

# Berkeley and God

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It is well known that Berkeley had two arguments for the existence of God. A while ago, in trying to discover what these arguments are and how they fit into Berkeley's scheme of things, I encountered problems which are hardly raised, let alone solved, in the commentaries. I think that I have now solved these and in this paper I present my results.

## 1. The continuity argument

The argument which is immortalised in the limericks about the tree in the quad, and which I shall call the continuity argument, goes as follows:

- (a) No idea, and therefore no collection of ideas, can exist when not perceived by some spirit;
- (b) Objects are collections of ideas, and therefore cannot exist when not perceived by some spirit;
- (c) Objects do sometimes exist when not perceived by any human spirit;

*therefore*

- (d) There must be one or more non-human spirits which perceive objects when no human spirit perceives them.

The first premiss reflects Berkeley's penchant for speaking of ideas which people 'perceive', where one would prefer that he spoke of sensory states which people may be in. This is one aspect of that reification of ideas or sense-data which ran through Locke, Berkeley and Hume, and which has, in

my opinion, vitiated much of the epistemology of the present century; but it raises issues which go too deep to be explored now. The second premiss reflects Berkeley's failure to see that, even if what we say about objects is reducible to what we say about sensory states, the mode of reduction might be too complex for terms like 'collection' to be in place. That is, it reflects his having opted for his kind of idealism, rather than for phenomenalism. If Berkeley had not taken this option, he could not have used the continuity argument, for its second premiss would then not have been available to him; but that too lies deep in Berkeley's thought and forms no part of my present concern. Nor shall I consider the yawning gulf between the conclusion of the argument and the Christian monotheism which it is supposed to serve. This gulf, and the moves which Berkeley might make to bridge it, are matters of routine apologetics which have little philosophical interest. The questions which I do wish to answer are these:

**q1:** Why does Berkeley think that he is entitled to the argument's third premiss, which says that objects do exist when not perceived by any human spirit? The argument depends, through its second premiss, upon equating statements about the existence of objects not with statements about sensory states which *would* be had if certain conditions obtained, but with statements about the existence of sensory states

the having of which is the perceiving of objects. From this, one would have thought, it follows very obviously that there could not be grounds for saying that any object exists at a time when no human perceives it.

**q2:** Why does Berkeley not use the continuity argument in his *Principles of Human Knowledge*? It will not do to say that he did not think of it until after that work was written, and that this is why it appears only in the *Three Dialogues*. If Berkeley had seen how bad the argument is, he would not have used it at all; failing to see that, he ought to have thought it deeply satisfactory. If, in addition, the continuity argument came to him as a new discovery after the writing of the *Principles*, he would surely have highlighted it in the later work which was supposed to remedy the unfavourable reception of the earlier. Yet in the *Three Dialogues* the argument is presented just once, in a passage consisting of two short sentences. This remark may be found surprising, but I shall justify it.

## 2. The passivity argument

Berkeley's other argument for God's existence, which I shall call the passivity argument, goes as follows:

(a) My ideas of sense (i.e. those which I have when I perceive objective states of affairs) come into my mind without being caused to do so by any act of my will;

(b) The occurrence of any idea must be caused by the will of some being in whose mind the idea occurs;

therefore

(c) My ideas of sense are in the mind of, and caused by the will of, some being other than myself.

Underlying this argument is Berkeley's belief that brute-fact regularities are not truly causal, and that the only genuinely causal activity is the purposeful behaviour of sentient beings. The argument also involves a dubious assumption about the

notion of an 'act of the will'. These flaws in the argument go to the heart of what I take to be some of Berkeley's most radical errors, but I shall discuss neither them nor the extent to which the passivity argument, even if valid, falls short of creating a presumption in favour of Christianity. The questions which I wish to answer are these:

**q3:** Why does Berkeley accept the second premiss of the argument? Granted his belief that causal activity is the prerogative of 'the will of a spirit', why does Berkeley think that every change in anyone's sensory state must have a cause?

