

Berkeley on Unperceived Objects and the Publicity of Language*

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Abstract

Berkeley's immaterialism aims to undermine Descartes's skeptical arguments by denying that the connection between sensory perception and reality is contingent. However, this seems to undermine Berkeley's (alleged) defense of commonsense by failing to recognize the existence of objects not presently perceived by humans. I argue that this problem can be solved by means of two neglected Berkeleian doctrines: the status of the world as "a most coherent, instructive, and entertaining Discourse" which is 'spoken' by God (*Siris*, § 254) and the nature of language as a public social practice. Together these doctrines entail that ordinary physical objects, including those that are not presently perceived, are a joint product of divine discursive activity and human interpretive activity.

Keywords: George Berkeley, René Descartes, skepticism, commonsense, language

In the *First Meditation*, Descartes presents a series of thought experiments designed to teach us to doubt the deliverances of the senses. All of these thought experiments turn on the observation that the connection between sense perception and reality is contingent: it is possible that sense perception should be uncorrelated with reality, as in the seemingly random experiences had while dreaming, or even inversely correlated with reality, as if they were caused by a deceiving demon. This observation is meant to raise the question, how can I know that the things I perceive really exist?

In the *Principles* and *Dialogues*, Berkeley argues that this question is a mistake. "[T]he very existence of [a body] consists in being perceived" (PHK, §88). Since (for bodies) existence consists in perception, the correlation between perception and reality is *not* contingent as Descartes supposed: "That a thing should be really

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perceived by my senses and at the same time not really exist, is ... a plain contradiction” (DHP, 230).

There is, however, a well-known problem with Berkeley’s response. Berkeley claims to be defending common sense against skepticism. However, it is of central importance to common sense that objects can, and often do, exist when unperceived by humans.¹ The unphilosophical gardeners of the world may not believe in *unperceivable* trees, but they certainly believe in *unperceived* ones (see DHP, 234). Recognizing this problem, Berkeley records in his notebooks his intention “to say the things ... themselves to really exist wⁿ not actually ... perceiv’d but still with relation to perception” (N, § 802). If Berkeley’s anti-skeptical, common sense project is to succeed, this is precisely what he *must* say: he must allow for the existence of presently unperceived bodies while at the same time making the existence of bodies universally dependent on perception in such a way as to remove the possibility of the kind of radical error envisaged by Descartes. But how is this to be done?

In order to solve this problem, we must pay careful attention to two views of Berkeley’s whose centrality to his philosophy has not been adequately recognized. First, Berkeley holds that the perceived world is *literally* “a most coherent, entertaining, and instructive Discourse” (Siris, § 254) which is ‘spoken’ by God in a language of God’s own design.² Nature therefore exhibits *grammatical* structure. Second, language is *by definition* a public social practice.³ The combination of these two views yields the conclusion that the structure of the natural world is a joint product of God’s discursive activity and our interpretive activity. It is this structure that is responsible for the existence of objects presently unperceived by humans. The existence of these objects therefore depends on us in a way that renders radical error impossible.

To explain and defend this interpretation, I begin by examining the two leading interpretations of Berkeley on unperceived objects and arguing that both make objects too independent of our perception and thereby undermine Berkeley’s anti-skeptical project. Next, I introduce Berkeley’s language of nature theory and explain how Berkeley employs this theory to give structure to a world of fleeting ideas. Finally, I argue that understanding the theory of nature as a divine discourse allows us to understand Berkeley’s talk of what would be perceived in counterfactual scenarios and his talk of archetypes in the divine mind in a way that does not undermine Berkeley’s anti-skepticism. These, I will argue, are two different vocabularies for describing the grammatical structure of the divine discourse. This grammatical structure depends on us in such a way that we cannot be radically deceived about it.

1 Skepticism and Unperceived Objects

In the most powerful of his thought experiments, Descartes asks me to imagine that the cause of my perceptions is “not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning [who] has employed all his energies in order to deceive me” (Descartes [1641] 1984–1991, 15). On this scenario, how could I gain knowledge of the world?

The challenge posed by Descartes can be understood in terms of a game with two players: the demon and the meditator. The meditator chooses a strategy for forming beliefs on the basis of her sensory experience. The demon knows the meditator’s strategy and has total control over the meditator’s sensory experience. If, as the game progresses, the meditator tends to form mostly true beliefs, the meditator wins. Otherwise, the demon wins.

Descartes held that for the meditator the only way to win this game is not to play. He therefore set out to prove *a priori* that he was created by a non-deceiving God, and therefore was not in the hands of the deceiving demon. Berkeley is dissatisfied with this approach. In his view, it is absurd “for a philosopher to question the existence of sensible things, till he has it proved to him from the veracity of God” (DHP, 230). In fact, Berkeley holds, contrary to Descartes, that it is only by “attentively consider[ing] the constant regularity, order, and concatenation of natural things” that we come to conclude that the mind responsible for the perceived world is “infinitely wise, good, and perfect” (PHK, §146). Thus, in Berkeley’s view, we must trust the senses to inform us about ‘natural things’ *before* we can come to know that God is trustworthy. Accordingly, if Berkeley’s anti-skeptical project is to succeed, he must show that we can gain knowledge of the natural world without assuming the veracity of God—that is, he must show that the meditator has a winning strategy. Berkeley aims to accomplish this by showing that the existence of sensible things depends on perception.

Note that not just any dependence on perception will do here: if the existence of elephants depended on my having jaguar perceptions, this would not prevent me from being radically mistaken about the world. What Berkeley needs to show is that no matter what the demon does he cannot bring it about that the world is radically different from how I perceive it to be.

