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Berkeley Without God

Margaret Atherton

In much of his work, Berkeley set himself the twin goals of combating atheism and skepticism. Nowadays, it is the second enterprise that interests philosophers more than the first, especially since Berkeley's proofs for the existence of God are not thought to be any more successful than anyone else's. There has been, then, some interest in the question, What does Berkeley's theory amount to if he is not allowed his proofs for the existence of God? Can there be a viable position that is Berkeleianism without God? To many, the answer to this question must be no. God plays far too important a role in Berkeley's thinking to be eliminable. For Berkeley maintains that for ideas to be perceivable, they must actually be perceived. Thus, things not currently perceived by any finite mind can only be perceivable if God is actually perceiving them. Berkeley's theory, it is said, is unavoidably theocentric. Without God, it collapses into the unlikely view that things exist only when they are actually being perceived.

There is, however, one consideration that suggests a different way of looking at Berkeleianism without God. Berkeley's first book, *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, in its first and second editions, made absolutely no reference to God whatsoever. (In the third edition, in two places, the phrase "language of nature" is changed to "language of the Author of Nature" [NTV 147 and 152].) The *New Theory* criticizes a theory of perception based on realist or materialist assumptions and, in its place, puts forward a theory of sensory representation, in which ideas represent only other ideas. This theory of sensory representation might be said, in effect, to constitute a Berkeleianism without God. This suggestion is plausible, however, only if the Berkeleianism of the *New Theory* is compatible with the Berkeleianism of the later works. If the proofs for the existence of God Berkeley subsequently introduces require adjustments to his theory that render it incompatible with the God-free *New Theory*, then perhaps those who say that Berkeleianism is unavoidably theocentric are in the right. If this is the case, then it will also mean that in suppressing all mention of God from the *New Theory*, Berkeley was doing something with more far-reaching consequences than his notorious suppression of the facts about *tangibilia*. He was putting the *New Theory* at odds with his final doctrine.[1]

I

When we consider the relation between the *New Theory* and Berkeley's proofs for the existence of God, it is highly significant that when Berkeley published *Alciphron*, he chose to reissue the *New Theory* along with it. *Alciphron*'s most important goal is theological. It is a defense of traditional religion against freethinkers, and it contains very elaborate proofs for the existence of God. In the *Theory of Vision Vindicated*, Berkeley tells us that he published the *New Theory* along with *Alciphron* because he was "persuaded that the *Theory of Vision*, annexed to the *Minute Philosopher*, affords to thinking men a new and unanswerable proof for the existence and immediate operation of God, and the constant conde-

1. The issues are not unconnected, of course. It is maintained Berkeley does not need God in the *New Theory* as he does in the later works, because in the *New Theory* tangible objects are mind-independent. This claim is not entirely compatible with the way in which I prefer to read the *New Theory*. See Margaret Atherton, *Berkeley's Revolution in Vision* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

scending care of his providence" (TVV 1). Thus, in 1732, when Berkeley published *Alciphron*, he indubitably considered the *New Theory* not only to be compatible with but also to provide significant support for the proofs for the existence of God to be found there. What remains at issue, however, is the extent to which the position Berkeley lays forth in *Alciphron* is compatible with what is found in *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*, with the position that is generally identified as Berkeleianism.

Berkeley's ultimate proof for the existence of God in *Alciphron* depends heavily on the results he had achieved in the *New Theory*. He builds to this proof by way of a subproof, which is not found satisfactory by Alciphron, one of Berkeley's representative freethinkers. This subproof sets the stage for the final proof and helps establish its nature. In this first proof, Alciphron concedes that while we can be sure of the existence of whatever we sense, we may also infer the existence of imperceptible things from their sensible effects. What is involved in these sorts of causal inferences is further refined: we can make inferences about the nature of the cause from the nature of the effects, and so, in particular, from rational acts we infer a rational cause. The proof therefore is going to be a matter of showing that there are a number of events that would be otherwise inexplicable unless we assume the existence of a particular rational cause. Euphranor, Berkeley's spokesman, cites a number of examples of such rational events, or motions, as he calls them: "A man with his hand can make no machine so admirable as the hand itself; nor can any of these motions by which we trace out human reason approach the skill and contrivance of those wonderful motions of the heart, and brain, and other vital parts, which do not depend on the will of man" (A IV, 5, 146). These are, then, examples of motions that are rational but in need of an explanation because they are independent of any human reason. Therefore, we can infer the existence of some rational or, indeed, suprarational cause.

