

Berkeley's Epistemic Ontology: The Principles

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Since *the Mind*, in all its Thoughts and Reasonings, hath no other immediate Object but its own *Ideas*, which it alone does or can contemplate, it is evident, that our Knowledge is only conversant about them. (Locke, *Essay* 4.1.1)

Berkeley's *Principles* is a curious work. The nominal topic is epistemic. The actual topic is ontological. And it is not uncommon to suggest that 'Berkeley's system presents us with unique puzzles, particularly at its foundation.'¹

If, as many commentators suggest, Berkeley's principal arguments for idealism are weak, this might suggest that we are approaching his works from a set of assumptions Berkeley did not share. In this paper I explore such a possibility.

Many commentators assume what I call an 'ontological' approach to Berkeley. They assume that ideas fundamentally are entities of a determinate nature. Ideas might be images,² or objects of thought,³ or modes

1 Robert G. Muehlmann, 'Introduction,' in *Berkeley's Metaphysics: Structural, Interpretive, and Critical Essays*, Robert G. Muehlmann, ed. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press 1995), 1.

2 George Pitcher, *Berkeley, Arguments of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1977), 70. Cf. Kenneth P. Winkler, *Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1989), 13; Robert G. Muehlmann, *Berkeley's Ontology* (Indianapolis: Hackett 1992), 49.

3 Winkler, *Berkeley*, 6

of a substance,⁴ or immediate objects of perception,⁵ or any of Berkeley's various characterizations of 'idea.' These commentators examine the opening arguments in the *Principles* only to discover that, *given that account of an idea*, the arguments are defective.

The alternative approach I propose is epistemological. On such an approach, Berkeley asks what is known and introduces ontological commitments only on the basis of what is known. Ideas are nothing more than 'objects of human knowledge.'⁶ Methodologically, such an approach is not unlike that in Descartes's *Meditations* and, if it's Berkeley's approach, it places him squarely in the epistemic milieu of the period. Whether it is a reasonable approach, of course, depends upon whether it dissolves the 'unique puzzles' by providing a coherent interpretation of the texts.

I begin with a brief discussion of my method and assumptions. Then I examine the opening seven sections of the *Principles*, Berkeley's principal argument for idealism. I argue that they show only (1) that minds are distinct from ideas, and (2) that ordinary objects are *at least* collections of ideas. I argue that these conclusions tell us *nothing* about the nature of mind and very little regarding the analysis of body. I turn next to sections eight through twenty-eight, arguing they show that insofar as we cannot *know* that body consists of something more than ideas, we should conclude that bodies are composed of nothing more than ideas. I conclude by examining his discussions in sections twenty-nine to thirty-three, showing (1) that it is only at that point that Berkeley identifies collections of ideas with real things, and (2) that Berkeley's remarks on the deity extend beyond what is established by his earlier arguments.

4 Harry M. Bracken, *Berkeley, Philosophers in Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1974), 76ff.

5 George Pappas, *Berkeley's Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 21-2

6 George Berkeley, *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Part I, §1, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop, eds., 9 volumes (London: Nelson 1948-1957), 2:41. Further references to the *Principles*, Part I (PHK) will be made by section. References to the Introduction to the *Principles* (Intro.), will be made by section. References to *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (DHP) will be to the appropriate page in *Works*, vol. 2. References to the *Philosophical Commentaries* (PC) will be by entry number in *Works*, vol. 1. References to *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* (NTV) will be by section. References to *The Theory of Vision or Visual Language Vindicated and Explained* (TVV) will be by section. References to *Alciphron*, or *The Minute Philosopher* will be by dialogue and section.

I Method and Assumptions

Interpreting a philosophical work is like reading a murder mystery. Sometimes, some of us are impatient and flip to the last page before all the clues are presented.

In reading the works of historical figures we are often like impatient mystery readers. We *know* that Berkeley was an ontological idealist. We *know* what the tenets of idealism are. We *know* that only certain kinds of arguments can be used to support idealism. So, when Berkeley's arguments do not fit in that mold, we *know* that Berkeley's arguments are defective.

In this paper I read the *Principles* in a different way. I follow the arguments as clues and treat the various things we all *know* as potential red herrings. This means (1) I start at the beginning; (2) I examine the clues as they come; (3) I attempt to avoid temptations to say, 'This is what Berkeley must have meant, since he says later (or in some other work) that ...'; (4) I assume that, given the choice between a philosophically plausible claim and one that is *prima facie* outrageous, one should thoroughly explore the former before assuming Berkeley accepts the latter.

I also acknowledge that these four principles cannot be religiously followed. There might be times when the immediate context will not allow one to elucidate a key concept, for example, his use of 'idea.' In such a case I examine Berkeley's several characterizations of ideas, on the one hand, and the historical context, on the other, choosing the characterization that carries the least conceptual baggage. Historical context cannot be avoided, but it is a double-edged sword: we must assign neither too much nor too little influence to Locke. When examining historical context I turn first to Locke, but I consider my contextual account warranted to the degree that it reflects the broader intellectual currents of the day.⁷ I believe a minimalist approach to concepts is

7 Some help in this regard might be gained from the *Philosophical Commentaries*. I do not, however, treat texts from the *Philosophical Commentaries* as authoritative regarding either the philosophers to whom Berkeley was replying or the content of his philosophy. As Bertil Belfrage has shown, Luce's account of the marginalia is at least suspect. (See Bertil Belfrage, 'George Berkeley's "Philosophical Commentaries," A Review of Prof. A.A. Luce's Editings,' in *Logik Rätt och Moral*, Sören Halldén, et al., eds. [Lund: Studentlitteratur 1969] 19-34; A.A. Luce, 'Another Look at Berkeley's Notebooks,' *Hermathena* 110 [1970] 5-23; Bertil Belfrage, 'Berkeley's *Philosophical Notebooks*,' in Ernest Sosa, ed., *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley*, Synthese Historical Library [Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company 1987] 217-30.) If the *Philosophical Commentaries* were notebooks (Belfrage), rather than systematic commentaries (Luce), experience suggests there can be considerable conceptual distance

preferable, since it is always possible to revisit the concept and enrich it if needed. A narrowly defined concept prevents us from reading more into the discussion than might be warranted.

In this paper I assume that epistemology plays a significant role in delineating Berkeley's ontology. This epistemic influence is *suggested* by the title of the *Principles*. Further, epistemic interests are expressed in the Introduction to the *Principles*:

Upon the whole, I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers, and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to our selves. (Intro. §3)

Finally, an epistemic approach is consistent with the focus of the modern period. Descartes used an epistemic method to inquiry into what exists.⁸ Locke's focus was epistemic, even though the assumed ontology is easily discerned.

If an assumed epistemology is the tail that wags an ontological dog, then the ontology can contain only what can be known. Ockham's razor shaves exceedingly close.⁹ Indeed, it implies that the conceptual content of Berkeley's ontology might be thin. For example, although Berkeley uses the word 'substance' with respect to the mind, it is unclear that one can delineate a determinate theory of substance.

Given these preliminaries, we may turn to Berkeley.

II The Argument for *esse is percipi*: *Principles* §§1-7

Berkeley's arguments for idealism in the *Principles* and the *Dialogues* appear distinctly different. In the *Dialogues*, a conflict is posed between

between the sketches in a notebook and the resulting polished product. Hence, I give them little sway.

8 See Daniel E. Flage and Clarence A. Bonnen, *Descartes and Method: A Search for Method in Meditations* (London: Routledge 1999).

9 That Berkeley subscribed to the principle of parsimony seems reasonable since (1) it was commonly assumed throughout the period (see, for example, Descartes's *Meteorology*, quoted in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (CSM), 3 vols., John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and [volume 3] Anthony Kenny, trans. [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985, 1984, 1991], 1:187n, see also Letter to Regius, *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, 3:205), and (2) Berkeley seems to employ it his account of account of meaning contrary to the abstractionists at Intro. §§11-12 (see Daniel E. Flage, *Berkeley's Doctrine of Notions: A Reconstruction based on his Theory of Meaning* [London: Croom Helm 1987], 36-41).

common sense and skepticism (See *DHP* 168, 172, 190, 218, 234, 237, 244, 259, 262, 263). This juxtaposition is *not* common in the *Principles*,¹⁰ and while Berkeley argues that his position wards off skepticism (*PHK* Preface, Intro. §1, and *PHK* §§ 40, 86, 87, 92, 129, and 137), this concern is *not* found in the opening thirty-three sections of the *Principles*, Berkeley's principal statement of and argument for his position. Rather, Berkeley begins with an account of ideas as objects of human knowledge. Since any account of Berkeley's argument for idealism rests upon his account of ideas, we may begin by inquiring into the relationship between his opening remark in the *Principles* and his alternative accounts of ideas.

Berkeley begins Part I of the *Principles* as follows:

It is evident to any one who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind, or lastly ideas formed by help of memory and imagination, either compounding, dividing, or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways. (*PHK* §1)

Berkeley *seems* to identify ideas with objects of human knowledge, a point he repeats in §2, where he distinguishes 'ideas or objects of knowledge' from that 'which knows or perceives them.' This suggests an epistemic focus and, as we shall see, places reasonable interpretive constraints on the remainder of the section. It also raises puzzles. Does Berkeley mean (1) that the class of objects of knowledge is extensionally equivalent to that of ideas? Or does he mean (2) that all ideas are objects of knowledge, leaving open the possibility that 'something which knows or perceives them' is also an object of knowledge? If one goes by the 1710 edition, the *only* places Berkeley alludes to 'objects of knowledge' or 'objects of human knowledge' are in §§1 and 2. This might suggest extensional equivalence and leave the knower unknown. In §89 of the 1734 edition he added, 'To me it seems that ideas, spirits and relations are all in their respective kinds, the object of human knowledge and subject of discourse: and that the term *idea* would be improperly extended to signify every thing we know or have any notion of.' This suggests the second reading. Since the second reading is weaker, and since even in the 1710 edition Berkeley allowed that spirit can be known, even if 'only by the effects which it produceth' (*PHK* §27), it seems reasonable to accept the second. As we shall see below, the principle

10 For more see, Pappas, *Berkeley's Thought*, 160ff.; cf. Pitcher, *Berkeley*, 140-62.

allows us to go from claims regarding ideas to claims regarding objects of knowledge at crucial points in Berkeley's arguments.