John Foster finds in Berkeley three different theses about the dependence of the perceived world on our perception. The first, which he calls ‘the hard-line doctrine,’ “equate[s] physical entities with ideas or collections of ideas” actually perceived by humans, and therefore denies the existence of objects unperceived by

humans (Foster 1982, 22). Berkeley's defense of common sense requires him to reject the hard-line doctrine in order to defend the existence of presently unperceived objects, as he indicated in the notebook entry quoted above (Stoneham 2002, 282–286; Hight 2008, 159–160; Dicker 2011, 252–254).

Second, Foster notes, Berkeley sometimes says that an object may exist “in virtue of the fact that if someone *were* in the right place at the right time, he *would* perceive it” (Foster 1982, 22). I will call this ‘the subjunctive theory,’ since it analyzes the existence of objects in terms of subjunctive conditionals.

Third, Berkeley sometimes says that objects unperceived by humans exist because they are perceived by God (27–32). I will call this ‘the divine idea theory’.

As has long been recognized,⁴ the divine idea theory is a disaster for Berkeley because it is really a form of representative realism. On this view, the ‘archetype’ in the divine mind is the real object, and my perception is veridical just in case it accurately copies that archetype.⁵ But then Berkeley falls victim to his own well-known criticism of representative realism:

It is your opinion, the ideas we perceive by our senses are not real things but images or copies of them. Our knowledge therefore is no farther real, than as our ideas are the true representations of those originals. But as these supposed originals are in themselves unknown, it is impossible to know how far our ideas resemble them, or whether they resemble them at all. We cannot therefore be sure we have any real knowledge (DHP, 246).

The problem can also be expressed in terms of the demon game. If we suppose that the archetypes are not in God but in a deceiving demon, and that the demon is the cause of my sensory perceptions, then the demon can easily deceive me. All the demon has to do is think up one world as the archetype and then cause perceptions as of a different world.

In response to this and other problems with the divine idea interpretation, Kenneth Winkler (1989, 191–237) has argued that the subjunctive theory was, or at least should have been, Berkeley's considered view. However, the subjunctive theory faces a problem precisely analogous to the problem faced by the divine idea theory.

Winkler takes the subjunctive theory (which he calls ‘the *phenomenalist* version of immaterialism’) to be committed to the claim that “The truth-conditions of statements about ordinary objects—including statements asserting the existence of those objects—can, as a matter of what these statements *mean*, be expressed in the

language of minds and ideas” (193), and that these translations will turn simple predicative sentences like ‘the table exists’ into long conjunctions of subjunctive conditionals about the perceptions of finite minds. Thus the truth of the claim that Berkeley’s table exists in his study requires the truth of certain claims about what Berkeley *would* perceive if he were in his study (see PHK, § 3). Although Winkler does not spell out precisely which conditionals are required (nor does he point to any text where Berkeley spells this out), one supposes that the conditionals are supposed to conform to the expectations of common sense or plain language. For instance, the existence of the table in a particular location requires that if my line of sight were directed to that location, from an appropriate distance, in appropriate light, and no other objects intervened (etc.), I would have a visual experience that an ordinary, competent speaker would be inclined to describe as ‘seeing a table’.⁶

Now, according to Berkeley, my perceptions depend on God’s (or the demon’s) free choice (§§ 106–107). When what happens in a given circumstance depends on the free choice of an agent, and that agent has a definite intention about what to do in that circumstance, then that intention determines what would happen were that circumstance actual. For instance, my intention to stay home if it rains suffices for the truth of the conditional ‘if it rains I will stay home’. Accordingly, God, or the demon, can control which conditionals are true simply by forming certain intentions.⁷ But then the demon can deceive me. All he needs to do is to form the intention that, for instance, if I dive under my desk and roll over three times, he will stop causing desk perceptions and start causing elephant perceptions. This intention, on the demon’s part, makes many of the conditionals required for the existence of the desk false and thereby brings it about that the desk does not exist, according to the subjunctive theory. (Indeed, if the demon has *always* had this aberrant intention then, according to the subjunctive theory, the desk never existed in the first place!) Unless and until I perform whatever bizarre actions the demon may have chosen for the antecedents of these conditional intentions, I will continue believing that there is a desk, and my belief will be false (cf. Pearce 2017, 105–106).⁸

In fact, matters are even worse for the subjunctive theory. According to Berkeley, God (the actual, non-deceiving God) can, and sometimes does, perform law-breaking miracles such as changing water to wine (PHK, §§57, 63, 84). But if God intends to cause wine perceptions in the future then many of the conditionals required for the present existence of the water will be false, with the result that the water never existed in the first place.⁹

If Berkeley holds the hard-line view, then he is committed to the claim that many of our ordinary beliefs about bodies are false. If he holds either the divine idea

theory or the subjunctive theory, then he does not give the meditator a winning strategy against the demon. On any of these interpretations, Berkeley's project fails.