**q4:** Does Berkeley see—and, if so, why does he not *say*—that the passivity argument gives to God a quite different scope from that given to him by the continuity argument? By the passivity argument, God perceives objects when we perceive them; by the continuity argument, God perceives objects when we do not. The two arguments are not in conflict on this point; indeed they are, on the face of it, agreeably complementary. Why does Berkeley not call attention to this striking feature of his theological arguments?

## 3. The point of the questions

I have waived a number of objections which depend upon Berkeley's not having seen further than he did into the nature of objectivity concepts, causal necessity, volition, sensory states, and so on. He was only Berkeley, not God; it takes time, and generations of stumbling, to get these deep and difficult matters right. But my question **q1**, about the existence of objects when they are perceived by no human, does not concern a deep error on Berkeley's part, but simply points to an obvious conflict between the continuity argument and one of Berkeley's most cherished views. We must therefore answer the question if we are to be

able to trace the movement of thought in Berkeley's pages. To understand a philosopher we need not believe everything he says, but we must at least be able to see how he could have made the mistakes which he did make. My answers to questions **q2** and **q4** will, it is true, rob **q1** of most of its interest; but it is nevertheless just worth asking, and there are exegetical lessons to be learned from answering it.

My question **q3**, about the assumption that every change of sensory state is caused, is in a slightly different case. It is arguable that Berkeley was one of those philosophers—we know there have been many—who assume without question that there are no absolutely brute facts. I found this answer to **q3** unconvincing, even before I had an alternative to it; and there *is* an alternative. Berkeley may not have taken it as axiomatic that every change of sensory state must be caused: he does give a reason for accepting this premiss of the passivity argument, though so far no commentator seems to have noticed it. I have found it only once in Berkeley's writings, and it may be that Berkeley put no weight upon it, and was after all one of those for whom it is axiomatic that every 'Why?'-question has an answer. Nevertheless, as with **q1**, there is profit to be gained from taking question **q3** as seriously as possible, if only because **q1** and **q3** are useful pegs on which to hang some exegetical material which is vital for the answering of **q2** and **q4**.

Questions **q2** and **q4** raise general issues about what sort of thing Berkeley thought he was doing with his theological arguments and—more important—what kind of scepticism it was that he was so anxious to disavow. Unless these issues are resolved, we cannot have an intelligent and informed picture of what is happening in the *Principles* and the *Three Dialogues*. I doubt if anything of live philosophical importance depends upon the answers to **q2** and **q4**; but other aspects of Berkeley do still have something to teach us,

and we shall not profit from them if we do not see clearly the total endeavour of which they form a part.

There is another matter which concerns all four questions. Berkeley's thought has more hard, complex structure than is usually realised. In his pages there is a less elaborate apparatus of self-conscious pros and cons, explanations and caveats, definitions and distinctions, than we should expect to find in a twentieth-century writer of similar scope; but the complexity and intellectual sophistication are there all the same; and it seems to me bad and unhealthy that Berkeley should be kept alive, to be hurriedly scanned from time to time and made the subject of elementary books, without proper attention being paid to the detailed ways in which his thought moved. I make this protest on behalf not only of Berkeley but also of Locke and Hume, Spinoza and Leibniz. A recent writer, for example, has described Hume's section 'Of Scepticism with regard to the Senses' as ironical. No-one could say this who had toiled through that section trying to find out in detail what is going on in it; and if the section is not studied in detail, it should not be studied at all. No-one would skim through a chapter by Moore, say, and then expect to be thanked for an impressionistic account of its main drift; and yet this kind of condescension is accorded to the immeasurably tougher, abler, more sophisticated and more genuinely complex thought of such philosophers as Berkeley.