Berkeley does not, however, take this proof as it stands to be sufficient to establish the existence of a single God. He therefore adduces some further evidence: these rational motions exhibit a unity in that they are governed by single set of immutable laws. It is concluded that they must be the product of a single agent or mind, which can be identified with God. This first proof is, as I read it, causal. It attempts to establish the existence of God as the best explanation for certain natural events.[2] It

2. The proof is sometimes taken as an analogical argument. The claim we infer rational causes from rational effects is taken to be licensed by a comparison with explanations for

depends upon our willingness to admit as evidence that there are events or motions in nature that are both rational and independent of a human will and that are law-governed. For the proofs to go through, we have to be in a position to accept these as facts.

Alciphron recognizes that the proof for the existence of God just given, depending as it does on the premise that from rational effects we can infer a rational cause, is a version of an argument to the existence of other minds. It requires that we have just as good evidence for the existence of God as we do for other rational human beings. This Alciphron refuses to admit. He is then casting doubt on the strength of the evidence Euphranor has cited, claiming it is not as powerful as the evidence Euphranor has that Alciphron exists, whom he sees and talks to. Euphranor responds by asserting he has better evidence for the existence of God than for the existence of Alciphron (A IV, 5, 147).[3] What is at stake here is the nature of the evidence Euphranor claims to have. Alciphron is maintaining that truly to be evidence of a rational cause, it would have to be of the same sort as the evidence that convinces him of the existence of a human mind, and that is the presence of language. Alciphron is introducing a condition on what it is for natural events or motions to be rational: they must be languagelike.

Berkeley's demonstration that the rational natural motions are languagelike amounts to a lightning tour through the *New Theory of Vision.* What he is seeking to establish is that vision is a language, that our ability to see the world around us, to see people, trees, and houses, is a matter of having learned to understand visual signs. Berkeley's demonstration consists, first, in a discussion of what he regards as a clear case of his account of how we learn to see, that of distance perception. We are undeniably able to see how far away objects are from us, even though this is not information available to us in the visual stimulus. Our success at seeing distance is the result of connecting visual cues, such as faintness,

human actions. Even those, however, who take the initial proof to be analogical suppose that the final "successful" proof is a best-explanation argument. See Michael Hooker, "Berkeley's Argument from Design," in *Berkeley: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. Colin M. Turbayne (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 261–70, and A. David Kline, "Berkeley's Divine Language Argument," in *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley*, ed. Ernest Sosa (Boston: Reidel, 1987), pp. 129–42; hereafter, Sosa.

3. This passage is sometimes considered a second subproof, analogical in nature, which is not usually regarded as satisfactory. Since, in the passage in question, Euphranor does not in fact give any of the evidence he alleges he has, I think it better to regard this not as a proof at all but rather as an introduction to the proof Euphranor eventually gives.

which in its own nature has nothing to do with distance, with distance information. Faintness can come to stand for distance because it is reliably correlated with distance in our experience. Seeing distance is therefore something we learned how to do; we learned to read visual distance cues such as faintness as signifying distance information. Berkeley generalizes from the distance case very rapidly. Just as we have to learn to see distance because distance information is not immediately present in visual stimulation, so most of what we see, trees, people, and houses, must be suggested by the lights and colors we are built to register visually. Thus, Berkeley claims that upon the whole, "it seems the proper objects of sight are light and colours, with their several shades and degrees; all which, being infinitely diversified and combined, form a language wonderfully adapted to suggest and exhibit to us the distances, figures, situations, dimensions, and various qualities or tangible objects: not by similitude, nor yet by inference of necessary connexion, but by the arbitrary imposition of Providence, just as words suggest the things signified by them" (A IV, 10, 154). This is the conclusion, of course, that Berkeley took most of the *New Theory* to demonstrate, that the natural motions of Alciphron are rational because they can be fit into the rational structure of a language. On the basis of what we see, we can learn what to expect, so as to govern our conduct rationally.