2 The Language of Nature

It is of course possible that Berkeley failed to recognize that the subjunctive theory would not suit his purposes. However, before attributing this failure to Berkeley, we ought to make a more careful examination of his text. Such an examination shows that Berkeley is a more sophisticated philosopher than our discussion has so far recognized. To see this, we must examine Berkeley's view about the 'principles of human knowledge'—that is, about how the mind progresses from its initial observation of "ideas actually imprinted on the senses" (§ 1) to the recognition of that "constant regularity, order, and concatenation of natural things" which reveals the attributes of God (§ 146). The 'ideas' from which we begin are things like "light and colours ... hard and soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance ... odours ... tastes ... [and] sounds" (§ 1); the 'natural things' whose orderliness, 'magnificence,' and 'exquisite contrivance' (§ 146) reveal the creator are "Wood, stones, fire, water, flesh, iron, and the like things" (DHP, 230). In other words, the journey the human mind makes in gaining knowledge is a journey from fleeting sense impressions to a stably structured world of bodies, and from there to God and other minds.¹⁰

According to Berkeley, "the mind makes her progress ... by an apposite choice and skilful management of signs" (Alc, § 7.14), that is, by the development of (human) language. By this means "several [sensible qualities] ... come to be marked by one name, *and so* to be reputed as one thing" (PHK, § 1, emphasis added). Human knowledge advances by the development of new signs achieving ever greater generality (Alc, §§ 7.9–10, 14–19). A crucial step in this progress is the recognition that the sensory ideas that human language serves (in part) to organize and predict *are themselves signs* that must be interpreted. This recognition begins to dawn on us when we observe that "The ideas of sense ... are not excited at random ... but in a regular train or series." We then give the name 'laws of nature' to "the set of rules or established methods, wherein the mind we depend on excites in us the ideas of sense" (PHK, § 30). Taking sensory ideas as signs and interpreting them correctly "gives us a sort of foresight, which enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life" (§ 31).

If, as Berkeley argues, sensible qualities are merely ideas and are caused directly by God, then one might wonder about the purpose of the complex organization

apparent in our examination of the natural world, and especially of biological organisms (§ 64). To this objection, Berkeley responds:

the connexion of ideas ... [is] the relation of a mark or sign with the thing signified ... the reason why ideas are formed into machines, that is, artificial and regular combinations, is the same with that for combining letters into words. That a few original ideas may be made to signify a great number of effects and actions, it is necessary they be variously combined together: and to the end their use be permanent and universal, these combinations must be made by rule, and with wise contrivance (§ 65).

These observed rules, which we call ‘laws of nature,’ are *grammatical*:

the steady, consistent methods of nature, may not unfitly be styled the language of its Author ... Those men who frame general rules from the phenomena, and afterwards derive the phenomena from those rules [i.e., physicists], seem to be grammarians, and their art the grammar of nature (§108 [1710 ed.]).¹¹

Our process of grouping ideas into objects, which we do by introducing words like ‘apple’ (§ 1), is part of the project of *parsing* the divine discourse (Pearce 2017, 182–188). This parsing is preliminary to the project of interpretation, the aim of which is the knowledge of God and the benefit of ourselves and our fellow creatures (PHK, § 109). When we parse properly, we group our ideas into objects according to certain grammatical rules. These are among the rules Berkeley calls ‘laws of nature.’

Nature, then, is a divine discourse and it is our task to interpret it.¹² Physics assists in this interpretive process by making explicit the grammatical rules we all grasp intuitively and thereby extending the scope and precision of our interpretive ability:

If ... we consider the difference there is betwixt natural philosophers [i.e., physicists] and other men with regard to their knowledge of the phenomena, we shall find it consists ... only in a greater largeness of comprehension whereby analogies, harmonies, and agreements are discovered in the works of nature, and the particular effects explained, that is, reduced to general rules (PHK, § 105).

These general rules, however, are not absolute regularities. They admit of two sorts of exceptions. First, “as it is very possible to write improperly, through too strict an observance of general grammar-rules, so in arguing from general rules of nature it is not impossible we may extend the analogy too far, and by that means

run into mistakes” (§108). This is the case where the rules of the grammarian fall short of the complexity exhibited by a living language. In the same way, the physicists’ general rules will frequently fall short of the complexity of the actual course of nature.

Second, even the laws that would be captured by an ideal grammar of nature may have exceptions. Any predictions based on general laws of nature “depend on a supposition that the Author of nature always operates uniformly ... which we cannot evidently know” (§ 107). In fact, in Berkeley’s view, “exceptions from the general rules of nature are proper to surprise and awe men into an acknowledgment of the Divine Being” (§63).

This generates a puzzle. The signs that make up the divine discourse are, Berkeley tells us, “instituted by the Author of nature” (§ 66). God is not only the author of this discourse but also the designer of its language. Furthermore, God is the *only* producer of this language; we are mere consumers. What then could it mean for God to violate (i.e., make exceptions to) the rules of the language?¹³

According to Berkeley, “Common custom is the standard of propriety in language” (DHP, 216).¹⁴ In early modern philosophy of language, ‘propriety’ is a technical term for the use of words in accordance with the rules of a language, as contrasted with idiosyncratic uses by an unusual speaker or in an unusual context.¹⁵ Berkeley’s claim here is that the rules for distinguishing ‘proper’ from ‘improper’ speech must be a matter of the ‘common custom’ of a linguistic community.

That Berkeley intends this claim seriously is strongly confirmed by the discussion of language in *Alciphron*. In that text, the title character is baffled by Euphranor’s rejection of abstract ideas, since if words do not suggest ideas they are apparently left without a purpose: “this is the opinion of all thinking men who are agreed, the only use of words is to suggest ideas. And indeed what other use can we assign them?” (Alc, § 7.7). Euphranor, speaking for Berkeley, responds: “Be the use of words or names what it will, I can never think it is to do things impossible. Let us then inquire what it is, and see if we can make sense of *our daily practice*” (§ 7.8, emphasis added). This practice that *we* (plural!) are all engaged in proceeds according to certain rules, using words in much the same way as we use simpler signs such as “Counters ... at a card-table” (§ 7.8). The use of such signs is clearly regulated by conventional rules. When Berkeley asserts that “propriety [is] regulated by custom” (PHK, §52), he means that the rules of language are a matter of public convention.¹⁶

If this claim is to be taken seriously, and if the signs of nature really do make up a language, then God's 'institution' of these signs cannot be a matter of mere fiat. God must instead act to establish a custom or convention.