#### 4. An answer to question **q3**

The question is: Why does Berkeley, in the passivity argument, help himself to the assumption that there must be what he would call a 'cause' for any change in anyone's sensory state? In *Principles* §26 he says: 'We perceive a continual succession of ideas, some are anew excited, others are changed or disappear. There is therefore some cause

of these ideas whereon they depend, and which produces and changes them.’ This suggests that Berkeley just is a philosopher of that familiar kind who cannot entertain the possibility that an intelligible ‘Why?’ might have no answer. This broadly rationalist frame of mind is sympathetically described by Warnock in connection with his answer to **q3**: ‘The true foundation of his view is, I believe, the conviction that to hold that events merely occur, without any purpose and volition behind them or anything analogous with purpose and volition, is to say something which is really quite *unintelligible*.’ (Berkeley, p. 123).

In the passage I have cited, Berkeley is not deploying the passivity argument for God’s existence, but merely arguing quite generally for the existence of spirits. He could as well have left causes out altogether, and used his stock argument that there must be spirits because it is ‘repugnant’ that ideas should exist unowned. Since Berkeley is not here centrally concerned with the special case of ideas in respect of which one is passive, we should not put too much weight on his seeming to take it for granted that every change in one’s ideas must have some cause. In *Principles* §29, however, the case is different: ‘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. . . There is therefore some other will or spirit that produces them. . . .’ We are now in the region where there is a *prima facie* case for denying that the change in one’s ideas has a cause, because one is not the cause of them oneself; and yet Berkeley apparently takes it for granted that there must be some cause. This looks like support for Warnock’s diagnosis of him as, in a broad sense, a rationalist.

On the other hand, Berkeley does not read like a rationalist. In his account of those regularities which are usually taken to be causal, he is as blandly and confidently final as

Hume, and one does not have the impression that this is only because he thinks that in disqualifying observed regularities from counting as causal he is making room for something else equally comprehensive. This is a matter of tone and of nuance, and unaided it will bear no weight at all; but it is confirmed in *Principles* §146: ‘Those things which are called the works of nature, that is, the far greater part of the ideas or sensations perceived by us, are not produced by, or dependent on, the wills of men. There is therefore some other spirit that causes them, since it is repugnant that they should subsist by themselves.’ Here, if English grammar counts for anything, Berkeley gives a *reason* for saying that a change in my ideas which I do not cause must be caused by some other spirit, namely that ideas cannot ‘subsist by themselves’. Normally, when Berkeley says that ideas cannot subsist by themselves he is making a point about the *ownership* of ideas: every idea must be someone’s. But now, it seems, he is inferring from this that the occurrence of any idea must be *caused*. This is a non-sequitur, but there is a distinction to be made between a thesis which a philosopher defends by an invalid argument and one which he sees no need to support with arguments at all.

There is something to be learned from this particular non-sequitur. I think that it turns upon an ambiguity in the word ‘depend’: I suggest, that is, that in the passage I have quoted Berkeley slides from ‘not dependent on (= not caused by) my mind’ to ‘dependent on (= caused by) some other mind’, through the general formula that *necessarily* every idea must depend on (= exist in, or be owned by) some mind.

It is certainly true that when Berkeley discusses the relation between ideas and minds in terms of ‘depend’ and its grammatical cognates, he does use these words both to talk

about the ownership of ideas by minds and to talk about the causing of ideas by minds. Some generous collaborators in Cambridge have put me in possession of all Berkeley's uses of 'depend' and its cognates throughout the *Principles* and the *Three Dialogues*; and the facts are as follows. There is a muddled and unclassifiable use of 'dependent' in *Principles* §12; there are half a dozen places where 'depend' is used logically, i.e. where a theory is said to depend upon another theory, or a problem to depend upon a prejudice; and there are a dozen uses of 'depend' or its cognates in which the items whose dependence is spoken of are not ideas at all, e.g. where Berkeley says that we depend on God or that God is independent of everything. Of the remaining uses of 'depend', etc., all but four fall squarely into one or other of two classes:<sup>1</sup>

**The ownership uses:** In *Principles* §§6, 89, 91, in the first dialogue, pp. 226, 232, in the second dialogue, p. 246, and in the third dialogue, p. 301, Berkeley uses 'independent', 'dependent' (once) and 'independency' (once) to make a point about the ownership of ideas. In each of these passages, the question of whether an idea is independent of a given mind is the question of whether it exists unowned by, not had by, or as Berkeley would say 'not perceived by', the mind in question.