Berkeley's proof for the existence of God follows quite straightforwardly from the claim that vision is the language of nature. If there is a language of nature, there must be a speaker of the language, there must be a divine mind to which we owe the language of nature. The only plausible explanation for the highly rational phenomenon that is the language of nature is that it is due to God. The last proof in *Alciphron* is intended by Berkeley to be understood as a convincing version of the first, and exemplifies the same causal principle, that from rational effects we can infer rational causes. For this proof to go through, we have to accept Berkeley's account of the evidence, his characterization of rational causes. We have to accept the demonstration of the *New Theory*, that sensory ideas constitute a language in which visual ideas represent other ideas. For the proofs in *Alciphron* to hold, we have to, at least, accept that what Berkeley says in the *New Theory* is true. Berkeley must first establish his theory of sensory representation as the correct way to understand our knowledge of the natural world; then he can use it as evidence for the existence of God. So Berkeley's theory, as developed in the *New Theory*, must be independent of the theological use to which he puts it, and cannot require the existence or the cooperation of God in order to be true. The

New Theory, then, from the perspective of *Alciphron*, constitutes Berkeleianism without God.

There is, however, a problem with drawing conclusions about the nature of Berkeleianism based on *Alciphron*. This is because *Alciphron* makes no mention of the issue of the mind-dependent status of the natural world. Indeed, the effects that in *Alciphron* are explained by appealing to God are referred to as "motions." There is no indication of the fact that, for Berkeley, these motions have the status of ideas. There is a sense, then, in which Berkeley's attitude in *Alciphron* is a throwback to the one he expressed in the *New Theory*, where he failed to point out that the tangible objects that visual ideas signify are themselves mind-dependent. Since the need to make use of God, which Berkeley's theory faces in its canonical form, is generally supposed to arise from the absence of a mind-independent material world to provide stability, it might be supposed that it is not appropriate, based on *Alciphron* to make generalizations about the nature of Berkeleianism. It might be the case that there are two versions of Berkeleianism. In the one laid out in the *New Theory* and *Alciphron*, Berkeley's account of the natural world is not theocentric and can be used as evidence in a proof for the existence of God. In the other, found in *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley's account of nature is unavoidably theocentric, and God's existence is proved by other means. It is not, on the face of it, likely that in the course of his life Berkeley leapt back and forth between two incompatible positions, but since the way in which *Principles* and *Three Dialogues* are often read has this result, it is necessary to show that the complete statement of his position that Berkeley gives in *Principles* and *Three Dialogues* is nonetheless compatible with the somewhat more cautiously expressed claims of the *New Theory* and *Alciphron*.

II

Berkeley proves the existence of God twice in *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, once in sections 25–33, at the end of the introductory section summarizing his doctrine, and once in sections 145–55, at the very end of the book. The placement of these proofs not only indicates the importance of this issue within Berkeley's overall plan, but also supports the view that Berkeley took his proof for the existence of God to be the culmination of his theory, for which the rest provided support. While the occurrences of

the proof differ in detail, they do not differ significantly from each other, in the sense that each relies on roughly the same body of evidence. The second occasion on which Berkeley proves God's existence, a proof that makes reference to other minds, ought appropriately to be regarded as an enrichment of the first. While in both cases the primary evidence Berkeley relies on are ideas rather than, as in *Alciphron*, "rational motions," the arguments do not otherwise differ significantly from that of *Alciphron*.