To see how this might work, consider the following bit of science fiction. An explorer arrives at a planet hoping to establish communication with intelligent life forms there. Unfortunately, the planet's atmosphere is extremely toxic to the explorer, and the native life forms have not developed radio communication. Despite their lack of technology, however, the natives are excellent mathematicians and code-breakers. Therefore, the explorer dispatches a probe to the surface of the planet. The natives will come to investigate the light and noise of the probe's descent. The probe then emits a series of beeps transmitted by the explorer, which will be used to encode messages to the natives. The natives have no way of sending beeps back to the explorer, but the explorer is able to monitor their behavioral responses by means of a powerful telescope. The interpretation of the beeps becomes a collective exercise of a team of native mathematicians stationed near the probe's landing site. Beginning by encoding a series of progressively more complicated mathematical propositions, the explorer is ultimately successful in establishing communication.

The explorer is analogous to God: she is the sole producer of the beep language. The natives are, like us, consumers only. However, once communication has been successfully established, so that the beep language becomes a genuine *language*, a set of conventional interpretive practices will have arisen among the natives. If the explorer does her job well, she will have been responsible for 'instituting' these practices—that is, they will have arisen according to her design. Nevertheless, once these conventions are in place it becomes possible for her to violate the beep language's rules by sending sequences of beeps that are impermissible relative to the rules she herself has inculcated in the community of interpreters. In the same way, God can violate the grammatical rules of the language God has created by causing perceptions contrary to the requirements of our interpretive practices.

If this is right then, although the laws of nature are 'instituted' and followed by God (PHK, § 32; DHP, 231), they are in fact a joint product of God's 'speech' and our interpretive practices.

Admittedly, the line of thought I have just developed goes beyond anything Berkeley says. However, it follows naturally from the combination of his language of nature theory with his philosophy of language. Further, it allows him to make sense of law-breaking miracles, as he clearly wants to do. Finally, as I will now proceed to show, it allows for an interpretation of Berkeley's remarks on

unperceived objects that gets just the results Berkeley wants.

3 Deflating the Subjunctives

The most detailed of the texts that appear to support the attribution of the subjunctive theory to Berkeley is found in his response to the objection that immaterialism is inconsistent with Copernicanism since we do not perceive the earth's motion. Berkeley responds as follows:

the question, whether the earth moves or no, amounts in reality to no more than this, to wit: whether we have reason to conclude from what has been observed by astronomers, that if we were placed in such and such circumstances, and such and such a position and distance, both from the earth and the sun, we should perceive the former to move among the choir of the planets, and appearing in all respects like one of them; and this, by the established rules of nature, which we have no reason to mistrust, is reasonably collected from the phenomena (PHK, § 58).

Although scholars have often cited this passage as supporting the attribution of the subjunctive theory to Berkeley (see, e.g., Foster 1982, 22-26; Winkler 1989, 199-200; Dicker 2011, §13.7), these scholars have not remarked on a curious feature of the text. Taken literally, this passage does *not* identify the question 'whether the earth moves or no' with the question of whether a certain conditional is *true*. Rather, Berkeley here identifies the question of the earth's motion with the question of whether a certain conditional *is supported by astronomical observations*. I do not believe that Berkeley is guilty of any sloppiness here. On the contrary, collapsing metaphysical questions into epistemological ones is one of Berkeley's favorite strategies.¹⁷ Furthermore, for the reasons given in § 1, Berkeley needs to make all of the physical world, including the earth's unperceived motion, dependent on actual human perception. Accordingly, what Berkeley says here, taken literally, is just what he ought to say: the claim that the earth moves is really a claim about the actual observations of astronomers.

Berkeley's reference to 'the established rules of nature' (i.e., the laws), together with the interpretation of the divine language theory we have so far developed, further supports this conclusion. The grammatical rules of the divine language are a joint product of God's activity of causing sensory ideas and the human activity of interpreting those ideas. Established interpretive practices, based on the actual content of the divine discourse, support general grammatical rules that allow us to conclude that "if we were placed in such and such circumstances, and such and

such a position and distance, both from the earth and the sun” we would perceive the earth going around the sun.

Suppose, however, that the demon resolves that, in the circumstances described, he will cause sensory ideas different from those predicted by Copernicanism. Will the conditional be rendered false?

In fact, given Berkeley’s language of nature theory, the conditional has an interpretation on which it will be true no matter what the demon intends. Once the rules of the language of nature become part of established interpretive practice they gain normative force. Normative rules can support subjunctive conditionals. For instance, it is a fact about baseball that if the pitch is inside the strike zone the umpire calls a strike. Even if the actual umpire for *this* game has been bribed and intends to call a ball no matter what, the conditional has an interpretation on which it is true: the interpretation that takes it as a general fact about the rules of baseball, rather than a claim about this particular game. Call this the *rule-following conditional*.

What I want to suggest is that the subjunctive conditionals Berkeley employs in his discussions of unperceived objects are rule-following conditionals.¹⁸ Thus when Berkeley writes, “if I were out of my study I should say [the table] exists, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it” (PHK, § 3), he means that, given what God has so far ‘said,’ the rules of the language require that if Berkeley enters the study God causes table perceptions. If Berkeley returns to the study and God does not cause Berkeley to experience table perceptions (and nothing else unusual has happened), God will have thereby annihilated the table miraculously, i.e., *in violation of the rules*.

