

Berkeley's Mental Realism A Reply to My Critics

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Abstract: This essay summarizes the argument of my *A Metaphysics for the Mob: The Philosophy of George Berkeley*, and it provides replies to objections raised against it, particularly about my focus on Berkeley's view of the nature of spirits. Specifically, I address worries about identifying mind as will, how we can think of God, the relation of mind and ideas, and how thinking of Berkeley's efforts as metaphysical is compatible with his commitment to common sense.

My book, *A Metaphysics for the Mob: The Philosophy of George Berkeley* is a bit unusual in that it is focused not on the most famous aspect of Berkeley's metaphysics, his immaterialism, what I call his "negative metaphysics," but rather on his "positive metaphysics," his mental realism.¹ But of course, Berkeley left me very little to work with. His principle concern was tearing down materialism, not building up a systematic metaphysics of spirit. This, I suggest, leaves the reader feeling that Berkeley has robbed reality of its substance and given us nothing with which to replace it. Without a coherent account of the basic stuff of reality, spiritual substances, and some plausible connection between the view of the world as consisting of spiritual substances and the views of common sense, Berkeley's metaphysics won't be very satisfying. My basic strategy is to develop an account of Berkeleyan spirits based on an interpretation of the active/passive distinction and then to use this to illuminate an overlooked connection between his positive metaphysics and common sense, one that runs through a fundamentally religious perspective on the nature of reality.

For the most part, I will limit myself to responding to criticisms/concerns/questions that are primarily directed at my account of spirits. Before doing that, it would be helpful for me to provide a summary of my position. At the heart of my interpretation of Berkeley's account of the nature of spiritual substances is what I take to be his identification of the soul with the will. Here's the basic idea: I take the active/passive distinction to be the fundamental distinction of Berkeley's metaphysics, and I take the category of activity to be the fundamental category of his ontology. Spirits, the only substances of Berkeley's ontology, are defined as active things. Activity, Berkeley tells us, is volition. Thus, spirits are volitional things (i.e., agents). This, I claim, is what Berkeley means by identifying the soul with the will. Since all causation, according to Berkeley, is volitional in nature, this also means that Berkeley gives us a kind of powers ontology.

There are two kinds of spirit, "infinite spirit" and "finite spirit." God is the only possible instance of the former. God as infinite spirit is pure act. There are two aspects to this. First, God as pure act is without passivity. Second, He is pure act in that there is no potentiality in God, so God doesn't even admit of the distinction between power and act. We, of course, possess only finite power and admit of passivity, so we are not pure act;

¹ John Roberts, *A Metaphysics for the Mob: The Philosophy of George Berkeley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

rather, in us there is a distinction between power and act. This yields a Platonic, hierarchical character to Berkeley's ontology. Berkeley, I argue, identifies *unum* and *ens*, so that at the head of his metaphysics is God, the omnipotent, and perfectly simple spirit. Next are finite spirits, active, but not omnipotent, subject to passivity and not quite as simple as God because they consist of the "parts" *power* and *act*. At the bottom of the metaphysics is the fleeting, ever-changing realm of sensible things. They are utterly powerless, passive things that enjoy no genuine unity in themselves. What unity they possess is entirely dependent upon the unity that the two kinds of spirits give to them. God gives them unity by causing them to occur in orderly succession. We give them unity through the practice of naming bundles of them and treating them as if they were one thing, when in reality they are fleeting multiplicities.

To this interpretation of the nature of spirits I join a view about the nature of concepts. I argue that Berkeley rejects the "ideational theory" of meaning, understanding, and communication because it is the source of the most pernicious belief in philosophy, the belief in abstract ideas. Following Anthony Flew, I argue instead that Berkeley pursued a view more akin to a "use-theory." Flew argues that this was a late addition to Berkeley's philosophy and that it was inconsistent with his attack on abstract ideas. I argue instead that his attack on the ideational theory underlies his attack on abstract ideas. Berkeley does not present a detailed philosophy of language, but the basic idea is that having a concept should not be thought of as perceiving an idea before the mind, but should be thought of more as a matter of possessing an ability.² The abilities view of concept possession nicely dovetails with my interpretation of spirits as essentially agents.