To claim that ideas are objects of knowledge tells us nothing about the nature of ideas. Berkeley himself presents multiple accounts of the nature of ideas, a multiplicity on which his commentators have only expanded. An idea is an object of thought.¹¹ An idea is an image.¹² An idea is 'any immediate object of the sense, or understanding.'¹³ Berkeleian ideas are modes of an immaterial substance.¹⁴ Ideas are not modes of substance.¹⁵ Some say Berkeley's use of 'idea' is fundamentally Lockean.¹⁶ Others say Berkeley's use of 'idea' is nonLockean.¹⁷ Do we need to explore these possible characterizations of ideas to unravel the mystery of Berkeley's position?

11 PC 427a, 643; PHK §25; cf. PC 665; cf. Kenneth P. Winkler, *Berkeley*, 6 and 157; Flage, *Berkeley's Doctrine of Notions*, 71.

12 PC 280, 684, 706; PHK §§27, 137, 140; DHP 231, 232; cf. Winkler, *Berkeley*, 13, Pitcher, *Berkeley*, 70-4; J.O. Urmson, *Berkeley*, in John Dunn, J.O. Urmson, and A.J. Ayer, *The British Empiricists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1984, 1982, 1980), 103; Frederick Copleston, *Modern Philosophy: The British Empiricists*, vol. 5, pt. II of his *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City: Doubleday Image Books 1964), 23; Désirée Park, *Complementary Notions: A Critical Study of Berkeley's Theory of Concepts* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1972), 37; Ian Tipton, *Berkeley: The Philosophy of Immaterialism* (London: Methuen 1974), 165; Peter Walmsley, *The Rhetoric of Berkeley's Philosophy*, Cambridge Studies in Eighteenth Century English Literature and Thought, vol. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990), 13-14. It is worthy of notice that at *no* point does Berkeley deem an idea a *mental* image.

13 NTV §45, DHP 175, 250, 251; cf. Pappas, *Berkeley's Thought*, 173 and *passim*; G.J. Warnock, *Berkeley*, Pelican Philosophy Series (Hammondsworth: Penguin 1953), 158, but see also 195.

14 Cf. Intro. §7; G.D. Hicks, *Berkeley* (New York: Russell & Russell 1932), 156; Edwin B. Allaire, 'Berkeley's Idealism,' *Theoria* 29 (1963) 229-44, but see also Edwin B. Allaire, 'Berkeley's Idealism Revisited,' in Colin Turbayne, ed., *Berkeley: Critical and Interpretive Essays* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1982) 197-206; Bracken, *Berkeley*, 76ff; cf. Louis Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1981), 89-90; Flage, *Berkeley's Doctrine of Notions*, 152-4.

15 PHK §49, DHP 247; cf. A.A. Luce, *Berkeley & Malebranche: A Study of the Origins of Berkeley's Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1934), 67; Pitcher, 195; John W. Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1984), 135.

16 Tipton, *Berkeley*, 20ff.; Walmsley, *The Rhetoric of Berkeley's Philosophy*, 14

17 Warnock, *Berkeley*, 146

No. If we were to enrich the concept of an idea, the most appealing characterization is 'immediate object of the sense, or understanding,' since this is a characterization found in his earlier *New Theory of Vision* (NTV §45) and in the *Dialogues* (DHP 175, 250, 251). Further, immediacy is a theme sounded *vis-à-vis* ideas throughout the early modern period.¹⁸ But it adds nothing to the notion of an idea as an object of knowledge *except* that it is known immediately, and we shall see that questions of immediacy are not needed to reconstruct the arguments in the opening seven sections of the *Principles*.

Berkeley continues §1 by enumerating the sensible modalities, indicating that certain ideas are derived from distinct senses. Then he remarks:

And as several of these [ideas of distinct senses] are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing. Thus, for example, a certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name apple. Other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and the like sensible things; which, as they are pleasing or disagreeable, excite the passions of love, hatred, joy, grief, and so forth. (PHK §1)

There might be a temptation at this point to say, with A.A. Luce, that 'Berkeley is not talking about ideas of stones, trees, and books. He is talking about ideas that *are* stones, trees, and books. He says that collections of ideas *constitute* these and the like sensible things.'¹⁹ I believe we should avoid this temptation. While he ultimately identifies real things with collections of ideas (PHK §§30-3), the focus in §1 is on ideas as objects of knowledge. Having discussed the sources of ideas of one sense, he shifts to ordinary objects. If the focus is still epistemic, then the concern is with objects *as they are known*. Such an approach is supported by both his discussion of abstraction and the historical context.

18 John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, P.H. Nidditch, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975), Book 4, Ch. 1, Sect. 1, 525 (further references to Locke's *Essay* will be by book, chapter, section, and page); cf. Descartes's discussions of objective reality at *Meditations*, CSM 2:28-9; Nicholas Malebranche, *Elucidations of The Search after Truth*, in *The Search After Truth and Elucidations of the Search After Truth*, Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp, trans. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press 1980), 561; Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole, *Logic or the Art of Thinking*, Jill Vance Buroker, trans. and ed., Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996), 26.

19 A.A. Luce, *The Dialectic of Immaterialism* (London: Hodder and Stroughton 1963), 30; cf. Antony Flew, *An Introduction to Western Philosophy: Ideas and Argument from Plato to Sartre* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1971), 339; Tipton, *Berkeley*, 70.

Regardless of the details of Berkeley's account of abstract ideas, he claimed *at least* that one cannot form an idea of a simple quality separated entirely from the complex idea that provides its basis.²⁰ The application of words is based on resemblances among complex objects (Intro. §§11-12; cf. PHK §49). Nor is this merely a Berkeleian ploy. Lockean nominal essences are abstract ideas that provide the basis for classifying (applying a word to) complex things. A nominal essence is 'the Complication, or Collection of those several simple *Ideas* of sensible Qualities, which we use to find united in a thing called *Horse* or *Stone*.'²¹ A Lockean idea of substance is nothing but a collection of ideas, and insofar as one is concerned with a nominal essence, it is subject to change on the basis of additional experience.²² Since Berkeley merely says that 'as several of these [ideas] are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be *reputed as one thing*' (my emphasis), not that they *are* one thing, his remark fits well with an epistemic reading.

On an epistemic reading, the conclusions in the second section of the *Principles* follow from those in the first. Berkeley writes:

But besides all that endless variety of ideas or objects of knowledge, there is likewise something which knows or perceives them, and exercises divers operations, as willing, imagining, remembering about them. This perceiving, active being is what I call *mind, spirit, soul* or *my self*. By which words I do not denote any one of my ideas, but a thing entirely distinct from them, wherein they exist, or, which is the same thing, whereby they are perceived; for the existence of an idea consists in being perceived. (PHK §2)

If there are objects of knowledge — things known — then there must be something that knows them. Knowledge *that* there is a knower follows from an analysis of the knowing relation. But Berkeley says more than that there is a knower; he also claims that it 'exercises divers operations, as willing, imagining, remembering about them.' Does that follow?

20 I leave open the question whether Berkeley accepted the existence of simple ideas (see Winkler, *Berkeley*, 53-75). If inseparability — the actual or logical impossibility of forming an idea of a simple quality separated from all other ideas — were a sufficient condition for denying the existence of simple ideas, then even such champions of simple ideas as Hume would seem committed to their nonexistence. (See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd edition revised by P.H. Nidditch [Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978], 2, 17-25.)

21 Locke, *Essay* 2.23.4, 297; cf. 3.3.18, 418-19, 3.6.2-3, 439, 3.6.6-8, 442-4, 3.6.28, 455-6, 4.12.9, 644-5.

22 Locke, *Essay* 4.12.9, 644-5. See also René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, Part I, §59, in CSM 1:212-13.

Perhaps. So long as the opening sentence of §1 is construed as maintaining that all ideas are objects of knowledge, and so long as one takes ideas to be effects, then there must be something that causes those known effects.²³ Further, there must be some *explanation* of the fact that the several ideas that 'are observed to accompany each other ... come to be marked by one name' (PHK §1). Thus, there must be an actor (namer). But is this actor identical with the knower? §1 provides no reason to make that identification, nor does Berkeley provide an argument for knower-actor identity in §2. His claim of knower-actor identity seems to be based on philosophical tradition, a tradition sufficient for Berkeley to conflate the knower with the imaginer, the rememberer, and the willer, and call it '*mind, spirit, soul, or my self*.'²⁴ This, of course, does *not* commit Berkeley to a determinate analysis of the nature of mind.

Positing a mind as knower and actor is not the end of Berkeley's analysis in §2. He also says, 'the existence of an idea consists in being perceived.' What does that mean? In §2 he *suggests* that 'to perceive' is extensionally identical with 'to know': 'But besides all that endless variety of ideas or objects of knowledge, there is likewise something which *knows or perceives* them' (my emphasis). In §6, he applies the *esse* is *percipi* principle to bodies, saying, 'all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind, that their being is to be *perceived or known*' (my emphasis). Similar correlations between forms of the terms 'to perceive' and 'to know' or 'to understand' or 'to comprehend' are found throughout Berkeley's writings.²⁵

Nor should this be surprising, since the term 'to perceive' often meant to know, to understand, or to comprehend, meanings that are also common to the Latin *percipere*. Cartesian clear and distinct perception is nonsensuous; it is reasonable to take it to concern how something is known. Locke wrote that 'having *Ideas*, and Perception [are] the same thing'²⁶ and included introspection under the heading 'per-

23 Our methodological constraints prohibit appealing to the passivity thesis in §25.

24 Cf. Descartes, *Meditations*, CSM 2:19

25 Cf. *PC* 74; *DHP* 202, 204 [knows], 199 [comprehends] (Hylas), and 212, 215, 234 [knows], 240 [understands], 231, 250 [comprehends] (Philonous); *TVV* §26; *Alciphron*, Dialogue 4, §8. This is also suggested in *PHK* §27, where Berkeley writes, 'A spirit is one simple, undivided, active being: as it perceives ideas, it is called the *understanding*, and as it produces or otherwise operates about them, it is called the *will*.'