The demon would be able to perform these same sorts of miracles, but this is not a problem since Berkeley is happy to admit that our predictions “all ...depend on a supposition that the Author of nature always operates uniformly, and in constant observance of those rules we take for principles, *which we cannot evidently know*” (§ 107, emphasis added). Berkeley is not attempting to defend infallible knowledge of future perceptions. He only wants to claim that “I might as well doubt of my own being, as of the being of those things I *actually* [presently] see and feel” (DHP, 230, emphasis added). The fact that the actual table perceptions are arranged in such a way that the rules of the language of nature require its author to cause more table perceptions in certain counterfactual and future scenarios suffices for the present existence of the table regardless of whether the author actually causes or intends to cause those perceptions. The demon can’t change the rules without changing our interpretive practices. Accordingly, we

cannot be radically deceived.

4 Deflating the Divine Ideas

In the *Principles*, Berkeley's primary strategy for dealing with unperceived objects is by means of subjunctive conditionals. However, he occasionally, and apparently rather hesitantly, proposes another strategy: "so long as [sensible objects] are not actually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some eternal spirit" (PHK, § 6; cf. § 48). In the *Dialogues*, this approach displaces the subjunctives almost completely (DHP, 212, 230–231, 248, 254).

According to Foster, Berkeley simply changed his mind between the *Principles* (1710) and *Dialogues* (1713) (Foster 1982, 28–32). This, however, is implausible. First, although it is true that the assertions about divine ideas in the *Principles* appear hesitant, and those in the *Dialogues* appear confident, Berkeley makes both sorts of claims in both works. Further, Berkeley did not make significant alterations to these passages for the 1734 editions of these works. Additionally, his 1729–1730 correspondence with Samuel Johnson shows the same kind of reticence about divine ideas exhibited by the *Principles*. Finally, as we have seen, the divine idea theory is philosophically disastrous for Berkeley in a way that ought to have been immediately apparent to him.

The central problem for the divine idea theory is the assumption that, as Johnson put it, "our ideas are copies of [the divine ideas], and *so far forth real as they are correspondent to their archetypes*" (CGB, 290–291, emphasis added). However, in addition to transforming Berkeley's theory into a version of representative realism, this assumption contradicts Berkeley's claims about the criteria for the reality of perceived objects.

A satisfactory interpretation of Berkeley on unperceived objects would explain the differences between Berkeley's remarks in the *Principles*, *Dialogues*, and Johnson correspondence while attributing to Berkeley a consistent position that does not undermine his anti-skepticism. In fact, when the foregoing account is combined with careful attention to the setup of Berkeley's *Dialogues*, just such an interpretation emerges.

Whereas Berkeley's *Principles* is a straightforward philosophical inquiry, the *Dialogues* represents an attempt at that most difficult of philosophical labors, the refutation of an incredulous stare (see Lewis 1986, 133–135). Berkeley took the

Principles to have decisively refuted materialism and was, therefore, puzzled that his book met with neither acceptance nor counter-argument, but only ridicule (Bracken 1965, 1-2, 23-24). Berkeley therefore wrote a new work on the same subject, a work which would “aim to introduce the notions [he] advance[s], into the mind, in the most easy and familiar manner” (DHP, 168). To this end, he chose to write in dialogue form. The dialogue is not just an artifice to allow Berkeley to answer objections as they come up; he had done that in the *Principles* (PHK, §§ 34–84). The dialogue form allows Berkeley to establish an artificial dialectical context. Berkeley sets up the *Three Dialogues* as an *anti-skepticism contest*. Hylas and Philonous begin by agreeing “to admit that opinion for true, which upon examination shall appear most agreeable to common sense and remote from scepticism” (DHP, 172), and conclude by agreeing that the winning view is “that which denies matter, or the absolute existence of corporeal things” (259).¹⁹

Framing the debate as an anti-skepticism contest has important consequences for the admissibility of premises. In the *Principles*, Berkeley attempts to build up a philosophical system from a few basic premises. In the *Dialogues*, Philonous is “content ... to appeal to the common sense of the world” (DHP, 234). Whereas in the *Principles* it is necessary to justify everything from axioms, in the *Dialogues* just any common sense belief is admissible.²⁰

There are, then, two differences between the *Principles* and *Dialogues*. The first is that the *Dialogues* aim to be more readable to popular audiences (to introduce Berkeley’s notions “in the most easy and familiar manner”), and the second is that the two works are set in different dialectical contexts which render different premises admissible. Given my interpretation of Berkeley’s theory of unperceived objects, it is possible to use these features to explain why, although both in the *Principles* and in the Johnson correspondence (CGB, 290-292, 310-311, 318; see Winkler 1989, 229-232), Berkeley is quite hesitant about divine ideas, Philonous uses them confidently in the *Dialogues*. The reason is that, *on the assumption that the super-mind who causes my ideas is the traditional God*, the divine ideas can be used to give a simpler explanation of Berkeley’s view than can be given without them.²¹ The existence of the traditional God is (according to Berkeley) a common sense, anti-skeptical view, and so can simply be assumed in the *Dialogues*.²² In the *Principles*, however, the existence and attributes of God must be demonstrated, and they must be demonstrated *after* the existence and nature of familiar objects are secured. It would not, therefore, be legitimate, in the *Principles*, to assume a traditional God in an elucidation of the nature of familiar objects.