**The causal uses:** In *Principles* §§10, 26, 29, 33, 106, in the first dialogue, pp. 228, 238, in the second dialogue, pp. 248, 250, and in the third dialogue, p. 271, Berkeley uses 'depend' and four of its grammatical cognates to make a point about the causes of ideas. In these passages, an idea is dependent on a given mind if it is caused or 'excited' by that mind.

Berkeley has, then, two distinct jobs for the 'depend'

family to do; and he too must agree that they are distinct, since he does not think that the only ideas which occur in my mind are ones which are caused by my mind. Since he nowhere comments on this double use of 'depend', one suspects that he has not noticed it; and this suspicion is immeasurably strengthened by *Principles* §56 where Berkeley criticises an inference which turns upon the very ambiguity which I have noted (the italics are mine): 'Men knowing they perceived several ideas whereof they were not themselves the authors, as not being excited from within nor *depending* on the operation of their wills, this made them maintain those ideas or objects of perception had an existence *independent of* and without the mind, without ever dreaming that a contradiction was involved in those words.' Here Berkeley says that a contradictory conclusion has been drawn from a true premiss, and thus he implies that the argument is invalid. Its invalidity clearly turns upon the fact that in the premiss 'not. . . depending on' means 'not caused by', while in the conclusion 'independent of' means 'not owned by'; *but Berkeley does not remark on this ambiguity*. Apparently he is so totally unaware of the ambiguity as a possible source of danger that he does not spot it even where it engenders a fallacy which he is actively engaged in pointing out.

It therefore seems clear that the passage I have quoted from *Principles* §146 should be interpreted in the way I have suggested, i.e. as an unrecognised exploitation of the ambiguity of 'dependent on'. At any rate, Berkeley does argue from 'All ideas are owned' to 'All ideas are caused', and the word 'dependent' is there. If it is not the source of the trouble, then the passage involves a non-sequitur which is about twice as bad as anything else in the book.

<sup>1</sup> Page-numbers are those in the Everyman volume *A New Theory Vision and Other Writings*. Those who do not have this may be helped to check my references by the information that in the Everyman volume the first dialogue is on pp. 199–240, the second on pp. 241–262, and the third on pp. 262–303.

## 5. The answer to question q1

The question is: Why does Berkeley, in the continuity argument, allow himself the premiss that objects exist while not perceived by any human? A possible answer is that this is such a deep-rooted, normal human assumption that Berkeley could not help making it even though he could not, on his own philosophical principles, be entitled to make it. Thus Warnock: 'Berkeley. . . knows that any plain man would insist that the furniture in an unoccupied room actually does exist, not merely that it would exist if the room were occupied; and he himself thinks that it would be merely absurd to question this' (*Berkeley*, p. 115).

This strikes me as false. In many places, Berkeley calmly says that if we clear our minds we shall see that we have no grounds for believing in the existence of objects while they are unperceived. See for example *Principles* §4, and also the following from *Principles* §6: 'All those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world have not any subsistence without a mind; their being (*esse*) is to be perceived; consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some eternal spirit.' These are not the words of someone who would add that since objects do exist when not perceived by created spirits, therefore there must be an eternal spirit which perceives them. The suggestion is rather that unless we can find independent grounds for believing that there is an eternal spirit we are not entitled to say that objects exist while not perceived by any created spirit; and someone whose mind is working this way cannot base the continuity argument for God's existence on the premiss that it is just obvious that objects exist when not perceived by any created spirit.