26 Locke, *Essay* 2.1.9, 108

ception.²⁷ John W. Yolton goes so far as to say that Berkeley ‘was quite clear about his analysis of “present to” and “exist in”: they mean “perceived,” “known,” or “comprehended” (i.e. understood).’²⁸ If ‘to perceive’ is extensionally identical with ‘to know,’ Berkeley’s concluding remark, ‘for the existence of an idea consists in being perceived’ is reduced to the statement: ‘for the existence of an object of knowledge consists in being known.’ If being known is a necessary condition for something to exist as an object of knowledge, one can understand the stipulative nature of Berkeley’s concluding remark in §2 and why he deemed *esse is percipi* a necessary truth.²⁹

If *esse is percipi* is a necessary truth applied to ideas in general, then the application of the principle to ideas of sense in §3 is nothing but a special case. His remark, ‘ideas imprinted on the sense, ... cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them,’ can be construed as an intuitive truth. It asserts: an object of sensible knowledge exists only as it is known, that is, ‘in’ a knower (mind, spirit). The epistemic interpretation explains why Berkeley provided no argument for *esse is percipi* in §3.

The epistemic reading of *esse is percipi* seems to be confirmed by the remainder of §3. Berkeley enumerates the ways in which one knows ideas of sense, regardless of their degree of complexity. The table in one’s study, as an object of knowledge, is known either by sight or touch. The warrant for claiming that there is a sound, an odor, or a color or figure is that it is known (perceived) by the senses. Remember, we are concerned here with ‘ideas imprinted on the sense.’ Berkeley’s enumerative argument reaches the not surprising conclusion that sense ideas, as objects of knowledge, are known — exist *as* objects of knowledge — only

27 Locke, *Essay* 2.1.4, 105. See also Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, 7-8; Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1, E.M. Curley, ed. and trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1985), 435, 448, 449, 457, 462, 469, 471, 477, 480, 481, 486, 487, 488, 504, 550, 555, 566, and 596; G.W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, in G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber, trans. and ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett 1989), 59 and 65; Arthur Collier, *Clavis Universalis* (London 1713; reprinted in the *British Philosophers and Theologians of the 17th and 18th Centuries*, New York: Garland 1978), 8.

28 Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance*, 135. Winkler also acknowledges that Berkeley sometimes seems to use ‘to know’ and ‘to perceive’ as synonymous. See Winkler, *Berkeley*, 172.

29 George Pappas has argued that the evidence that Berkeley held *esse is percipi* to be a necessary truth is questionable, since Berkeley ‘says that *either* the denial of the principle is a contradiction *or* the denial is meaningless’ (*Berkeley’s Thought*, 103). If my account is correct, then *at least in the Principles*, Berkeley held that the denial of *esse is percipi* is meaningless *because* it is self-contradictory.

when they are sensibly perceived. Given this, the penultimate sentence of the section seems plausible, 'For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible.' *Ex hypothesi*, ideas of sense are known only by sense perception. As objects of knowledge (things known), they must stand in a relation to a knower (mind, spirit). To claim that there is an unthinking thing (a nonmind, a nonknower) that exists apart from being known (perceived) is, at best, unwarranted and, at worst, a contradiction ('perfectly unintelligible'). If it is unwarranted, there is no reason to ascribe existence to it. Since we are concerned with 'ideas [objects of knowledge] imprinted on the sense,' 'unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived [known]' must be at once known (under the first description) and unknown (under the second), which is 'perfectly unintelligible.' So, if we are concerned with *ideas* of sense — as Berkeley *says* we are — he is justified in claiming that 'Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.'

Before turning to §4, we should note exactly what Berkeley has shown and what he has not shown. In the first three sections of the *Principles*, Berkeley is concerned *solely* with ideas as objects of knowledge and what the knowing relation entails. If ideas are objects of knowledge (§1), then complex objects, *as known*, must be known by way of ideas. *As known*, apples, stones, tables, and chairs are nothing but collections of ideas, a position consistent with Locke's account of nominal essences. Does this mean that there are no things beyond ideas and minds as things that know (§2)? No. Berkeley has yet to broach the question whether there *are* things other than ideas and minds. Even his celebrated *esse is percipi* principle is applied solely at the level of ideas. In §2 he argues that insofar as ideas are objects of knowledge, it is impossible for ideas to exist unperceived (unknown), since then they would need to be at once known and unknown, which is a contradiction. §3 does no more than apply this principle specifically to ideas of sense. Insofar as an idea of sense must be known (perceived) to be an idea of sense, it cannot exist unknown. This does *not* entail that there are no objects beyond ideas (and minds). At most, it commits him to the thesis that *if* there are objects beyond the domain of ideas, they are unknown — a thesis which, by itself, does not entail that there no such objects.

If this is correct, then the 'manifest contradiction' in §4 is fairly tame. We are concerned with sensible objects (ideas of sense). If objects (ideas) of sense are known only on the basis of sense experience and exist only when and if they are so known, then complex objects of sense *understood in the same way* are objects of knowledge and can exist only when known (perceived). Hence, Berkeley concludes that claiming sensible objects (ideas, objects of knowledge) can exist unknown is a contradiction.

But, surely, one might object, this is far tamer than Berkeley suggests. Doesn't the implicit argument in Berkeley's questions go more like this:

- (1) All ordinary objects (mountains, etc.) are objects perceived by sense.
- (2) All objects perceived by sense are ideas.
- (3) So all ordinary objects are ideas.
- (4) No ideas can exist unperceived.
- (5) So, no ordinary objects can exist unperceived.
- (6) According to the common view, some ordinary objects can exist unperceived.
- (7) The common view expressed in (6) is inconsistent with (5).
- (8) Therefore, the common view is 'a manifest contradiction,' 'plainly repugnant.'

Isn't there an equivocation on 'objects perceived by sense' in going from (1) to (2)? On the Lockean and Cartesian accounts, ideas might be the *immediate* objects of sense perception, but ordinary objects are perceived *mediately* (by way of ideas). If there is a shift in the meaning of 'objects perceived by sense,' then the surprising conclusion, (3), does not follow from (1) and (2), and if (3) does not follow, then neither (5) nor the 'manifest contradiction' in (8) follows. Surely, the critic might add, it defies common sense to suggest that ordinary objects *cannot* exist unperceived. Indeed, this seems to be part of what is behind Hume's remark that 'all his [Berkeley's] arguments, though otherwise intended, are, in reality, merely sceptical.'³⁰

More sympathetic critics might allow that the argument works only if Berkeley plays the God-card: God always perceives, so, in a sense, there are natural objects even when we do not perceive them. But Berkeley has provided no arguments for the existence of God, so he is either allowing theological prejudices to influence his argument or he assumes a tacit Cartesian premise that only an infinite substance is perfectly inde-

30 David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, in *Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, L.A. Selby-Bigge, ed., 3rd edition revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1975), 155n.

pendent, so all things ultimately depend on such a substance.³¹ Without an argument, neither of those two possibilities is warranted. So we must reject his argument.

A third objection might be based on Berkeley's concern with 'existence real or natural.' As the metaphysical realist uses the term, realism is 'the thesis that sensible objects have a natural or real existence, distinct from being perceived.'³² Such a position is contrary to Berkeley's. So, he cannot be a metaphysical realist. So, at best, his argument is misleading.

In reply to the third objection, several points should be noted. While Luce takes 'existence real or natural' to be an allusion to material substance,³³ Kenneth Winkler correctly notes that the word 'matter' does not occur prior to §9 and the first allusion to the notion of material substance as 'unthinking substance or *substratum*' is in §7.³⁴ While understanding 'existence real or natural' as a veiled allusion to material substance is consistent with metaphysical realism, it is not clear that such was Berkeley's concern. One of Berkeley's concerns was with epistemic realism, that is, the question of epistemic access to real things, however 'real' may be analyzed.³⁵ Whether Berkeley is concerned solely with epistemic realism or with some form of metaphysical realism seems undecidable, nor, as we shall see, is it important for understanding his argument. Thus, I consider it reasonable to treat 'existence natural and real' as a courtesy-term, that is, a term without a determinate meaning.

In reply to the first objection, we can reformulate the argument by appealing to the principle (*I*) that all ideas are objects of knowledge, understanding 'to perceive' as 'to know,' and recognizing that Berkeley, like Locke and other proponents of the 'way of ideas,' held that ordinary objects, *as known*, are collections of ideas.

31 Descartes, *The Principles of Philosophy*, Part I, §51, CSM 1:210

32 Pappas, *Berkeley's Thought*, 85; cf. Jonathan Dancy, *Berkeley: An Introduction* (London: Basil Blackwell 1987), 62ff.; Luce, *Berkeley's Immaterialism*, 62

33 Luce, *Berkeley's Immaterialism*, 62; cf. Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971), 70-4

34 Winkler, *Berkeley*, 178-9

35 Notice that in §95 Berkeley writes, 'Take away this *material substance*, about the identity whereof all the dispute is, and mean by body what every plain ordinary person means by that word, to wit, that which is immediately seen and felt, which is only a combination of sensible qualities, or ideas: and then their most unanswerable objections come to nothing.' Notice also that epistemic realism is consistent with both direct or naive realism and phenomenalism, since both claim that one has direct epistemic access to 'real things.' This distinction between access and analysis is sometimes blurred. See, for example, Dancy, *Berkeley*, 62ff.

- (1') All ordinary objects (mountains, etc.), as known, are objects known by sense.
- (2') All objects known by sense are ideas.
So, all ordinary objects (mountains, etc.), as known, are ideas.
- (I) All ideas are objects of knowledge.
- (3') So all ordinary objects, as known, are objects of human knowledge.
- (4') No objects of human knowledge can exist unknown.³⁶
- (5') So, no ordinary objects, as known, can exist unknown.
- (6') According to the common view, some ordinary objects, as known, can exist unknown.³⁷
- (7') The common view expressed in (6') is inconsistent with (5').
- (8) Therefore, the common view is 'a manifest contradiction,' 'plainly repugnant.'