In saying that the existence of the traditional God can be assumed in the *Dialogues*, I do not mean to deny that Berkeley aims in the *Dialogues*, just as

much as in the *Principles*, to persuade the *reader* of God's existence. After all, the subtitle of that work reports that it was written against atheists as well as skeptics. What I mean is that Philonous does not need to persuade Hylas of God's existence, for neither Hylas nor Philonous ever evinces any doubt about God. Arguments for the existence of God appear explicitly only when Philonous teaches Hylas how to argue against the atheist (DHP, 212-213). In this text, Hylas explicitly identifies as a Christian theist *before* Philonous presents any argument for the existence of God. Within the internal dramatic structure of the *Dialogues* God's existence is assumed from the beginning.²³

Keeping these things in mind, let us turn to those passages in the *Dialogues* where Berkeley makes reference to God as perceiver of objects unperceived by humans. The most important of these, for our purposes, is as follows:

Now it is plain that [bodies] have an existence exterior to my mind ... There is therefore some other mind wherein they exist, during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them ... it necessarily follows, there is an omnipresent eternal Mind, which knows and comprehends all things and exhibits them to our view in such a manner, and according to such rules as he himself has ordained, and are by us termed the 'laws of nature' (DHP, 230-231).

What is especially illuminating about this speech, as compared to Berkeley's other remarks on God's perception, is that it explicitly connects the divine archetypes with the laws of nature. The laws, recall, are the rules of the grammar of nature. Here, the divine ideas are 'exhibited' to us according to these grammatical rules. In a language, the things that are ordered according to the grammar are the *words*. This fits well with Berkeley's claim in the *Principles*, discussed above, that sensible qualities are combined into objects in the same way letters are combined into words. This supports the hypothesis that when Berkeley refers to divine ideas or archetypes he is referring to God's knowledge of the lexicon of the language of nature.

This interpretation satisfies all of our desiderata: it attributes to Berkeley a single consistent theory, it secures Berkeley's anti-skeptical result, and it explains the difference in exposition between the *Principles* and *Dialogues*. The key here is the *publicity* of language. Since, as we have observed, "common custom is the standard of propriety in language" (216), God (or the demon) cannot establish either the grammar or the lexicon of the language of nature by mere fiat: instead, certain interpretive conventions must be established among us humans. This is what guarantees that we cannot be radically mistaken, even about presently unperceived objects. The existence of these objects—even those that existed

before the creation of the human race—is “entirely in respect of finite spirits” (253) and is not a matter of what occurs in the divine (or demonic) mind. Furthermore, the fact that the existence of these objects is not a matter of mere fiat opens up the possibility that the mind that establishes them may be in error with respect to them: the demon may be speaking a language other than the one he intends to speak. It is only once we have either established (as in the *Principles*) or assumed (as in the *Dialogues*) that the mind responsible for our sensory ideas is unlimited in power and wisdom that we are assured that this mind has comprehensive and perfectly accurate knowledge of the language of nature. However, such assurances are necessary before we can appeal to the divine ideas and, in the *Principles*, we have no such assurances until after we have made sense of the structure of the perceived world.

Another way of putting the matter is this: Berkeley’s talk about divine ideas being exhibited according to divinely instituted rules presupposes that the mind causing our ideas has a grand plan and is carrying it off successfully. However, the existence of such a grand plan is just what Berkeley needs to establish in order to show that we are dealing with a God and not a demon. As a result, Berkeley cannot appeal to the divine ideas as any more than a speculative possibility until the end of the *Principles*. On the other hand, in the *Dialogues*, he is in a position to assume them from the beginning.

This interpretation is also able to make sense of Berkeley’s response to Johnson. Johnson had fixed on these ‘divine archetype’ passages in the *Dialogues* as the key to understanding Berkeley’s theory and taken conformity to archetypes as the criterion of reality (CGB, 290–291). Berkeley’s first response (letter 194) ignores this part of Johnson’s letter, prompting Johnson to request further clarification (letter 197). Berkeley finally provides the following brief response:

I have no objection against calling the ideas in the mind of God archetypes of ours. But I object against those archetypes by philosophers supposed to be real things, and to have an absolute rational existence distinct from their being perceived by any mind whatsoever, it being the opinion of all materialists that an ideal existence in the divine mind is one thing, and the real existence of material things is another (318).

This terse response is not fully satisfying, and Berkeley does not explicitly reject Johnson’s suggestion about reality. However, the contrast Berkeley draws between himself and the materialist is illuminating. Whereas Philonous accepts “a twofold state of things, the one ectypal or natural, the other archetypal and eternal” (DHP, 254), the (theistic) materialist in fact accepts a *threefold* state of things: objects

exist in the divine mind, in the material world, *and* in finite minds. What Berkeley here points out to Johnson is that the materialist does not regard the objects in the divine mind as the real objects. For reasons given in the *Dialogues*, the materialist *must not* do this: the objects exist in the divine mind eternally, but real objects come to be in time (253). However, as is abundantly clear throughout the discussion of the creation story in the *Dialogues*, *the very same consideration* prevents Philonous (and hence Berkeley) from regarding the divine archetypes as the real objects.²⁴

For the (theistic) materialist, the divine ideas are archetypes of the material things and the material things are archetypes of the ideas in finite minds. What Berkeley is telling Johnson is that he rejects the second set of archetypes, not the first. However, in the very same breath he reminds Johnson that it is the archetypes he rejects (material objects) and *not* the archetypes he retains (divine ideas) that the materialist calls ‘real things’. The question that remains is, within Berkeley’s ‘twofold state of things,’ which are the real things: our ideas or God’s? The answer is, ours. Berkeley’s position on divine ideas is the same as the (theistic) materialist’s: they are eternal archetypes of the temporal objects we encounter in sense experience.²⁵ As Philonous expresses the matter,

When things are said to begin or end their existence, we do not mean this with regard to God, but His creatures. All objects are eternally known by God or, which is the same thing, have an eternal existence in His mind. But when things, before imperceptible to creatures, are, by a decree of God made perceptible to them, then they are said to begin a relative existence with respect to created minds (DHP, 252).