In developing my interpretation of spirits I exploit two explanatory devices. The first proved controversial. But I'll start with the second one. I claim that Berkeley's spiritual substances can be seen as a kind of hybrid of Cartesian mental substances and Lockean persons. They are like Cartesian substances in that their being and essence coincide. For Descartes, the being of a mental substance is thought. To be is to think. If you aren't thinking, you aren't being. This, I think makes a pretty good case for viewing Descartes' substances as active things as well. But regardless, Berkeley's view is a little different. For Berkeley, the being of a spiritual substance is volition. To be is to act. The connection to Locke is through his insightful treatment of the notion of person as a "forensic" term. Persons are, if you will, loci of responsibility. Identifying the essence of spirit with volition means that Berkeleian substances are also loci of responsibility. This, I claim, gives a normative cast to the active/passive distinction that divides his ontology accordingly. Spirits are the sorts of thing that can be the subject of moral evaluation due to their essentially active nature. Ideas cannot, due to their passive nature.

This provides then for another key contrast with Descartes. Descartes divides his ontology along the conscious/non-conscious line. One result of this is that sensations are considered modes of thought and thus modes of the mental substance. This leads, for instance, to the famous "painted soul" problem, i.e., when a Cartesian mind experiences a

² One of my regrets is that when I sent my book to press, I had not read Tom Stoneham's *Berkeley's World* where he presents a concepts-as-abilities interpretation as well. I am here borrowing the label from him.

sensation of blue, is the soul then blue? If the sensation is a modification of the thinking substances, it looks like the Cartesian will have to say yes. But Berkeley won't. I am an active thing, but not omnipotent. Not being omnipotent, I suffer passivities when God acts on me. This manifests in a number of ways but the important one in Berkeley's metaphysics is in the having of sensations. I can will to look to the right or the left, but what sensations follow isn't up to me; it's not dependent on my volition. I am not responsible for them. Sensations are then passivities. They are the upshot of God, the omnipotent will, acting upon me. Thus, my ability to have sensations is not so much an ability as a *liability*. The upshot is that sensations are not modes of Berkeleian spiritual substances. The soul is the will, the volitional thing, and sensations are not modes of volition. Sensations are what finite spirits meet at the limit of their activity. They mark a limit to our being and thus are not part of the being. And that's just as it should be. Sensations constitute the physical world. I am not physical. They don't constitute me; they are in no sense parts of me. This still leaves the physical world ontologically dependent not just upon God but upon finite minds as well. Sensations are passivities. In order for there to be passivities there must be non-omnipotent (finitely) active things to suffer passivities. So, the switch from thought to volition as the essence of mind is subtle but has profound ramifications that are fundamental to Berkeley's metaphysics.

My aim was to give an interpretation that rescued Berkeley's view of spirits from the charge of incoherence. So long as one regards Descartes as having a coherent view of substance, then I think it is fair to say that Berkeley does too. And of course, I think Berkeley's view offers some improvement upon Descartes'.

This then yields an account of the faculty of understanding as an activity. For other philosophers, understanding tends to be viewed as a kind of perception, perception of an idea before the mind. But Berkeley's view emphasizes the active aspect as the faculty of understanding proper. Perceiving ideas is just the passive reception of sensations. Here there is no understanding. However, the sensory world, Berkeley argues, is linguistically organized. Understanding only comes when we learn how to interpret the language. The faculty of understanding can be reduced to the will.

The other explanatory device I used to develop my interpretation, the one that proved somewhat controversial, was to compare and contrast Berkeley's view with a more contemporary trend in philosophy of mind. As an example, I used Daniel Dennett's approach. The compare and contrast exercise was obviously meant to be a bit provocative because, of course, Dennett is everything Berkeley isn't. Dennett is a materialist reductionist of the instrumentalist variety. His view even teeters on the edge of eliminativism. I had hoped that by the time I reached this discussion the fact that I was arguing that Berkeley was a hardcore mental realist who regarded minds as simple immaterial substances would be clear enough to ward off any temptation to think that by exploiting Dennett's work that I was attempting to give a reductionist account of Berkeleian minds. The connection between Dennettian stances and a certain strain of contemporary physicalism and Berkeley that I was hoping to exploit was the centrality the former give to the evaluative activities that go into what it is to think of something as a mind. My aim was to say that that can be a helpful approach to how to think about

minds, but it needn't lead to anti-realism about the mind. If minds are, as I argue Berkeleyan minds are, volitional substances, evaluative beings through and through, then some of the valuable insights from the trend toward evaluative approaches to mind in contemporary physical, reductionist philosophy of mind can be seen to be compatible with mental realism. Several commenters found this confounding, most notably Margaret Atherton in her review, and it led to misunderstandings about just what my position was.³ In hindsight, I think that's understandable. I can see how this might just end up being too much of a Rube Goldberg device to be a helpful explanatory device. On the other hand, many others found it helpful. So I'm torn. On the whole, I think I'm now inclined to agree with Atherton.