From (1'), (2'), and (I), (3') follows with necessity (without equivocation). (4') is the epistemic version of the *esse is percipi* principle, and from (3') and (4'), (5') follows with necessity. As epistemic claims neither (3') nor (5') is shocking, but they are sufficient to generate the 'manifest contradiction' in (8). Notice also that this reconstruction of Berkeley's argument does *not* entail that ordinary objects themselves are identical with collections of ideas; it claims such an identity *only as they are known*.

Notice also what this reconstruction does and what it does not do. It retains a focus on ideas as objects of knowledge. Within that context it assumes the Lockean principle that complex objects, as known, are

36 (4') cannot be reached by way of (I), since a syllogism with (4) and (I) as premises would commit the fallacy of illicit process of the major term. If Berkeley took the terms 'idea' and 'object of knowledge' as extensionally equivalent, the substitution would be unproblematic. As we agreed above, however, such a reading is inconsistent with some of the later Berkeleian texts. Nonetheless, if we recognize that (4') is a more general principle of which (4), that 'No ideas exist unknown' is an instance, it is reasonable to substitute (4') for (4). So long as Berkeley is concerned with *actual* objects of knowledge, rather than possible or potential objects of knowledge, (4') seems to be a necessary truth, asserting no more than that all (actually) known things are (actually) known.

37 (6') should be understood as commonsensical truth.

complex ideas, and it shows that such complex ideas, as objects of knowledge, cannot exist unknown. It does *not* assume any determinate account of 'existence real or natural' beyond that of a thing existing unperceived (unknown). If, as Berkeley says, we are concerned with 'sensible objects' (ideas known by sense perception), the common view commits one to claiming that these inherent objects of knowledge exist unknown, a claim which is internally inconsistent. This is a fairly mild Berkeley: the *possibility* is left open that there are things without that are related to our objects of knowledge, and it requires no reference to the God-card.

In §5 Berkeley explains the philosophical error of attributing existence to nonsensible entities on the basis of abstract ideas and shows that any basis for attributing existence to unknown things is unwarranted. He writes:

[1] If we thoroughly examine this tenet, it will, perhaps, be found at bottom to depend on the doctrine of *abstract ideas*. For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived? Light and colours, heat and cold, extension and figures, in a word the things we see and feel, what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas or impressions on the sense; and is it possible to separate, even in thought, any of these from perception? For my part I might as easily divide a thing from it self. [2] I may indeed divide in my thoughts or conceive apart from each other those things which, perhaps, I never perceived by sense so divided. Thus I imagine the trunk of a human body without the limbs, or conceive the smell of a rose without thinking on the rose it self. So far I will not deny I can abstract, if that may properly be called *abstraction*, which extends only to the conceiving separately such objects, as it is possible may really exist or be actually perceived asunder. But my conceiving or imagining power does not extend beyond the possibility of real existence or perception. [3] Hence as it is impossible for me to see or feel anything without an actual sensation of that thing, so is it impossible for me to conceive in my thoughts any sensible thing or object distinct from the sensation or perception of it.

I have divided the section into three parts for purposes of discussion.

In the Introduction to the *Principles*, Berkeley argued that 'the opinion that the mind has a power of framing *abstract ideas* or notions of things' 'seems to have had a chief part in rendering speculation intricate and perplexed, and to have occasioned innumerable errors and difficulties in almost all parts of knowledge' (Intro. §6). Berkeley's fundamental contention is that the doctrine of abstract ideas holds that it is possible to conceive (form ideas of) impossible states of affairs.³⁸ Given that the

38 For a more complete defense of this interpretation see Daniel E. Flage, 'Berkeley on Abstraction,' *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24 (1986) 483-501.

commonly accepted maxim that whatever is conceivable is possible³⁹ entails that what is impossible is inconceivable,⁴⁰ it follows that abstract ideas of impossible states of affairs cannot be formed. Part [2] parallels Introduction §10 to the point of echoing the words, ‘I deny that I can abstract one from another, or conceive separately, those qualities which it is impossible should exist so separated’ (Intro. §10). If the *esse is percipi* principle is construed epistemically and applies only to ideas as objects of knowledge, then it is a necessary truth and to conceive of an object of sense existing apart from a knower is an inconsistent state of affairs. Inconsistent states of affairs are neither possible nor conceivable. So, Berkeley can claim in part [3] that it is ‘impossible for me to conceive in my thought any sensible thing or object distinct from the sensation or perception of it.’ So, if his *general* criticism of abstraction is sound, it provides a plausible explanation of a common philosophical error, namely, the contention that ordinary objects understood as sensible objects (objects of knowledge) can exist unperceived (unknown), as he claimed in part [1].

In §6 there seems to be a shift. While the opening five sections of the *Principles* can be read epistemically, in §6 he seems to shift to things themselves. He writes:

Some truths there are so near and obvious to the mind, that a man need only open his eyes to see them. Such I take this important one to be, to wit, that all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind, that their being is to be perceived or known; ... (PHK §6)

Since Berkeley alludes to ‘all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world,’ *not* to the choir of heaven and the furniture of earth *as perceived* or *as known*, he seems to be talking about objects themselves. If he is talking about objects themselves, then either (a) there is a shift away from the considerations in the opening five sections — a shift that needs to be explained — or (b) there is an *implicit* reference to things known, or (c) the alleged epistemic import of the opening five sections is an illusion.

I believe it is reasonable to suggest there was a shift. For an idea (object of knowledge) to exist, it must be perceived (known). Insofar as ordinary objects are known, they are collections of ideas. So, insofar as there are

39 Cf. Descartes, *Meditations*, CSM 2:54.

40 That Berkeley was aware of this entailment is clear from the First Draft of the Introduction. See *Works*, 2:125.

grounds for claiming the existence of ordinary objects, those objects are mind-dependent. Notice that insofar as Berkeley provides an argument for this claim, it is only that any alternative is unintelligible and involves all the absurdity of abstraction.

What is one to make of Berkeley's claim? It is radical. While virtually all Berkeley's contemporaries maintained that ideas are objects of knowledge (or immediate objects of knowledge), and many held that there is a correlation between what one knows and what exists, none held that ideas are involved in the analysis of ordinary objects. Granting this, one must still ask what the nature of Berkeley's claim is. Is it the claim that ordinary objects are *only* collections of ideas? Or does he maintain that ordinary objects are *at least* collections of ideas?

There are two reasons why one should assume it is the latter. First, no more is warranted by the previous arguments. Second, as we shall see below, beginning in §8, Berkeley examines arguments that allegedly support the claim that materiality is involved in analyzing the nature of ordinary objects.

Nor does §7 carry one a great deal further:

From what has been said, it follows, there is not any other substance than spirit, or that which perceives. But for the fuller proof of this point, let it be considered, the sensible qualities are colour, figure, motion, smell, taste, and such like, that is, the ideas perceived by sense. Now for an idea to exist in an unperceiving thing, is a manifest contradiction; for to have an idea is all one as to perceive: that therefore wherein colour, figure, and the like qualities exist, must perceive them; hence it is clear there can be no unthinking substance or *substratum* of those ideas. (PHK §7)

If we are dealing with ideas as objects of knowledge, then, as we saw in §2, the existence of objects of knowledge entails the existence of a knower, 'what I call *mind, soul, spirit, or my self*' (PHK §2). So, from known sense objects, the only non-idea or substance that is warranted is spiritual. Ideas as objects of knowledge are mind-dependent.⁴¹ So, there is no epistemic warrant for claiming the existence of an 'unthinking substance or *substratum* of those ideas,' that is, sensible qualities can exist only in a mind.

But what does this mean? Does it mean (1) that there are no material substances, that the thesis of immaterialism is true? Or (2) that, whether or not there are material substances, the entire perceivable world is dependent upon immaterial substance(s)? Or, merely, (3) that insofar as we can determine to this point, there are only thinking substances?

41 Nor need one *here* read 'idea' as 'object of knowledge.' See Pitcher, *Berkeley*, 93.

Berkeley has not yet broached the question of the existence of material substance. This is a topic he examines in subsequent sections. While he argued that the existence of objects of knowledge entails the existence of a knower, he has provided *no* analysis of this '*mind, soul, spirit, or my self*' (PHK §2). It is consistent with what he has argued *to this point* to contend that the knower is a thinking material substance. So, neither (1) nor (2) seems warranted by the textual evidence. (3) leaves the nature of thinking substance indeterminate. While the 'to be is to be known' principle commits Berkeley to the claim that the physical world is composed, at least, of ideas and that ideas as objects of knowledge are dependent upon a knower, at this point, the *nature* of the knower is unknown. Indeed, nothing to this point precludes the possibility of thinking matter. Since (3) leaves questions of the ontology of mind open, it is best supported by the textual evidence.

Before turning to Berkeley's arguments that there are no grounds for introducing material substance, we should consider an objection. Someone might object⁴² that even if Berkeley does not argue that ordinary objects are nothing but collections of ideas in the opening seven sections of the *Principles*, he must provide an argument that ideas are mind-dependent on pain of leaving his position that sensible things (ordinary objects) unsupported at its core. Either these arguments are given in the first seven sections of the *Principles*, or they are not given at all, since no one has found an argument for the mind-dependence of ideas *after* the first seven sections. Since there is no explicit argument in the first seven sections, if there is an argument, it must be implicit. So, either Berkeley assumes, but does not support, the claim that all ideas are mind-dependent, or the argument is implicit in the first seven sections (perhaps, §5).