Again, in *Principles* §§45–8, Berkeley discusses the charge 'that from the foregoing principles it follows [that] things are every moment annihilated and created anew. . . Upon shutting my eyes, all the furniture in the room is reduced to nothing, and barely upon opening them it is again created.' He does not reply that of course *that* would be absurd, but. . . On the contrary, he says that the charge itself is absurd, and that, since anyone who brings it must admit that it is impossible 'either for his ideas or their archetypes to exist without being perceived. . . it is unreasonable for him to stand up in defence of he knows not what, and pretend to charge on me as an absurdity the not assenting to those propositions which at bottom have no meaning' (§45). He proceeds to devote two sections to arguing that certain rival schools of philosophy are committed to the same conclusion, and only then does he remark mildly that after all he is not committed to the conclusion himself: 'Though we hold, indeed, the 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' (§48). The crucial expressions are 'we may not thence *conclude*', 'there *may* be some other spirit', 'it does not therefore *follow*'. These are not the words of someone who proposes to base the continuity argument on the absurdity of denying that objects have a continuous existence.

(Among all the commentators who credit Berkeley with a confident belief in the existence of objects when they are

not perceived by humans, Dawes Hicks and Luce do at least see that *Principles* § 45-8 needs some explaining away. Warnock, on the other hand, says: 'It would, he says, be absurd to suggest that "things are every moment annihilated and created anew" . . .' (*Berkeley*, p. 115). Warnock gives no reference for the clause he quotes, but we have seen that it comes from *Principles* § 45, in which Berkeley resolutely, and mockingly, refuses to say that it is absurd!

We find the solution to the puzzle in the third dialogue (p. 266), where Hylas asks: 'Supposing you were annihilated, cannot you conceive it possible that things perceivable by sense may still exist?' Philonous replies:

'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 time of my perceiving them: as likewise they did before my birth, and would do after my supposed annihilation.'

Here we have the ambiguity of 'depend' etc., which I noted earlier, but this time exploited in reverse. I find 'by experience' that some ideas are independent of (= not caused by) my mind, and I therefore conclude that they are independent of my mind (= owned by some mind other than mine), and thence that they can exist after my annihilation.

The passivity argument has the dubious premiss that *all ideas are caused by some mind*, while the continuity argument has the dubious premiss that *some ideas are not owned by my mind*. Now, if we replace 'caused' by 'owned' in the former of these, the result is something which Berkeley is entitled to accept; and similarly if we replace 'owned' by 'caused' in the latter. Berkeley has, in effect,

performed these substitutions by expressing each premiss in terms of 'dependent on' and interpreting this in the way most favourable to the purpose in hand. If this is not a correct account of this third-dialogue passage, what other explanation can be given for Berkeley's allowing himself to say that we 'find by experience' that some of our ideas are 'exterior' to our minds in a sense which is relevant to their continuity 'during the intervals between the time of our perceiving them'?

It may be thought that I have rested too much on one brief and rather casual presentation of the continuity argument; but I make no apology for this, since the passage I have quoted from the third dialogue is Berkeley's *only* presentation of the continuity argument. In my next two sections I shall show that this is so.

## 6. 'Reality' in Berkeley

When Berkeley talks about the 'reality' of things, and about 'scepticism' in that connection, he is not talking about continuity or about anything which is relevant to the continuity argument. In *Principles* § 33 he says:

'The ideas imprinted on the senses by the author of nature are called real things. . . The ideas of sense are allowed to have more reality in them, that is, to be more strong, orderly and coherent than the creatures of the mind. . . They are also less dependent on the spirit or thinking substance which perceives them, in that they are excited by the will of another and more powerful spirit. . .'

This is all in the region of the passivity argument: it concerns ideas which exist although not caused by me, and it has nothing to do with ideas which exist when not perceived by me.