In a review of the book, Samuel Rickless objects to my identification of the soul with the will.⁴ As he points out, Berkeley at one point in the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* even says, "will and understanding constitute in the strictest sense a mind or spirit."⁵ My response is that one has to have a way to reconcile sentences like this one with the identification of minds with *active* things, and activity with volition, and thus, in this sense, minds with wills. The solution I offer in the book is the reductive account of the understanding summarized above. It appeals, on the one hand, to the finiteness of our active natures and passivity in our reception of ideas, and on the other hand, to the active nature of understanding in interpreting ideas as signs. This allows Berkeley to say that mind consists of both will and understanding while maintaining the identification of the soul as an essentially active being. Rickless does not address this solution to the problem.

Rickless also raises an objection to my non-representationalist interpretation of Berkeley on meaning and understanding. Against it he cites Berkeley's account of how we come by our concept of God as an example of Berkeley's treating even our *notions* of spirits as ideational-cum-representational in nature. The objection is that Berkeley does say that we have an "image" of God, after all. But Berkeley is, as is his practice, using "image" and "idea" here in what he calls a "large sense," i.e., not strictly.⁶ Berkeley is perfectly clear about the fact that spirits are not perceivable and not imaginable. In addition, it should be noted that what Berkeley says in the passage that Rickless is referring to is that the *immaterial spiritual substance itself* is an image of God. When Berkeley says that *I*, myself, am a kind of acting thinking image of the Deity, I read Berkeley as working with the conventional image of God doctrine, that is, the view that we are made in God's

³ Margaret Atherton, "Review of *A Metaphysics for the Mob: The Philosophy of George Berkeley*," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 17 (2009), 428-31.

⁴ Samuel Rickless, "Review of *A Metaphysics for the Mob: The Philosophy of George Berkeley*," *Philosophical Review* 118 (2009), 244-47.

⁵ *Works of George Berkeley*, eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Nelson, 1948-57), 2: 240. All references will be to this edition of Berkeley's works.

⁶ "Ideas are things inactive, and perceived: and spirits a sort of beings altogether different from them. I do not therefore say my soul is an idea, or like an idea. However, taking the word idea in a large sense my soul may be said to furnish me with an idea, that is, an image, or likeness of God, though indeed extremely inadequate. For all the notion I have of God, is obtained by reflecting on my own soul heightening its powers, and removing its imperfections. I have therefore, though not an inactive idea, yet in my self some sort of an active thinking image of the Deity" (*Three Dialogues*, in *Works* 2: 232).

image. Now, certainly, within this doctrine there is sense to be made of the idea that each of us is an “image,” a representation of God here on earth. But in the present context that would mean that we have to hold that *the self* is *literally* a representational item. That seems to me to be pretty far out of the spirit of what people have in mind by a representational theory of meaning and understanding. And Berkeley makes it clear in the passage that this is not what he means. He explicitly guides us away from it. In *Siris*, Berkeley explores and appears to endorse a Neoplatonic account of reflection on our own nature that brings us to an understanding of God’s.⁷ It would be a considerable task to lay out the view, but it looks nothing like a representational theory. In keeping with the image of God doctrine, understanding the Divine nature is a matter of *participation* with Divine nature, rather than having a representational item before the mind.

Marc Hight objects that I do not say what the ontological nature of ideas are.⁸ It’s unclear to me what he’s looking for. But he gives some indication when he asks, if “ideas are modifications or something else?” The request seems to be that I place ideas in one of the traditional ontological categories. But I take it that part of the point of Berkeley’s account is that ideas don’t fit the traditional categories and yet their ontological nature is perfectly familiar to us. My sensations are not modes, or accidents, or attributes, etc. of me. When I perceive a cube I do not become cube-shaped. Nor is an idea a mode, etc. of anything else. Ideas are simply what we perceive them to be and they don’t stand in some obscure metaphysical relation of substance to mode, but in the familiar perceiving relation to minds. In the book, I present this as one of the strengths of Berkeley’s account. Beyond that I take myself to be describing their ontological nature by describing their ontological dependence conditions, which I do at considerable length via appeal to my interpretation of the active/passive distinction. Once that’s done I don’t think there’s anything left to do in order to explain their ontological nature. However, if one should insist on their being given some ontological category label, then I think it’s best to call them “passivities.”