If my account is correct, Berkeley neither leaves the claim that ideas are mind-dependent unsupported nor does he provide an argument for it. His concern is with ideas as objects of knowledge. As known, ideas depend upon a knower, a mind (PHK §2). The mind-dependence of an idea is understood as a necessary truth known by intuition (cf. PHK §3). Were one to claim that this is granting Berkeley too much and that ultimately he is borrowing from an earlier tradition, then so be it. As Gustav Bergmann used to say, in ontology, as in baking, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. If Berkeley's 'intuition' is no more than a philosophical hunch which is woven into a theory that provides a more coherent account of the world than its predecessors, that provides *some* evidence that the 'intuition' is true. I believe the epistemic account gives

42 I wish to thank Robert Muehlmann for this objection.

at least a plausible explanation of why Berkeley considered the contention that all ideas are mind-dependent a necessary truth.

III Likeness and the Rejection of Matter: §§8-24

By the end of §7 Berkeley is committed to the claims that there are ordinary objects are composed of *at least* ideas and that there is a knower of an indeterminate nature. This is a far cry from his declaration at §33 that ordinary objects are real things composed *solely* of ideas of sense. In the intervening sections Berkeley examines variations on the doctrine of material substance and arguments for the existence of material objects. We shall see, as Charles McCracken has acknowledged, that Berkeley's main arguments 'cannot be said to show that matter doesn't exist but only that, even if it did, we couldn't know it did, or know what its properties were.'⁴³

Berkeley prefaces his discussion of matter with an argument that only an idea can be like (resemble) an idea. He writes:

But say you, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them whereof they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind, in an unthinking substance. I answer, an idea can be like nothing but an idea; a colour or figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure. If we look but ever so little into our thoughts, we shall find it impossible for us to conceive a likeness except only between our ideas. Again, I ask whether those supposed originals or external things, of which our ideas are the pictures or representations, be themselves perceivable or no? If they are, then they are ideas, and we have gained our point; but if you say they are not, I appeal to any one whether it be sense, to assert a colour is like something which is invisible; hard or soft, like something which is intangible; and so of the rest. (*PHK* §8)

On what grounds does Berkeley conclude that an idea can be like nothing but an idea? He says it is impossible to conceive of a likeness between an idea and anything that is not an idea. Why should that make any difference? What mode of impossibility is assumed?

Berkeley alludes to inconceivability at various points in his works. At one point in §10 of the Introduction he suggests that what is impossible is inconceivable (cf. 'First Draft,' *Works* 2:125; Intro. §13 and *NIV* §125), which seems reasonable. More commonly, however, he seems to take

43 Charles J. McCracken, 'Berkeley on the Relation of Ideas to the Mind,' in *Minds, Ideas, and Objects: Essays on the Theory of Representation in Modern Philosophy*, Phillip D. Cummins and Guenter Zoeller, eds., North American Kant Society Studies in Philosophy, volume 2 (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview 1992), 191

the fact that one cannot conceive of a state of affairs as evidence that such a state of affairs is impossible. If one assumes this is an allusion to logical impossibility, the good bishop would seem to be guilty of *hubris*. The fact that Berkeley cannot conceive of x provides some reason to believe that you and I cannot either, but, by itself, it seems to provide *no* reason to believe that a state of affairs is logically impossible. On the other hand, if his concern is with *epistemic* impossibility, it makes perfect sense. In that case, the *fact* that one cannot conceive of x is sufficient to show that x cannot be known, that x is epistemically impossible. If Berkeley posits the existence of objects if and only if they can be known, the fact that an object cannot be conceived entails that there is no basis for positing its existence. In the case of the likeness principle, this blocks any basis for an inference from the existence of an idea to a nonidea. As the second horn of his dilemma indicates, were there to be a ground for claiming that ideas resemble nonideas, ideas would need to resemble objects that are presumed to have no properties that resemble the properties perceived in ideas.⁴⁴

Nor need Berkeley have focused on ideas (cf. *DHP* 203-204). The same kind of question can be asked regarding the woman in Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*: does the woman in the picture resemble the subject who sat for the painting? There is no way to know. Assuming there was exactly one woman who provided the basis for the woman in da Vinci's picture, the fact that she has been dead for several hundred years entails that there is no basis for a comparison. To *justify* a comparative claim, it must be possible to compare the objects. On an epistemic inter-

44 An alternative interpretation of the second horn points to logical impossibility. Since objects are divided into kinds on the basis of resemblance, and given that the properties of ideas do not resemble the putative properties of an alleged material substance, claiming resemblance between two things that do not resemble is self-contradictory. If a claim is self-contradictory, it represents an impossible state of affairs. If what is conceivable is logically possible, then what is logically impossible is inconceivable, so a likeness between an idea and a nonidea *as understood by the 'materialists'* is inconceivable. If this is understood as supporting the claim that the position of the proponents of material substance *in particular* is inconceivable, fine. If it is taken as something close to Berkeley's entire argument, I do not believe it is plausible since (a) the likeness principle is general and, therefore, should not be restricted to a particular account of nonideas, (b) the allusion to 'whether it be sense' in the second horn is at least ambiguous between the possibility of forming a positive idea and the analysis of two descriptions to determine whether they are consistent, and (c) Berkeley *uses* the likeness principle to block inferences from ideas to putative nonideas. Given (a) and (c), I consider it plausible to suggest that Berkeley's defense of the likeness principle is based on appeals to conceivability, and if that is so, the mode of impossibility to which he alludes is most plausibly epistemic impossibility.

pretation of Berkeley, the *presumption* that there are external objects distinct from ideas entails that it is impossible to establish that there is — or is not — a resemblance between the putative object and an idea. Notice, this entails *neither* that there are no distinct, independent external objects *nor*, if there are, that they do not resemble ideas. All that it entails — and all Berkeley needs — is that the resemblance claim is epistemically unjustifiable. If it is epistemically impossible to establish that ideas can resemble external objects, there is no basis for positing the existence of external objects as things distinct from ideas, and therefore it blocks one basis for extending the scope of existential claims beyond ideas and minds.

The discussion of the likeness principle is a preamble to Berkeley's discussion of primary and secondary qualities: The likeness principle blocks the Lockean claim that ideas of primary qualities do, while ideas of secondary qualities do not, resemble qualities in external objects.⁴⁵ By arguing that the primary/secondary qualities distinction is unwarranted, Berkeley undercuts one of the grounds for introducing matter into his ontology.

Berkeley begins as follows:

Some there are who make a distinction betwixt *primary* and *secondary* qualities: by the former, they mean extension, figure, motion, rest, solidity or impenetrability and number: by the latter they denote all other sensible qualities, as colours, sounds, tastes, and so forth. The ideas we have of these they acknowledge not to be the resemblances of any thing existing without the mind or unperceived; but they will have our ideas of the primary qualities to be patterns or images of things which exist without the mind, in an unthinking substance which they call *matter*. By matter therefore we are to understand an inert, senseless substance, in which extension, figure, and motion, do actually subsist. But it is evident from what we have already shewn, that extension, figure and motion are only ideas existing in the mind, and that an idea can be like nothing but another idea, and that consequently neither they nor their archetypes can exist in an unperceiving substance. Hence it is plain, that the very notion of what is called *matter* or *corporeal substance*, involves a contradiction in it. (PHK §9)

Berkeley's enumeration of the sensible qualities is straightforwardly Lockean,⁴⁶ and he lists each primary quality as a sensible object.⁴⁷ Insofar

45 Locke, *Essay* 2.8.15, 137

46 See Locke, *Essay* 2.8.9-10 and 17; see also Robert Boyle, 'The Origin of Forms and Qualities,' in *Selected Philosophical Papers of Robert Boyle*, M.A. Stewart, ed. (New York: Barnes and Nobles 1979), 42.

47 On extension see §5. On figure see §§1, 3, 5, 7, and 8. On motion see §§1 and 7. While Berkeley does not allude directly to solidity or impenetrability, his allusion to resistance in §1 might be taken as a reference to solidity, since Locke recognized that solidity is perceived only insofar as one perceives resistance (*Essay* 2.4.1).

as they are existent sensible objects, they are objects known by the mind and can exist only as perceived (known). The proponents of the primary/secondary qualities distinction, however, maintained that the primary qualities are constitutive qualities of matter and that our ideas of these qualities are 'patterns or images of things which exist without the mind.'⁴⁸ Given the likeness principle, there is no justification for a claim of resemblance between an object of human knowledge and anything that is not an object of human knowledge, so there is no basis for positing the existence of an extra-ideational object that resembles an idea. Therefore, Berkeley can claim that 'neither they [ideas] nor their archetypes can exist in an unperceiving substance.' Since the proponents of the primary/secondary qualities distinction hold that matter exists independently of a knower, since they take extension, figure, motion, and solidity to be constitutive properties of matter, but since extension, figure, motion, and solidity are sensible objects (objects of knowledge) which, as such, can exist only in a perceiving (knowing) substance, 'the very notion of what is called *matter* or *corporeal substance*, involves a contradiction in it.' The generation of the 'contradiction' follows the same lines as in §4.

But if the account in §9 appears Lockean, his turn to an examination of the individual qualities in §10 seems to veer from that account. He writes:

They who assert that figure, motion, and the rest of the primary or original qualities do exist without the mind, in unthinking substances, do at the same time acknowledge that colours, sounds, heat, cold, and such like secondary qualities, do not, which they tell us are sensations existing in the mind alone, that depend on and are occasioned by the different size, texture and motion of the minute particles of matter. This they take for an undoubted truth, which they can demonstrate beyond all exception. Now if it be certain, that those original qualities are inseparably united with the other sensible qualities, and not, even in thought, capable of being abstracted from them, it plainly follows that they exist only in the mind. But I desire any one to reflect and try, whether he can by any abstraction of thought, conceive the extension and motion of a body, without all other sensible qualities. For my own part, I see evidently that it is not in my power to frame an idea of a body extended and moved, but I must withal give it some colour or other sensible quality which is acknowledged to exist only in the mind. In short, extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable. Where therefore the other sensible qualities are, there must these be also, to wit, in the mind and no where else. (*PHK* §10)

48 Locke, *Essay* 2.8.15

While Descartes, Malebranche, and Cudworth might have held that secondary qualities exist only in the mind,⁴⁹ and while a focus on ideas or qualities as known might yield the same result, Locke's official view was that secondary qualities *as such* are powers in objects that produce the ideas of secondary qualities in us.⁵⁰ Indeed, some might consider this causal claim of greater significance than Locke's nonresemblance thesis *vis-à-vis* secondary qualities. Has Berkeley ignored this causal hypothesis, or is there an implicit response to it? To answer this question we need to look carefully at what he says in conjunction with the intellectual milieu in which he wrote.