This creation, conferring ‘relative existence’ on things, is “a creation of things, of ‘real’ things” (251). It is this relative existence, and not existence in the divine mind, that Berkeley calls ‘real existence’ (cf. Winkler 1989, 220–222).²⁶ Relative existence depends on a divine decree or law which is a rule of the grammar of nature. This rule requires that “if I had been present at the creation, I should have seen things produced into being; that is, become perceptible” (DHP, 251). God’s decree, however, is not a mere counterfactual intention. Rather, it is part of the grammar of nature which God has inculcated in us, the interpretive community. As a result, even facts about the distant pre-human past, on Berkeley’s view, ultimately depend on actual human perceptions and interpretive practices in a way that ensures that we cannot be radically deceived.

5 Defeating the Demon

According to Berkeley, it is by careful observation of our sensory ideas that we come to regard them as signs generated by another mind which must be interpreted. This practice of interpretation involves parsing the signs according to those grammatical rules which we call ‘laws of nature’. It is the lawful relationship between unperceived objects and actual perception that makes unperceived objects exist, and these laws are a joint product of the discursive activity of the author of nature and the interpretive activity of us humans. Recognition of this fact—that the grammatical rules depend not only on the speaker but also on the hearers—leads to the conclusion that we cannot be radically deceived: a Cartesian demon could not change the facts about presently perceived bodies without altering either our actual perceptions or our interpretive practices or both. In this way, Berkeley’s language of nature theory is directly and centrally involved in his defeat of Descartes’s demon.²⁷

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Abbreviations

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| Alc | Berkeley, George. (1732) 2010. <i>Alciphron: or, the Minute Philosopher</i> . In <i>Berkeley’s Alciphron: English Text and Essays in Interpretation</i> , edited by Laurent Jaffro, Geneviève Brykman, and Claire Schwartz, 17–274. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag. |
| CGB | Hight, Marc A., ed. 2013. <i>The Correspondence of George Berkeley</i> . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. |
| DHP | Berkeley, George. (1713) 2008. <i>Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous</i> . In D. M. Clarke 2008, 151–242. |
| N | Berkeley, George. 1989. <i>Philosophical Commentaries</i> . Edited by George Hasson Thomas. <i>The Philosophy of George Berkeley</i> . New York and London: Garland. |
| NTV | Berkeley, George. (1709) 2008. <i>An Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision</i> . In D. M. Clarke 2008, 1–66. |
| PHK | Berkeley, George. (1710) 2008. <i>A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge</i> . In D. M. Clarke 2008, 67–149. |
| Siris | Berkeley, George. (1744) 1948–1957. <i>Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar-water, and divers other Subjects connected together and arising One from Another</i> . In <i>The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne</i> , edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 5:31–164. 9 vols. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons. |

- TVV Berkeley, George. (1733) 1998. *The Theory of Vision, or Visual Language, Shewing The Immediate Presence and Providence of a Deity, Vindicated and Explained*. In *Philosophical Works Including the Works on Vision*, edited by Michael Ayers, 277–304. London: J. M. Dent.

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Notes

¹ Seth Bordner has argued that Berkeley's commitment to commonsense is much narrower in scope than is usually supposed, encompassing only "the Vulgar's unreflective belief that the perceived world is the real world" (Bordner 2011, 323). He explicitly argues that Berkeley therefore need not be seen as committed to continuity (Bordner 2011, 337–338; 2017). In Pearce, forthcoming(b) I argue, on the contrary, that Berkeley's defense of commonsense is a defense of certain epistemic practices followed by 'the vulgar'. The affirmation of the real existence of presently unperceived objects (in

certain circumstances, on the basis of certain evidence) is authorized by these practices and is therefore part of what Berkeley wishes to defend.

² For argument that Berkeley intends this claim literally, see Olscamp 1970, 36-37; Creery 1972; Berman 1994, 134–144; Stoneham 2013, 219-220; Pearce 2017, 174–182; Fields, forthcoming, note 10.

³ Although Berkeley anticipates several aspects of the thought of the later Wittgenstein (Flew (1974) 1993; Roberts 2007, ch. 2; Pearce 2017), he does not anticipate the so-called ‘private language argument’ (see, e.g., Wittgenstein 1953, § 1.202). Berkeley sees no impossibility in private rule-following or the private use of signs or symbols. It is just that, in Berkeley’s view, these private practices would not count as languages.

⁴ See, e.g., Mabbott 1931; Foster 1982, 29-32; Dicker 2011, 268; Frankel 2016.

⁵ As an anonymous referee pointed out, not every version of the divine idea theory has this feature. See, e.g., Hight 2008, chs. 6 and 7. The current objection is admittedly ineffective against such interpretations. There is not space here to address all of these views.

⁶ As an anonymous referee pointed out, the argument could be escaped if one did not require the conditionals to conform to the expectations of ordinary speakers. Indeed, Berkeley would surely want to allow that we are sometimes surprised by new observations, and that the recognition of this fact is not objectionably skeptical. However, the conditionals required for the existence of the table certainly ought to be closely connected to the expectations of ordinary speakers in ways that go at least some distance beyond what we have actually (already) perceived. I am arguing that if the present existence of the table requires the truth of conditionals confirming our expectations with respect to *any* future or counterfactual cases, this provides an opening for the demon.

⁷ Winkler (1989, 222) explicitly affirms that the conditionals of the subjunctive theory depend on divine intentions.

⁸ These problems for the subjunctive theory also affect the interpretation defended by Melissa Frankel (2012, 2016) on which the archetypes are to be identified with divine powers to cause ideas in us.