Some have objected to identifying the soul with the will along the following lines: Isn’t the soul rather something that wills? That would make the soul one thing and its volitions just something the soul does. Hight writes, “Berkeley most often writes as if minds are beings that are essentially active, breaking the identity of mind and activity.” But I fail to see how this breaks the identification of the mind and will. My view is that Berkeleian minds are substances, like Cartesian substances, except their essence is activity. So they are not thinking things for whom *to be is to think*, rather they are active things, for whom *to be is to act*. So they are not thinking things, but active things. So, if Hight’s concern is a real problem, it’s a problem for Cartesian substances as well. Now, it is, in fact, an old objection that was raised against Descartes in his own time. It’s the question of how to understand the relation between a substance and its principle attribute. As it happens, I don’t think this is a real problem for Descartes (nor for Berkeley), but set that aside. Again, my aim was to defend the coherence of Berkeley’s account of spiritual substances. Descartes’ is one of the standard accounts of substance. If I can show that his view can be explained as a kind of modified Cartesian view, and that the modification doesn’t

⁷ *Siris*, §§333-34, *Works* 5: 152.

⁸ Marc Hight. (<http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23200-a-metaphysics-for-the-mob-the-philosophy-of-george-berkeley>)

introduce some incoherence and even improves on the Cartesian view, then I've done my job and then some. All accounts of substance face objections. The problem I was dealing with was the big problem. Berkeley faces the charge that either he doesn't really have an account of spiritual substance or that his account is a non-starter because it's incoherent. Hight chides me for not considering the rival Cartesian view of substances, although he acknowledges that what I offer is a modified Cartesian view. This is confusing. I guess I have to assume that he means a view that takes *thought* as its essence rather than *volition*. But, as reviewed above, a central part of my view is that Berkeley's modification of the Cartesian view is of great importance because it allows him to deny that sensations are modes of the mental substance. So, I take myself to have explicitly addressed the Cartesian view according to which the essence of mind is thought rather than volition.

Dale Jacquette objects to my opening chapter's opening device for getting us focused on the being of spirits rather than ideas.⁹ In a somewhat lighthearted spirit, I remark how every freshman philosophy student knows that for Berkeley "to be is to be perceived." That, of course, is horribly misleading because Berkeley sharply distinguishes the being of spirits from that of ideas; spirits cannot be perceived, and spirits are the fundamental beings of the ontology. Jacquette objects that I'm attacking a straw man and complains that I don't cite anybody who holds that for Berkeley to be is to be perceived. But I deny that I even attempted to create any men, straw or otherwise. I explicitly say both that we later get disabused of this notion and that professional philosophers know better. That is why there is no citation to any professional philosophers making this mistake. Rather than creating a straw man to attack, I use this historical fact about how we first get introduced to Berkeley's philosophy to draw attention to the fact that we are traditionally focused on the nature of secondary beings of Berkeley's ontology, ideas, and that this has typically come at the expense of paying attention to the nature of the fundamental beings of Berkeley's ontology, spirits. Since my book was in large part about the nature of the being of the basic items of the Berkeley's ontology, spirits, I wanted to draw attention to their more fundamental place in his metaphysics. I hoped that the contrast with what we first learned (and let's be honest, the only thing most people remember about the Berkeley they were taught) would be an engaging way to get the discussion started.

Jacquette also objects to my taking spirits to be the fundamental items of Berkeley's metaphysics. He writes,

minds or spirits need not be ontically more fundamental than their ideas, if, as in Schopenhauer and other later idealists, spirits and ideas as designated in their distinct terminologies are inter-implicative or inter-presuppositional. For these thinkers also there are no ideas without minds—but equally there are no minds without ideas. Which, then, ideas or minds, are supposed to be ontically more fundamental if one never exists without the other? Schopenhauer would insist that neither is ontically more basic, and Roberts gives us no reason to believe that Berkeley would disagree. (470)

⁹ Dale Jacquette, "Review of *A Metaphysics for the Mob. The Philosophy of George Berkeley*," *Faith and Philosophy* 28 (2001), 468-72.