It was commonly granted that for two objects to stand in a relation of efficient causality, they must be distinct entities. This is found in Francisco Suarez's discussion of efficient causality,⁵¹ and it is the basis for Antoine Arnauld's objection to Descartes's claim that God is self-caused.⁵² If, in fact, one cannot conceive of a primary quality apart from secondary quality, the distinction is epistemically impossible: there are no grounds for introducing an ontological distinction between primary and secondary qualities. If primary and secondary qualities are not distinct, this is sufficient to show that neither a primary quality nor a combination of primary qualities can cause a secondary quality (or idea of a secondary quality). Thus, although §10 appears nonLockean, it provides a tacit reply to Locke's causal thesis.

While Berkeley had already suggested that the primary/secondary qualities distinction is a philosophical error that can be explained by a commitment to the doctrine of abstract ideas — 'In short, extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable' (§10) — his discussion in §11 makes this connection explicit. He writes:

Again, *great* and *small*, *swift* and *slow*, are allowed to exist no where without the mind, being entirely relative, and changing as the frame or position of the organs of sense

49 Cf. Descartes, *Meditations*, in *Philosophical Writings*, 2:29; Malebranche, *Search After Truth*, 59 and 61; on Cudworth see Kenneth P. Winkler, 'Ideas, Sentiments, and Qualities,' in Cummins and Zoeller, *Minds, Ideas, and Objects*, 151-2.

50 Locke, *Essay* 2.8.8, 134

51 Francisco Suarez, *On Efficient Causality: Metaphysical Disputations 17, 18, and 19*, Alfred Freddoso, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press 1994), Disputation 18, §7, 131-77, and Disputation 17, Introductory Remarks, 3. For a careful discussion of Aristotle's, Aquinas's, and Suarez's criteria for deeming a cause an efficient cause, see Jorge Secada, 'Descartes on Time and Causality,' *Philosophical Review* 99 (1990), 49-51.

52 CSM 2:147

varies. The extension therefore which exists without the mind, is neither great nor small, the motion neither swift nor slow, that is, they are nothing at all. But say you, they are extension in general, and motion in general: thus we see how much the tenet of extended, moveable substances existing without the mind, depends on that strange doctrine of *abstract ideas*. And here I cannot but remark, how nearly the vague and indeterminate description of matter or corporeal substance, which the modern philosophers are run into by their own principles, resembles that antiquated and so much ridiculed notion of *materia prima*, to be met with in Aristotle and his followers. Without extension solidity cannot be conceived; since therefore it has been shewn that extension exists not in an unthinking substance, the same must also be true of solidity. (PHK §11)

All known cases of size and movement are determinate, yet we make comparative claims regarding size and motion. Relations and comparisons were understood in actions of mind: they were granted no status in the extra-mental world.⁵³ So either they do not apply to putative material objects — in which case material objects are extended but have no relative size and move but at no relative speed (which is absurd) — or only extension in general and movement in general are applicable to material objects — in which case the notions of extension and motion are unintelligible. If the notions of extension and movement as applied to putative material objects are unintelligible, then the doctrine of matter assumed by the primary/secondary qualities distinction is no better than the Aristotelian doctrine of prime matter. In either case, the attempt to ascribe extension to matter is unintelligible. But, since even Locke allowed that the notion of solidity could be construed only as impenetrability or resistance, since only extended substances can be known to be impenetrable, and since Berkeley already argued that extension can exist only in the mind, solidity also can exist only in the mind.

Sections 12 and 13 are extensions of the conclusions reached in §11. While §11 focuses on vague concepts such as ‘swift’ and ‘slow,’ Berkeley focuses on explicit measurements in §12. Determinate measurements are always made relative to some conventional scale. So one thing is at once one yard, three feet, or thirty-six inches long, depending upon one’s chosen standard of measure. And measure is always made by comparing one sensibly perceived object with another. Given the conclusions in §11 as well as the likeness principle, it is incoherent to apply standards of measurement to imperceptible objects. So, it is implausible to suggest that number is a property of matter as such.

In §13 Berkeley argues that the root problem is with the notion of unity (oneness). If units are relative to a system of measurement, then, contrary

53 See Locke, *Essay* 2.25.5; cf. PHK §142. See also Flage, *Berkeley’s Doctrine of Notions*, 157-67.

to Locke,⁵⁴ it makes no sense to suggest that we have a determinate simple idea of unity. The idea of unity can be derived only by a putative act of abstraction, which explains the philosophical error in claiming that number is a primary quality.

In §14 he argues that the argument from perceptual relativity is as applicable to the primary qualities as it is to the secondary qualities. As Robert Muehlmann acknowledges, the argument from perceptual relativity in §14 is strictly epistemic, rather than ontological,⁵⁵ which is as one would expect if Berkeley's sole reason for introducing an entity into his ontology is that it is required by his epistemic theory.

And Berkeley's summary of his criticisms in §15 tend to support this epistemic reading. As he writes:

In short, let any one consider those arguments, which are thought manifestly to prove that colours and tastes exist only in the mind, and he shall find they may with equal force, be brought to prove the same thing of extension, figure, and motion. *Though it must be confessed this method of arguing doth not so much prove that there is no extension or colour in an outward object, as that we do not know by sense which is the true extension or colour of the object* [emphasis added]. But the arguments foregoing plainly shew it to be impossible that any colour or extension at all, or other sensible quality whatsoever, should exist in an unthinking subject without the mind, or in truth, that there should be any such thing as an outward object. (PHK §15)

Berkeley states that the arguments showing that the ontological status of primary qualities is the same as that of secondary qualities are epistemic arguments. This tends to show that the use of 'impossible' in the last sentence is also epistemic. As known, primary and secondary qualities are on a par. Secondary qualities, as known, depend on a mind. So, primary qualities must as well. Hence, the primary/secondary qualities hypothesis provides no basis for positing the existence of material objects as things independent of minds.

In Berkeley's time, the account of matter in terms of primary qualities was wedded to the more traditional substratum account of material substance.⁵⁶ In §§16-17 he focuses on our presumed knowledge of a

54 Locke, *Essay* 2.16.1, 205

55 Muehlmann, *Berkeley's Ontology*, 122; see also his long and insightful discussion of the argument from perceptual relativity in the *Three Dialogues, Berkeley's Ontology*, 131-69, in which Muehlmann argues that even in the *Three Dialogues* the primary function of the argument from perceptual relativity is to undermine materialism, rather than to defend idealism.

56 Cf. Locke, *Essay* 2.23.2, 295-6. Similarly, Descartes in his scientific moments focused on a modified atomic theory, while in his philosophical moments focused on the traditional language of substance.

material substratum, returning to a discussion of matter framed in terms of primary qualities in §§18-20, although everything he says there is equally applicable to a substratum theory.

In §16, Berkeley focuses on the presumptive idea of a substratum. He writes:

It is said extension is a mode or accident of matter, and that matter is the *substratum* that supports it. Now I desire that you would explain what is meant by matter's *supporting* extension: say you, I have no idea of matter, and therefore cannot explain it. I answer, though you have no positive, yet if you have any meaning at all, you must at least have a relative idea of matter; though you know not what it is, yet you must be supposed to know what relation it bears to accidents, and what is meant by its supporting them. It is evident *support* cannot here be taken in its usual or literal sense, as when we say that pillars support a building: in what sense therefore must it be taken? (PHK §16)

If there is any reason to posit the existence of material substance *qua* substratum, the substratum must be knowable. At the very least, one must be able to form some kind of conception of it, since that would allow one to know *what* something is, even though the conception alone would not show that anything exists corresponding to it. The distinction between positive and relative ideas was the commonly drawn distinction between conceiving of a thing in terms of its constitutive properties — conceiving of it directly — and conceiving of a thing in terms of its relation to something directly conceived.⁵⁷ Hence, allowing that substrata are known only in virtue of their modes or attributes, Berkeley focuses his criticisms on the relative idea of material substance. As Daniel Garber acknowledges,⁵⁸ the focus of his attack was almost certainly Locke's account of one's relative idea of substance in the first Letter to Stillingfleet.⁵⁹ If it were possible to form a relative idea of substratum and thereby single-out an entity, then the relational term, 'support,' would need to have a determinate meaning. It does not. Berkeley contends that

57 Cf. *Essay* 2.8.2, 132 and 2.23.3, 296; cf. Arnauld and Nicole, *Logic*, 45 and 126; Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, Baruch Brody, ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press 1969), 7. See Daniel E. Flage, 'Locke's Relative Ideas,' *Theoria* 47 (1981) 142-59; Daniel E. Flage, 'Berkeley's Notions,' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 45 (1985) 407-25; Flage, *Berkeley's Notions*, 134-42.

58 Daniel Garber, 'Something-I-Know-Not-What: Berkeley on Locke on Substance,' in *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley*, edited by Ernest Sosa (Dordrecht: D. Reidel 1987), 29

59 John Locke, *A Letter to the Bishop of Worcester*, in *The Works of John Locke*, 10 vols. (London, 1823; reprint edition Darmstadt: Scientia Verlag Aalen 1963), 2:21-2

our only clear notion of support concerns the relationship between a pillar and a building, a notion that is inapplicable to substance. So, there is at least a shift in the burden of proof: unless 'support' can be satisfactorily explicated, there is no reason to claim one has knowledge of a material substratum.

What is the source of this philosophical error? Abstraction. In §17 he argues that the alleged relative idea could single-out only a being in general, a notion that has no cognitive content. Conjoin this with the indeterminate meaning of 'support' and the earlier arguments that figure and motion can exist only in the mind, he has effectively shown that material substance cannot be known. Therefore there is no reason to posit the existence of material substance.