Berkeley begins his proof in PR 26 by claiming ideas need causes, and proceeds to establish by a process of elimination that they must be caused by spiritual substance or mind. (Ideas, being inert, cannot cause other ideas, and so must be caused by a substance. Since there is no such thing as corporeal substance, they must be caused by spiritual substance.) Although I experience some of my ideas as having been caused by myself ("It is no more than willing, and straightway this or that idea arises in my fancy" PR 28), many other ideas, in particular, sensory ideas, are not like this but are experienced as involuntary. These ideas, the ones that are independent of my will, are caused by some other will or spirit (PR 29). Thus, this proof, like the *Alciphron* proof, is causal. Since the "rational motions" of *Alciphron* have been identified in the *Principles* as ideas, Berkeley is able to argue more straightforwardly that their cause must be something mental, or rational, and argues that God is the best explanation for our ideas.

As in *Alciphron*, the nature of the evidence must be further refined before Berkeley can plausibly argue that the cause of our ideas is God.[4] Berkeley gives a description of the ways in which the ideas he is going to ascribe to God differ from human productions.

> The ideas of sense are more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the imagination; they have likewise a steadiness, order and coherence, and are not excited at random, as those which are the effects

4. Jonathan Bennett, as A. C. Grayling points out, has unaccountably ignored this part of Berkeley's proof in his influential discussion of Berkeley's proofs for the existence of God, although he does nevertheless criticize Berkeley for having given a proof that falls far short of theism. It is certainly true that at the place where Bennett halts his discussion of Berkeley's proof, Berkeley has done no more than show that my involuntary ideas are caused by some mind or other besides my own. See Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); idem, "Berkeley and God," reprinted in *Locke and Berkeley: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. C. B. Martin and D. M. Armstrong (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 380–99; and A. C. Grayling, *Berkeley: The Central Arguments* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986).

> of human wills often are, but in a regular train or series, the admirable connexion whereof sufficiently testifies the wisdom and benevolence of its Author. Now the set rules or established methods, wherein the mind we depend on excites in us the ideas of sense, are called the *Laws of Nature:* and these we learn by experience, which teaches us that such and such ideas are attended with such and such other ideas, in the ordinary course of things. (PR 30)

This passage, in a highly condensed form, refers to the same sorts of reasons that led Berkeley in *Alciphron* to describe our ideas as language-like: they have the order and coherence that allows us to learn what to expect, that is, to learn to understand them. As in *Alciphron*, Berkeley argues the specific character of our ideas of nature indicates they must be the effects of a suprarational mind, or God. While the reference to language is lacking, otherwise this proof parallels the proof in *Alciphron.* Like that one, this depends upon the claim that our ideas are law-governed and independent of our will.[5]

The proof for the existence of God Berkeley gives at the end of the *Principles*, like the proof in *Alciphron*, is enriched by a comparison with the way in which we know other persons, or other minds. Berkeley's point is that the inference that leads us to God is as good as and in fact better than the inference we make to the existence of other minds. Just as we do not see a person directly, but rather infer the person's existence from "such a certain collection of ideas, as directs us to think there is a distinct principle of thought and motion like to our selves" (PR 148), so we infer the existence of God. Presumably (this is not spelled out with respect to other finite minds) it is not just any ideas that lead us to suppose we are in the presence of another person, but only those to be explained as deriving from a rational agent. Similarly, in the proof for the existence of God, the emphasis is on the complexity of the evidence that leads us to attribute some of what we experience to God.

5. For those who like to see proofs laid out in a series of numbered steps, the one just discussed might go something like this:

(1) Ideas can only be caused by a mind.
(2) I am not the cause of ideas of sense.
(3) Therefore they are caused by some other mind.
(4) Ideas of sense are more coherent and orderly than any caused by a finite mind.
(5) Therefore they are caused by God.