I reply that the bulk of the first chapter of my book is devoted to showing that Berkeley does think otherwise. Again, Berkeley, with the Neoplatonists, identifies being and unity. At the ground of being is God, the perfectly simple active being. Then there's us; we do not enjoy divine simplicity but still qualify as simple substances in a qualified sense. At the bottom of the ontological ladder is the sensible world. Nothing in this realm enjoys true unity. Berkeley's metaphysics is a version of the great chain of being. That's my main reason for saying spirits are more fundamental than ideas. I would add to this all the traditional reasons for holding that substances qualify as more basic beings than other things. Ideas come and go; the sensible world is always in flux. Substances, however, persist, etc. Furthermore, my interpretation of finite spirits as finitely active things is compatible with saying that finite spirits must always have ideas, because as finite they are always subject to passivity. This, however, doesn't change their position in the ontological hierarchy. So, I think my view is compatible with the spirit of one of the points that Jacquette is making here, but I believe his central point is mistaken.

Finally, Seth Bordner argues that, "[s]tandard interpretations take Berkeley to be defending commonsense by building a metaphysical system that somehow shows how commonly held beliefs are either true or at least justifiable."¹⁰ This, he argues, is a mistake. Bordner's view is that "Berkeley's defense of commonsense is instead destructive—his aim is to prevent the corruption of the vulgar by attacking and destroying that which threatens them." My view of Berkeley is cited as one of the paradigm examples of treating Berkeley as attempting to build up a metaphysical system. But for Bordner, "[Berkeley's] is not the project of divining the mind of the common person so that he can build up a metaphysics for the mob" (329).

This misidentifies which side of the debate I'm on. A pivotal element of my approach to Berkeley's metaphysics is my claim that it is essential that we see Berkeley as pursuing what (for better or worse) I dub a "deflationary strategy." (See especially II.3-6, pp. 44-58.) So just to give you an idea, in a section titled "Berkeley's Deflationary Strategy" (ch. II.3), I begin by quoting a line from his notebooks:

[Remember]: To be eternally banishing Metaphysics & recalling Men to Common Sense.¹¹

Among other things, I quote Anne Berkeley, the Bishop's learned wife. I think she had it exactly right when in a letter to their son after the Bishop's death she wrote,

[H]ad he *built* as he has pulled down he had been then a Master Builder indeed, but unto every man his work. Some must remove rubbish.¹²

It's in the approving context of such quotations that I say we should recall the title of the Bishop's principle work, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*.

¹⁰ Seth Bordner, "Berkeley's Defense of Common Sense," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 49 (2011), 327.

¹¹ NB 750, *Works* 1: 91.

¹² *Works* 8: 388; emphasis in original.

What I was very keen to draw attention to here is the fact that the “principles” Berkeley is immediately interested in are not principles that will provide us with a foundation upon which to build a metaphysics. Rather, what Berkeley tells us is,

My purpose... is, to try if I can discover what those principles are, which have introduced all that doubtfulness and uncertainty, those absurdities and contradictions into the several sects of philosophy. (Intro 4)

As I put it, “[Berkeley’s] is no Cartesian project. The principles he is most interested in laying bare are the principles—i.e. the origins, the sources—of *error* in our philosophical thinking” (45). I insist upon the importance of taking the good Bishop seriously, when in the *Introduction* to the *Principles* he tells us that,

Upon the whole, I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not the whole, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers, and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to ourselves. That we have first raised a dust, and then complain, we cannot see. (Intro 3)

This, I say, is Berkeley’s philosophy of philosophy, and “we should let it guide our understanding of his argumentative strategy” (45). And I do. I immediately put it to use to produce a reinterpretation of Berkeley’s famous attack on abstract ideas. But its central role comes in the final chapter where I argue that we can see an important connection between Berkeley’s positive metaphysics and common sense if we see him as working his deflationary strategy toward metaphysics from a fundamentally religious view of reality. So, far from being a paradigm example of the approach Bordner rejects, I think mine is a paradigm example of the one he pursues.

My sincere thanks go out to all of these reviewers and to those whose questions and objections I have not included here. I greatly appreciate their time and thoughtful, helpful comments. If only I could have run the manuscript past each of them, the final product would have been a far sight better than it was.

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