In §§18-20 Berkeley focuses on the question how 'solid, figured, movable substances' would be known if they existed apart from the mind. If they are known, 'Either we must know them by sense or by reason' (*PHK* §18; cf. *DHP* 232-3). After noting that by sense 'we have knowledge only of our sensations, ideas, or those things that are we immediately perceived by sense, call them what you will' (*PHK* §18), he notes that dream phenomena show that at least some ideas are not caused by external objects. In §19 he notes that even the proponents of material substance 'own themselves unable to comprehend in what manner body can act upon spirit, or how it is possible it should imprint any idea in the mind,' so positing the existence of material substance is of no explanatory value.⁶⁰ So, appealing to the principle of parsimony, Berkeley concludes: 'In short, if there were external bodies, it is impossible we should ever come to know it; and if there were not, we might have the very same reasons to think there were that we have now.'⁶¹ Berkeley's appeal is fundamentally epistemic: if a putative entity cannot be known, there is no reason to posit its existence.

In §§22-23 Berkeley sets forth the so-called 'Master Argument':

I am afraid I have given cause to think me needlessly prolix in handling this subject. For to what purpose is it to dilate on that which may be demonstrated with the utmost evidence in a line or two, to any one that is capable of the least reflexion? It

60 For discussion of the 'materialists'' position on the explanation of ideas by means of primary qualities see Nancy L. Maull, 'Berkeley on the Limits of Mechanistic Explanation,' in Turbayne, *Berkeley*, 95-107.

61 *PHK* §20. This is followed by an anticipation of his explanation of the origin of ideas as things caused by God (cf. §29), a position which introduces no ontological category distinct from mind and is, therefore, simpler than a theory that posits material substance, and some remarks on the virtues of rejecting material substance on the basis of the philosophical and theological conundrums it generates (§21).

is but looking into your own thoughts, and so trying whether you can conceive it possible for a sound, or figure, or motion, or colour, to exist without the mind, or unperceived. This easy trial may make you see, that what you contend for, is a downright contradiction. Insomuch that I am content to put the whole upon this issue; if you can but conceive it possible for one extended moveable substance, or in general, for any one idea or any thing like an idea, to exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it, I shall readily give up the cause: And as for all that compages of external bodies which you contend for, I shall grant you its existence, though you cannot either give me any reason why you believe it exists, or assign any use to it when it is supposed to exist. I say, the bare possibility of your opinion's being true, shall pass for an argument that it is so. (PHK §22)

Before we turn to the passage itself, we should ask what Berkeley's objective is in raising this argument. Is it, as most commentators contend, his ultimate argument for *esse is percipi*? Or is it something else? And if it is something else, how is it related to *esse is percipi*?

On the face of it, it seems odd to suggest that the Master Argument is an argument for *esse is percipi*. (1) If that were Berkeley's objective, one might reasonably expect him to say as much. (2) His focus since §9 has been on arguments used to posit material substance. In each case he argued that, under its alternative descriptions, material substance cannot be known, and therefore there is no reason to posit its existence. (3) If my arguments in the first part of this paper are sound, the *esse is percipi* principle asserts no more than the mundane claim that for an idea *qua* object of knowledge to be is to be known.

Of course, the epistemic arguments against material substance and the arguments for *esse is percipi* are complementary insofar as the latter show that ordinary objects are *at least* composed of ideas of sense, while the former tend to show that they are composed of nothing more than ideas of sense (there is no evidence for the existence of a constituent of an ordinary object beyond ideas of sense). In effect, the Master Argument extends *esse is percipi* from a thesis about ideas (objects of knowledge) to a thesis about ordinary objects by showing that it is impossible to have evidence for even the possibility that material substance exists. This is what George Pappas calls an 'Impossible Performance.'⁶²

Notice precisely what Berkeley is challenging us to do. He challenges us to 'conceive it possible for a sound, or figure, or motion, or color to exist without the mind or unperceived,' allowing that 'if you can but conceive it possible for one extended moveable substance, or in general, for any one idea or any thing like an idea, to exist otherwise than in a

62 Pappas, *Berkeley's Thought*, 141-4; George Pappas, 'Berkeleyan Idealism and Impossible Performances,' in Muehlmann, *Berkeley's Metaphysics*, 127-45, especially 142-5.

mind perceiving it, I shall readily give up the cause.' Sounds, figures, motions, and colors, as known, are ideas (objects of knowledge). Ideas as objects of knowledge have but one intrinsic property, *viz.*, they are known (perceived, exist in a mind). If what is conceivable is possible, then Berkeley is challenging us to form an idea of a thing that is unknown. But if ideas — even ideas of the imagination — are inherently things known, then the thing of which we conceive must, *ex hypothesi*, be unknown, but insofar as it is an idea, it must be known. Hence, the contradiction.

But surely, as numerous commentators have claimed,⁶³ it is possible to distinguish between the object conceived and our conceiving of it, so Berkeley's argument fails. On various construals of 'idea' this seems reasonable. If, for example, an idea were fundamentally a mental image, it would make sense to distinguish between the image and that of which it is the image. In attending to that of which the idea is an image, one would be conceiving of something unconceived. If an idea were an object of thought, one might similarly distinguish between the object and the thinking of the object. Does the same hold of an idea as an object of knowledge?

No. The object is nothing other than the object as known. The knowing is nothing distinct from the conceiving of the object. If an idea is inherently an object of knowledge, then it cannot exist unknown. But a consideration of the knowing situation also indicates that *unless* there is an object of knowledge, nothing is known. Various things can enter into a knowing relation, and there are many things I do not know. I do not know the current behaviors of the family cats, for example. But remember that Berkeley holds that the knowing relation is basic. If I imagine that the cats are engaged in a massive battle, I *know* this in that basic sense. What I *do not know* is whether the cats actually are behaving in that way — if you prefer, the cats I imagine might not be 'real' (cf. §33). In this basic sense, every state of knowing requires an object, and states of knowing are differentiated on the basis of the objects known. To conceive of some object is to know it. An idea as an object of knowledge is inseparable from the knowing of it. So understood, any appeal to the conceivability criterion *cannot* show that it is possible for the idea (object of knowledge) to exist unperceived (unknown). It is an impossible performance. This seems to be Berkeley's point in §23, when he considers the books in the closet when no one is around to (sensibly) perceive them.

63 Winkler, *Berkeley*, 184; Tipton, *Berkeley*, 158-78; Pitcher, *Berkeley*, 113-15; cf. G.E. Moore, 'The Refutation of Idealism,' in his *Philosophical Studies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1922), 1-30.

Does this show that material substance is impossible? No. At best it shows that material substance is unknowable and that there are no grounds for claiming it is so much as possible. But if Berkeley champions an epistemic ontology, then the unknowability of material substance is a sufficient condition for denying it ontological status. Thus, after the arguments in §§9-23 — though certainly not as early as the arguments for *esse is percipi* in the first seven sections of the *Principles* — Berkeley has grounds for claiming that ordinary objects, as they are known, are *at most* combinations of ideas.⁶⁴ In the opening sections he argued that, as they are known, ordinary objects are *at least* combinations of ideas. Insofar as material substance is unknowable, he can reasonably claim, in §24, ‘that the absolute existence of unthinking things are words without meaning,’ if they are said to pick out objects, ‘or which include a contradiction,’ if those things are identified with ideas unperceived (unknown).

And if material substance is unknowable, then there also is no reason to claim that minds are material. Hence, at this point, one might deem Berkeley an immaterialist, although logically he is a ‘*nonmaterialist*.’

But while one might claim that Berkeley has ‘reduced’ ordinary objects to ideas — even to ideas of sense, given his concerns in §§4-7 — his work is not yet complete. He has yet to provide grounds for distinguishing ideas of sense from ideas of imagination, and, thereby, real objects from imaginary objects, a task he does not complete before §33.

Before turning to that issue, Berkeley presents a noetic interlude. For purposes of the epistemic interpretation, two points from that interlude are relevant. (1) The passivity of sense perception does not provide grounds for claiming that the cause of passively perceived ideas is a material substance (PHK §§25-26). (2) Immaterial substance alone can fulfill all explanatory needs (PHK §§26-7).

IV God, Ideas of Sense, and Real Things, §§29-33

If my account is correct, Berkeley holds that ordinary objects are nothing but collections of ideas of sense. But while we know *what* ordinary objects are, we do not yet know *which* objects they are, since Berkeley has yet to distinguish ideas of sense from ideas of memory and the imagination. In

64 Cf. §73, where Berkeley provides a history of material substance and, after contending that he has shown that the primary qualities are mind-dependent, he concludes with the epistemic language, ‘it follows that we have no longer *any reason to suppose* the being of matter’ [my emphasis]. See also §88.

addition to ideas (objects of knowledge), there are knowers or minds. Minds are passive in sense perception and the sole source of action. While Berkeley says that minds are both knowers and actors, he provides no argument to support this dual nature of mind; he seems to rest the knower-actor identity claim on nothing more than generally accepted philosophical claims.

In §29, Berkeley provides an argument for the existence of a spirit other than the self. He writes:

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 day-light I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or no, 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. (PHK §29)

Assuming the causal maxim that every existent has a cause, and recognizing that I am passive in sense perception, it follows that there must be something else that causes those ideas I sensibly perceive. The only kinds of things that can be causes are spirits. So there must be 'some other will or spirit that produces them.' So, beginning with the passivity thesis, which Descartes and Locke take as one ground for proving the existence of material objects,⁶⁵ Berkeley proves the existence of something that is fundamentally different from a material object.

Is this, as is commonly claimed,⁶⁶ an argument for the existence of God? No. All it shows is that there must be some mind that causes those ideas we do not cause ourselves. On the basis of the argument *as given*, one need not assume that the cause of those ideas I do not cause myself is either a single being or a divine being.⁶⁷

65 Descartes, *Meditations*, CSM 2:52-53; Locke, *Essay* 4.11.5, 633.

66 Cf. Pitcher, *Berkeley*, 133; Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume*, 165, though Bennett acknowledges, 'the argument's conclusion falls short of theism, let alone Christian monotheism.'