⁹ Winkler (1989, 201–202) briefly recognizes these problems for the subjunctive interpretation, but suggests that the resulting skeptical tendencies can be contained in a way that Berkeley would find acceptable. I am arguing that this is not the case.

¹⁰ How the structure found in the world of bodies arises from the ideas is the central question of Pearce 2017. The next four paragraphs summarize some of the most important conclusions I defend there.

¹¹ Although the alterations to this passage in the 1734 edition make the point less explicit, the connection of physics with grammar is even clearer in the 1744 work *Siris*: “There is a certain analogy, constancy, and uniformity in the phenomena or appearances of nature, which are a foundation for general rules: and these are a grammar for the understanding of nature” (*Siris*, § 252).

¹² In NTV; Alc, dialogue 4; and TVV, Berkeley argues that *vision* is a language. However, Berkeley explicitly asserts that nature as a whole is a ‘discourse’ only once (*Siris*, § 254), and (as an anonymous referee pointed out) this assertion occurs in the course of an exposition of the views of Plotinus and Cudworth. Further, in the 1752

edition of *Alciphron* (§ 4.12), Berkeley, while affirming that smells and tastes are signs, denies that they form a language. (Berkeley does not mention hearing.) However, there are also a number of other texts in which Berkeley appears to treat nature as a whole as a single discourse—most notably, PHK, §§ 65 and 108–9 (see Turbayne 1970; Olscamp 1970, 30–31). I follow Turbayne in holding that vision and touch are literally languages and the relationship between them can be understood by analogy to the relationship between written and spoken English (see NTV, § 143). Taste and smell, on the other hand, furnish signs which are part of the total apparatus by which God communicates but do not exhibit the full complexity of language (Pearce 2017, 180–182, 197–198). I here assume that, although smell and taste are not literally linguistic, they are language-like in that their rules are a matter of public convention rather than private stipulation. If this assumption were rejected it would introduce doubts with which Berkeley would be unhappy, such as whether untasted sugar is sweet. However, it would not undermine his basic project, since the status of visible and tangible qualities would remain secure.

¹³ I thank Rachel Cohon for pressing this objection in connection with a much earlier version of this material.

¹⁴ Hylas is the speaker here, but this is a concession he makes at Philonous’s prompting. Further, Philonous reiterates the point at DHP, 250 and Berkeley also says the same thing at PHK, §52. For exposition of this remark, see Pearce 2017, §4.3.

¹⁵ For clear examples of this use of ‘propriety’ in Berkeley, see PHK, Intro § 20; PHK, § 118. Every use of the word ‘propriety’ in Locke’s *Essay* has this sense. Clear examples include Locke (1690) 1975, §§ 2.9.1, 2.30.4, 2.32.1, 2.32.17, 3.9.8, 3.11.11, 3.11.24, and 4.4.10.

¹⁶ Berkeley often recognizes that the conventions of human language are imperfect and in need of reform (e.g. PHK, §§ 38–39, 52; TVV, § 35; Siris, § 296; for discussion see Pearce 2017, 157–171). This in no way undermines my claim that, for Berkeley, such rules obtain as a matter of convention.

¹⁷ See, e.g., the discussion of dreams at DHP, 235.

¹⁸ If rule-following really is the central notion in Berkeley’s philosophy of language—as I argue in Pearce 2017, ch. 4, *et passim*—then it is not at all surprising that Berkeley would be using the conditionals in this way.

¹⁹ The importance of understanding the dialectical setup of the *Dialogues* is emphasized by Stoneham 2002.

²⁰ This observation can also be used to solve the circularity problem with Berkeley’s arguments for God raised by Dicker 2011, §13.4. See Pearce, forthcoming(a).

²¹ The distinction between Berkeley’s arguments for the existence of a super-mind and his subsequent arguments for the identification of this super-mind with the traditional God is drawn in Pearce, forthcoming(a).

²² The centrality of theism to Berkeley’s conception of common sense is defended at length by Roberts 2007, ch. 6.

²³ How can a dialogue between two orthodox Christians serve as a polemic against atheists and free-thinkers? In Pearce, forthcoming(c), I argue that the argument against matter in the *Three Dialogues* is patterned after an argument for atheism which Berkeley attributed to Anthony Collins (see Berman 1990, ch. 3). Berkeley aims to show that the pattern of argument Collins employs works against matter but (as argued at DHP, 231–

234) not against God. Further, as Berkeley had explicitly noted in the *Principles* (PHK, §§ 92–93), it was widely accepted in the 18th century that the viability of atheism relied essentially on the *eternal, necessary* existence of matter (see, e.g., S. Clarke [1705] 1998, 38). But if matter cannot exist *at all* then, *a fortiori*, it cannot exist eternally and necessarily. Thus although this is presented, within the fiction, as an argument whereby one Christian convinces another of the non-existence of matter, Berkeley believes that the argument simultaneously saps the foundations of atheism.

²⁴ On the theological difficulties Berkeley faces here, see Cates 1997.

²⁵ Keota Fields (forthcoming, § 2) would take the agreement between Berkeley and traditional theistic metaphysics even further by making divine ideas the *essences* of material things. However, Fields takes these essences in the divine mind to be signified by our sensible ideas and to be constituent parts of ordinary physical objects. This appears to make Fields' interpretation vulnerable to the standard objections to divine idea interpretations. Fields' attempt to evade these objections depends on an interpretation of Berkeley's philosophy of language very different from my own.

²⁶ On Berkeley's general criteria for the reality of bodies, see Pearce 2017, 119–121.

²⁷ I thank two anonymous referees for this journal for very detailed and helpful comments on previous drafts.