In *Principles* §34 Berkeley faces squarely the accusation that his principles lead to scepticism about the reality of things:

It will be objected that by the foregoing principles, all that is real and substantial in nature is banished out of the world. . . All things that exist, exist only in the mind, that is, they are purely notional. What therefore. . . must we think of houses, rivers, mountains, trees, stones. . . ? Are all these but so many chimeras and illusions on the fancy? To all which. . . I answer that by the principles premised we are not deprived of any one thing in nature. Whatever we see, feel, hear, or any wise conceive or understand, remains as secure as ever, and is as real as ever. There is a *rerum natura*, and the distinction between realities and chimeras retains its full force. This is evident from sections 29, 30 and 33, where we have shown what is meant by real things in opposition to *chimeras*, i.e. ideas of our own framing. . .

Here again there is not a word about the existence of things while they are not perceived by me, or by any created spirit: the question of reality is explicitly referred back to the earlier discussion which, like the re-play of it in §36, is conducted solely in terms of one's passivity in respect of ideas which one does have. In §§30–44, where Berkeley treats of reality, chimeras, scepticism, etc., he does not once discuss whether sensible things exist when they are not perceived by me or when they are not perceived by any finite creature. Throughout these fifteen sections the discussion is entirely confined to ideas which one does have, and thus entirely excludes the question of continuity.

This latter question is, as we have seen, raised in §§45–8, where the issue is clearly stated in terms of what can be the case at a time when I have no ideas in my mind. Notice,

though, that Berkeley explicitly treats this as a new question, over and above the issues about 'reality' which he has been discussing for some pages. After an exhaustive discussion of reality etc. he starts §45 with the words: 'Fourthly, it will be objected that from the foregoing principles it follows, things are every moment annihilated and created anew. . .'. And in §48 he refers back to 'the objection proposed in Section 45', not to 'the objection we have been discussing for the past fifteen or so sections'.

When in *Principles* §§82–4 Berkeley defends himself against the charge that he has so emptied out the universe as to be in conflict with holy writ, he deals with this entirely in terms of the real/imaginary dichotomy, and the issues of passivity on which it depends. There is again nothing about objects existing when not perceived by created spirits.

Finally, in *Principles* §90 Berkeley talks about externality:

'The things perceived by sense may be termed external, with regard to their origin, in that they are not generated from within by the mind itself, but imprinted by a spirit distinct from that which perceives them. Sensible objects may likewise be said to be without the mind in another sense, namely when they exist in some other mind. Thus when I shut my eyes, the things I saw may still exist, but it must be in another mind.'

Berkeley calls this *another* sense of 'external': so far from running the two together, he explicitly distinguishes them.

Notice also his conspicuous failure to base any argument on the second sense of 'external': he says only that the things I saw *may* still exist, but it must be in another mind. This uncombative remark fits in with Berkeley's other treatments of the question about whether any ideas or sensible things exist when I do not perceive them. I showed in section 5 that, so far from insisting that it would be absurd to deny

sensible things a continuous existence, Berkeley normally contents himself with saying mildly that he is not positively committed to any such denial. It begins to look as if, as well as distinguishing 'reality' from continuity, we must also say that Berkeley cares deeply about the former whereas the latter is not for him a matter of urgency or anxiety or even much interest. If this is true, as I believe it is, the implications for Berkeley's theological arguments are obvious.

### 7. The 'false imaginary glare' passage

To prove Berkeley's unconcern with the question of continuity, I need to cite all the passages in which he raises the question of things' existing when not perceived by humans and show that in none of them (apart from the two-sentence continuity argument in the third dialogue) does he show any inclination to insist on the continuity of sensible things or to argue from their continuity to the existence of God. I have in fact already dealt with all Berkeley's discussions of continuity in the *Principles* and *Dialogues*; but the second dialogue contains one passage which looks a little as though it were concerned with continuity and is indeed sometimes adduced as a source for the continuity argument. I shall try to show that this is a mistake.