> But, though there be some things which convince us human agents are concerned in producing them; yet it is evident to every one that those things which are called the words of Nature, that is, the far greater part of the ideas or sensations perceived by us, are not produced by, or dependent on the wills of men. There is therefore some other spirit that causes them; since it is repugnant that they should subsist by themselves. See *Sect.* 29. But if we attentively consider the constant regularity, order, and concatenation of natural things, the surprising magnificence, beauty, and perfection of the larger, and the exquisite contrivance of the smaller parts of the creation, together with the never enough admired laws of pain and pleasure, and the instincts or natural inclinations, appetites, and passions of animals; I say if we consider all these things, and at the same time attend to the meaning and import of the attributes, one, eternal, infinitely wise, good, and perfect, we shall clearly perceive that they belong to the aforesaid spirit, *who works all in all*, and *by whom all things consist.* (PR 146)

Berkeley's proof here, as in *Alciphron*, requires us to see the effects that we attribute to God not just as independent of our will but as exhibiting a certain kind of rational structure.

While the language analogy, the explicit comparison between our ideas of the natural world and a language, is absent from Berkeley's proof for the existence of God in the *Principles*, it is not entirely missing from the *Principles* itself. Berkeley refers to the language analogy explicitly in PR 44, in which he goes over the results of the *New Theory*,[6] and makes use of it in PR 65, in his answer to the eleventh objection. This objection asks why there appears to be a clockwork of nature, if all the various inner parts have no causal efficacy. Berkeley's answer, in part, is that the connections observed are not causal but those of sign to thing signified. Further, he writes:

> [T]he reason why ideas are formed into machines, that is, artificial and regular combinations, is the same with that for combining

6. "It is, I say, evident from what has been said in the foregoing parts of this treatise, and in *Sect.* 147, and elsewhere of the essay concerning vision, that visible ideas are the language whereby the governing spirit, on whom we depend, informs us what tangible ideas he is about to imprint upon us, in case we excite this or that motion in our own bodies." It is clear from this passage Berkeley regards the language analogy as established by the argument of the *Principles*.

> 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*. By this means abundance of information is conveyed unto us, concerning what we are to expect from such and such actions, and what methods are proper to be taken, for the exciting such and such ideas: which in effect is all that I conceive to be distinctly meant, when it is said that by discerning the figure, texture, and mechanism of the inward parts of bodies, whether natural or artificial, we may attain to know the several uses and properties depending thereon, or the nature of the thing.

Finally, in PR 108, he compares natural scientists to grammarians, who are able to go beyond the ability of ordinary people in understanding the signs of nature and to write the grammar or rules for their use.[7] It seems reasonable to suppose that the rational structure that, in the *Principles*, Berkeley argues must be the effect of God is the same as the language of nature, whose existence he demonstrated in the *New Theory* and referred to in *Alciphron*. Berkeley's proof for the existence of God in the *Principles* does not require the traditional argument from design, as Grayling has it, but rather the enriched version of this argument, as found in *Alciphron*, which presupposes the results of the *New Theory*. As in *Alciphron*, the proofs for the existence of God in the *Principles* assume the truth of the theory of sensory representation developed in the *New Theory*.

III

But even if the proof of the *Principles* is entirely compatible with the proof given in *Alciphron*, it might be supposed that the same cannot be said of the way in which Berkeley sets about proving the existence of God in *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. For it is generally

7. Curiously, in the first edition, Berkeley made much more explicit use of the language analogy in PR 108, writing, for example, "It appears from *Sect.* LXVI, etc. that the steady, consistent methods of Nature, may not unfitly be stiled the *language* of its *Author*, whereby he discovers His *attributes* to our view, and directs us how to act for the convenience and felicity of life." I have no theory to account for Berkeley's deletion of this and other sentences from PR 108.

supposed that in *Three Dialogues* Berkeley introduces a new proof for the existence of God, a proof Jonathan Bennett has called the continuity argument.[8] And it is, after all, the continuity argument that has led people to claim Berkeley's theory is intrinsically theocentric, because it purports to show God must exist to perceive the tree when there is no one about in the quad. The crucial passage runs as follows:

> When I deny sensible things an existence out of the mind, I do not mean my mind in particular, but all minds. Now it is plain they have an existence exterior to my mind, since I find them by experience to be independent of it. There is therefore some other mind wherein they exist, during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them: as likewise they did before my birth, and would do after my supposed annihilation. And as the same is true, with regard to all other finite created spirits; it necessarily follows, there is an *omnipresent eternal Mind*, which knows, and comprehends all things, and exhibits them to our view in such a manner, and according to such rules as he himself hath ordained, and are by us termed the *Laws of Nature.* (D 230)