67 While in §§30-33 Berkeley invites us to identify the cause of those ideas we do not cause ourselves with God, we should notice that in §146, where Berkeley provides his version of the teleological argument for the existence of God, he cites §29 as showing only that there must be some cause of those ideas we do not produce ourselves. If he were to defend his suggestion in §29 that there is a single cause of ideas we do not produce ourselves, Berkeley presumably would appeal to parsimony.

Returning to §29, we should notice that in addition to providing an argument for the cause of those ideas we do not cause ourselves, Berkeley lays the basis for his distinction between ideas of sense and ideas of the imagination. Building on §28, where he said that 'I find I can excite ideas in my mind at pleasure,' he contrasts these with ideas of sense. The mind is active in willing; it is passive in sensibly perceiving. In §§30-33, Berkeley discusses the bases for distinguishing between ideas of sense and ideas of imagination, on the one hand, and between real things and imaginary things, on the other. These two distinctions are related. It is only with the introduction of 'real things' in §33 that Berkeley can be said to have reduced ordinary objects to collections of ideas of sense.

In §30, Berkeley gives us two grounds for distinguishing between ideas of the sense and ideas of the imagination. Ideas of sense are (1) 'more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the imagination,' and (2) they 'have likewise a steadiness, order, and coherence, and are not excited at random, as those which are the effects of human wills often are.' Call the first the 'phenomenal criterion.' Call the second the 'coherence criterion.' The phenomenal criterion is internal: The ideas of sense themselves differ in perceivable ways ideas of the imagination. The coherence criterion is external: distinct kinds of ideas of sense are regularly preceded by and followed by other distinct kinds of ideas of sense, a property that is not found in ideas of memory and the imagination. Both of these differ from the criterion to which Berkeley alluded in §29, *viz.*, that the mind is passive in perceiving ideas of sense but actively forms ideas of the imagination. How do these three criteria fit together?

The phenomenal criterion is at least a commonsense basis for drawing a distinction between ideas of sense and memory. Descartes makes much the same move early in the Sixth Meditation, suggesting that the liveliness of an idea together with the passivity of the mind in perception provide grounds for claiming that the existence of material objects is at least probable. In Descartes, the liveliness of an idea, even in conjunction with the passivity of the mind, is not a sufficient condition to deem the cause of the idea a material object,⁶⁸ although both might be necessary conditions. Similarly, the coherence of assumed waking experience compared with the relative incoherence of dream-states commonly was taken as a means by which those two states could be distinguished.⁶⁹ So

68 Cf. Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, CSM 1:129-30; see also Flage and Bonnen, *Descartes and Method*, 237-51.

69 Descartes, *Meditations*, CSM 2:61-62; Locke, *Essay* 2.1.16-17, 13

Berkeley draws from common elements of several philosophical traditions in drawing his distinction between ideas of the sense and ideas of the imagination. If an idea is an idea of sense, then the mind is passive, the idea is relatively lively, and the idea coheres with other lively ideas according to the laws of nature. In contradistinction to Descartes and Locke, however, his earlier arguments show that ideas of sense neither are nor are caused by material objects.

The role of coherence and laws of nature is of particular interest. Practically speaking, it 'it gives us a sort of foresight, which enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life. And without this we should be eternally at a loss: we could not know how to act anything that might procure us the least pleasure, or remove the least pain' (*PHK* §32). The regularity of ideas provides the basis for 'sure and well-grounded predictions, concerning the ideas we shall be affected with, pursuant to a great train of actions, and be enabled to pass a right judgment of what would have appeared to us, in case we were placed in circumstances very different from those we are in at present' (*PHK* §59). In this way, while doing away with any grounds for claiming the existence of material substance, Berkeley accommodates himself to Locke's practical concern with our limited knowledge. As Locke wrote, 'For our Faculties being suited not to the full extent of Being, nor to a perfect, clear, comprehensive Knowledge of things free from all doubt and scruple; but to the preservation of us, in whom they are; and accommodated to the use of Life: they serve to our purpose well enough, if they will but give us certain notice of those Things, which are convenient or inconvenient to us.'⁷⁰

But Berkeley's concern with coherence also plays a paramount role in defining reality. As he writes in §33:

The ideas imprinted on the senses by the Author of Nature are called *real things*: and those excited in the imagination being less regular, vivid and constant, are more properly termed ideas, or *images of things*, which they copy and represent. But then our sensations, be they never so vivid and distinct, are nevertheless *ideas*, that is, they exist in the mind, or are perceived by it, as truly as the ideas of its own framing. 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; but this is no argument that they exist without 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: yet still they are *ideas*, and certainly no *idea*, whether faint or strong, can exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it. (*PHK* §33)

70 Locke, *Essay* 4.11.8, 634

It is here — and only here — that Berkeley is ‘changing ... ideas into things’ (*DHP* 244). Recall where we have been. If ideas are objects of knowledge, then by §7 he had concluded that ordinary objects are *at least* collections of ideas of sense. He then argued that material substance is unknowable, so ordinary objects are *at most* collections of ideas of sense. After arguing that only spirits can be causes, Berkeley faced the task of distinguishing ideas of sense from ideas of memory and imagination. As everyone would agree, ordinary objects are real if anything is. If ordinary objects are real, and ordinary objects are composed solely of ideas of sense, then ideas of sense — individually and in concert with other ideas of sense — are real. What is known by sense and what is real correspond: epistemic access to reality is guaranteed.

There seem to be two senses of ‘real thing’ in §33, one ontic and the other epistemic. If the idea of sense present to my mind is a red patch, it might also be an apple. The reduction of reality, the *rerum natura* (*PHK* §34), to ideas of sense, means that both individual ideas of sense — the visual red patch, the aroma, the tactile sensation — and that apple that is a collection of all those ideas are equally real. The reality of that collection of ideas of sense which is the apple depends on the reality of each of the component ideas of sense. Insofar as we are concerned with ideas of sense *as such*, we are concerned with the ontic sense of ‘reality.’

But we come to know the *nature* of an apple on the basis of experience, that is, we come to know that there certain laws of nature according to which ideas of the several senses ‘are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing’ (*PHK* §1). We form a concept of a thing of a kind comparable to what Locke called a nominal essence. Like a Lockean nominal essence, the notion of the apple will change as we learn more laws of nature. When we were young, our notion of an apple might have been one of a certain color (or range of colors), a certain shape, aroma, texture, and flavor. As we grew older and learned more laws of nature, we might have learned that if one leaves an apple on a table for an extended period of time, its color and aroma will change significantly (it rots). Our notion of the nature of an apple is *not* composed solely of ideas of sense. Learning laws of nature requires comparisons of remembered apples with presently perceived apples. So the notion we form of the nature of an apple is not real in the ontic sense; rather, it is an epistemic construct, and insofar as it is composed (in part) of ideas, those include at least ideas of the memory if not ideas of the imagination.⁷¹ We might posit the existence

71 If we became familiar with the behavior of citrus fruit before becoming familiar with the behavior of apples, and if we came to notice that citrus fruit spoils in predictable

of things corresponding to our notion of an apple — we might construct a theory of the natures of the things in the world — but the confirmation of epistemic constructions of reality can be based only on the ontologically real, that is, the ideas of sense themselves. And, of course, it is wholly consistent with Berkeley's ontic realism to suggest that we will remain epistemic skeptics regarding the *natures* — or at least a detailed account of the natures — of those complex things that are ontologically real. But this kind of epistemic skepticism is extremely weak. Unlike the representative realist, whose mediate perception of reality was the object of attack of both classical and renaissance skeptics, the problem is *not* one of epistemic access to reality. Berkeley's skepticism regarding the nature of real objects is no more than the contention that, no matter how many laws of nature one discovers regarding the correlations of ideas in the formation of the notion of a thing of a kind, there always might be more laws to discover. Such a skepticism is compatible with common sense and with any empirical philosophy, indeed, it is at the heart of scientific inquiry.

V Conclusions

In this paper I argued that if Berkeley's ontology rests on an epistemic foundation, the principal arguments for his position are plausible. I have shown that by drawing out the implications of the claim that 'the objects of human knowledge ... are ... ideas,' the arguments in the first seven sections of the *Principles* show that ordinary objects are *at least* collections of ideas. The criticisms of material substance in §§8-24 show that ordinary objects are *at most* collections of ideas. In §§29-33, Berkeley reduces collections of ideas to real things by providing grounds for distinguishing between ideas of sense and ideas of memory and imagination. Throughout this discussion, his primary emphasis is on what one can know, and he limits his ontological commitments to what can be known.

But before closing, we should note one more thing. I have argued that '*esse is percipi*' is to be understood as 'to be is to be known.' I have argued that 'to be is to be known' is a principle of ontological commitment. As it is normally understood, '*esse is percipi*' pertains only to ideas and ordinary objects. As Berkeley wrote in the *Philosophical Commentaries*, 'Existence is percipi or percipere \wedge . the horse is in the stable, the Books

ways when left in the open air, then we might imagine that apples would behave in similar ways and, at least tentatively, include rotting behaviors in our notion of an apple.

are in the study as before. \wedge or velle i:e. agere' (PC 429-429a). This reflects the distinction between ideas and ordinary objects that exist only as they are perceived, and minds that will, perceive, and act. While the ontological distinction is found in the *Principles*, the formulation appears only in the *Philosophical Commentaries*. Did Berkeley retain the *Commentaries* principle? If one construes 'esse is percipi' broadly as 'to be is to be known,' there is no reason why Berkeley should retain the principle. Both ideas and objects as collections of ideas, on the one hand, and minds, on the other, are known, although they are not known in the same way. If Berkeley construed 'esse is percipi' broadly as 'to be is to be known,' this explains why the principle at PC 429-429a — a principle one would expect Berkeley to have shouted from the rooftops, if it was central to his position — fails to appear in the published works. As a principle of ontological commitment, 'To be is to be known' gives Berkeley all, and only, what he needs.⁷²

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