The passage in question occurs on pp. 243ff. Here Philonous sings the praises of the universe, and asks: 'How should those principles be entertained that lead us to think all the visible beauty of the creation a false imaginary glare?' Berkeley is here leading into the question of whether his own principles lead to such a conclusion; he is not, as Warnock astonishingly implies in his *Berkeley*, p. 118, railing against Locke.) Hylas, who has been converted to what he takes to be Berkeley's principles, meets this with the forlorn remark that 'My comfort is, you are as much a sceptic as I am';

to which Philonous replies that on the contrary he is not a sceptic, that scepticism does not follow from his principles and indeed is not true, and that God will come to the rescue. 'As sure. . . as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite, omnipresent Spirit who contains and supports it.' He also distinguishes his position from the pious declaration that God sees all: '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.' This has been taken as an exposition of the continuity argument, but it is no such thing.

Firstly, there is as I have already pointed out a sharp separation in Berkeley between the question of whether things 'exist when not perceived by human minds' and the question of whether anything 'is real', 'really exists', 'is not imaginary', etc., these latter expressions being elucidated by Berkeley mainly in terms of the causes of ideas. In the passage under discussion there is not one word about the existence of things when they are not perceived by us. Philonous speaks of depriving the world 'of all reality', of reducing it to 'a false imaginary glare', of the 'real existence' of things, and of inferring God's existence from 'the bare existence of the sensible world'.

Berkeley makes Philonous say that Hylas's scepticism arises precisely from his misunderstanding of what it is for something to be real; and we have already noted Berkeley's insistence that, properly understood, the notion of 'a real thing' is the notion of something which exists *although not caused by me*, and is not the notion of something which exists *when not perceived by me*.

Secondly, consider how the passage develops. Hylas asks whether Philonous's position differs from 'a notion entertained by some eminent moderns, of seeing all things in God'. The discussion then becomes mired in Philonous's attempt to understand and criticise Malebranche; until finally Philonous brushes Malebranche aside and pulls the discussion back to his own views with the abrupt words: 'Take here in brief my meaning. . .', whereupon he launches into a lucid presentation of the passivity argument!

Why have some commentators associated the 'false, imaginary glare' passage with the continuity argument, in the face of such clear indications that this is a mistake? Part of the trouble doubtless lies in the prejudgment that it is useless to look to Berkeley for any distinction which couldn't be drawn with a three-inch brush; but there are two sentences which, I suspect, have had a special responsibility for the misconstruction of the passage as a whole. Philonous says: '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.' Since the first sentence is explicitly concerned with the ownership of ideas, it might be argued that the second sentence concerns ownership too, so that the two together do introduce the continuity argument.

Since this reading of the two sentences makes nonsense of the rest of the passage, I do not think that anyone could easily accept it unless he had already overlooked all Berkeley's distinctions between the two sorts of scepticism which go with the two arguments for God's existence. In fact, though, the interpretation in question is probably wrong, as can be seen if we inspect the beginning of the paragraph in which

the two sentences occur. Philonous says that his opinions would lead to the sceptical conclusion that sensible things are not real if Hylas were right in taking 'the reality of sensible things' to consist in 'an absolute existence out of the minds of spirits'. He goes on: 'But I neither said nor thought the reality of sensible things was to be defined after that manner. 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. . . etc.' The argument is not that sensible things cannot exist out of all minds, but do sometimes exist out of human minds and must therefore sometimes exist in a non-human mind. It is that sensible things cannot exist out of all minds, but are undoubtedly real, and therefore 'real' must be defined in some other way than 'capable of existing out of all minds'. The point about the ownership of ideas comes in here solely in order to highlight Hylas's wrong analysis of 'real'.

