his argument in Section 29:

But whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by sense have not a like dependence on my will. When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or not, or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my view; and so likewise as to the hearing and other senses, the ideas imprinted on them are not creatures of my will. There is therefore some other will or spirit that produces them.¹¹

If ideas of imaginary objects in my mind cannot bring them about¹², then ideas generally are non-causal. If ideas that I generate can't cause anything to happen, and I am a passive receptacle for the ideas of sense, then they must be caused by something else; and Berkeley holds that "something else" to be God. Berkeley's argument here falls somewhat short of proving the existence of a necessarily Christian God.¹³

The passivity argument is most interesting for laying the foundations for the argument from design that Berkeley will present in the *Alciphron*, for it is the order in real things that distinguishes them from imaginary things.¹⁴ It is the order of the universe that ultimately Berkeley will build his argument from design around.¹⁵ This order of the universe is essential for Berkeley to distinguish between real ideas and false ones, including dreams versus reality, for in dreams we often don't see the regularity and order that we would experience in real life, so we are able to tell them apart. However, as we've seen, it shares the same problems with

¹¹ (Berkeley, 2004) Section 29, pg. 63

¹² Ibid. Section 28, pg. 63

¹³ (Bennett, 1965) pg 208

¹⁴ (Berkeley, 2004)a Section 30, pg. 63

¹⁵ (King, 1970)

the continuity argument: in what way do we share God's ideas? If we are passive vessels for experiencing them, since surely we would not choose to experience pain if we had any say, how does God generate these ideas in us? Particularly, if claiming God experiences these ideas *just as we do* leads to hopeless theological problems? God's will seems to be a possible answer again, but this was not a solution proposed by Berkeley himself.¹⁶

A paper of this sort is far too brief to have a complete discussion of the role of God in Berkeley's philosophy, and so here we have focused on the continuity argument. Berkeley argues here, somewhat backhandedly, that it is God that sustains the continuity we perceive in the universe: when we ourselves are not perceiving objects, He is, and so they don't pop into and out of existence and violate those very laws of nature upon which we are dependent. This doesn't seem to be where he started in the *Principles*, but it is where his thought ended in the *Dialogues*. His change in stance will lead him to the kind of argument from design that he eventually develops in *Alciphron*. God, and the theology of the Church to which he is beholden, are very much tangled up in Berkeley's Immaterialism, and it is often theological questions that pose the most difficulty for the role God plays in his philosophy.

¹⁶ (Downing, 2008) pg. 17