I do not contend that the passage is flawless. On my interpretation, Philonous's 'Whence I conclude. . .' is too abrupt: there should at this point be a reference to the analysis of 'real' which Philonous does accept. But if we are to take the passage as giving the continuity argument, then—apart from the difficulties already mentioned—we must suppose that in Berkeley's first and almost his only presentation of that argument he fails to make the point that something may exist out of all human minds without existing out of all minds whatsoever. He makes this point clearly enough in his other, unargumentative discussions of continuity; but now that continuity is supposed to become really important to him we are invited to believe that he neglects to say the one thing which most needs saying.

If someone still insists that in this passage Berkeley is nevertheless also thinking of the continuity argument and conflating it with the passivity argument, I cannot prove

him wrong. In an earlier section I listed all but four of Berkeley's uses of 'depend' and its cognates in speaking of the relationship between ideas and minds. Of the four exceptions, one was the passage in §56 in which Berkeley criticises an argument which turns upon the ambiguity of 'depend' without himself mentioning this ambiguity; one was the passage in *Principles* §146 where Berkeley himself exploits the ambiguity in order to move from 'every idea depends upon (= is owned by) a mind' to 'every idea depends upon (= is caused by) a mind'; and one was the passage in the third dialogue, p. 266, where Berkeley exploits the ambiguity in reverse, in his one clear presentation of the continuity argument, moving from 'some ideas do not depend upon (= are not caused by) my mind' to 'some ideas do not depend upon (= are not owned by) my mind'. The fourth use of 'depend' which was omitted from my list of straightforward cases is the one in the second-dialogue passage now under discussion, and it may be that this too should be treated as a mixed use of 'depend', in which it does two things at once. But at least let it be recognised that in this case the mixture is quite different from the other three: each of them is clearly and explicitly concerned *both* with the ownership *and* with the causation of ideas, and the ambiguity of 'depend' is there invoked in order to explain how Berkeley is (or, in the first case, how his opponents are) trying to bring the two things together. In the 'false imaginary glare' passage, however, the only explicit reference to ownership admits of a perfectly good explanation as relevant to the criticism of Hylas's definition of 'real': there is no *need* to say that 'depend' is used ambiguously here, except the need created by an antecedent prejudice in favour of taking this passage to express the continuity argument.

## 8. The answers to questions q2 and q4

Berkeley addresses himself to **(a)** the accusation that on his principles the sensible world is robbed of its reality, and **(b)** the accusation that on his principles the sensible world flickers in and out of existence as one wakes and sleeps, opens and shuts one's eyes, and the like. He cares deeply about **(a)**, and is at great pains to rebut it by an account of the correct meaning of 'real', an account which, since it defines 'real' only for ideas which one does have, has no bearing on the question of whether any ideas exist which one does not have. Not only is Berkeley manifestly anxious to rebut **(a)**, but he also takes this to be the focus of the one argument which he strenuously advances for the existence of God.

His treatment of **(b)**, apart from two sentences in the third dialogue, is uniformly relaxed and agnostic. He would as soon say that **(b)** is meaningless as say that **(b)** does not follow from his principles; he rests no weight on the claim that he is not committed to **(b)**; and he most certainly does not—with the one tiny exception already noted—argue from the falsity of **(b)** to the existence of God. He does in fact have a reason for saying that, God or no God, **(b)** is meaningless. For he has an argument whose conclusion is that one cannot make sense of talk about an idea's existing while not in *one's own* mind. The argument is extremely bad, but Berkeley liked it well enough to use full-dress versions of it in both his major works—in *Principles* §23 and in the first dialogue, p. 232—which is more than he did for the continuity argument.

The questions **q2** and **q4**, then, may be answered as follows. Berkeley makes so little of the continuity argument, and is so silent about its relationship to the passivity argument, because he does not seriously wish to employ the

continuity argument at all. Not only is Berkeley uninterested in arguing from the continuity of objects to the existence of God; he is not even interested in arguing strenuously from the existence of God to the possible continuity of

objects. Those who think otherwise—those who accept the limericks' account of Berkeley's thought on continuity—have not attended carefully enough to what he actually wrote.