This argument is supposed to differ from the one given in the *Principles* because it argues God must exist, not to be the cause of the ideas we do have, but to perceive the ideas we do not have. The *Principles* God functions as a cause—He is to be seen primarily as an agent, a will—whereas the *Three Dialogues* God preserves the continuing existence of things and is primarily (or, rather, additionally) a perceiver, an understanding. Such an assessment, however, not only requires a particular way of reading *Three Dialogues,* which can be questioned, but also requires taking the *Principles* to be about God only as a cause. According to this assessment, the *Principles* argument is what has been called a "pure passivity" argument. The account I have given so far of the *Principles*

8. Although Jonathan Bennett has focused attention on the problem of the two proofs for the existence of God and given them the names by which they are now commonly known, the idea that *Dialogues* contain a new proof is not new with him. See the editor's introduction, *Works* II, 152: "In the *Principles* (Sect. 29) God was adduced as the *cause* of our percepts, and of our perceptual experiences, and only incidentally (Sects. 48 and 91) is He brought in as the *upholder* of sensory things when they are not being perceived by us. The emphasis is now transposed: the argument is that the existence of God must be granted in order to account for the continuous existence of the natural order; the notion of God as cause is slipped in in a quite casual way."

suggests this is not the case. When the *Principles* argument is properly understood, it is clear that the arguments of the *Principles* and *Three Dialogues* are very similar.[9]

Since the proof in the *Principles* does not stop with the conclusion that some other spirit causes our involuntary ideas, it does not simply establish the existence of God as a will or agent. The ideas whose existence depend upon God do not occur randomly or incoherently, but instead display the sort of order that leads Berkeley to describe them as languagelike. God is not a random cause or blind agent, but causes our ideas according to a plan, the laws of nature, by virtue of which our ideas are meaningful. It cannot be correct, therefore, to see Berkeley as offering at any stage an argument that just trades on God's volitions, an argument to be otherwise supplemented by another about his role as an understanding. The argument that establishes that the cause of our ideas is *God* rests on the claim that these ideas are rational in structure, requiring a rational cause.[10]

In arguing that our involuntary ideas are also orderly or meaningful, Berkeley is presenting a picture of our ideas as having an existence that is distinct from any particular (finite) perceiver. Consider the case of distance perception, discussed extensively in the *New Theory of Vision*. When I stand on my front steps and look to the corner, I may be said to see how far away the corner is from me. But, of course, all that I register visually, all that I immediately perceive, is light and colors. These lights and colors, therefore, suggest to me distance, which, according to Berke-

9. This position is also shared by Grayling and Winkler and is compatible with Winkler's claim that Berkeley's Divine Agent is both will and understanding. Michael Ayers has shown the continuity argument of D 230 is an enrichment of and not otherwise distinct from the central proof for the existence of God in D 212–15, but he wants to distinguish what he renames the "distinctness argument" from the "pure passivity argument" he finds in the *Principles*. It is not like Ayers to be taken in by Bennett, but I think he is wrong in agreeing with Bennett that the *Principles* contains a "pure passivity" argument. See Grayling, *Berkeley: The Central Arguments*; Kenneth P. Winkler, *Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); and M. R. Ayers, "Divine Ideas and Berkeley's Proofs of God's Existence," in Sosa, pp. 115–28.

10. The best evidence, according to Ayers, Berkeley thought he had two arguments for the existence of God comes at D 240, where Berkeley says: "From the effects I see produced, I conclude there are actions; and because actions, volitions; and because there are volitions, there must be a will. Again, the things I perceive must have an existence, they or their archtypes, out of my mind: but being ideas, neither they nor their archetypes can exist otherwise than in an understanding: there is therefore an understanding. But will and understanding constitute in the strictest sense a mind or spirit. The powerful cause of my ideas, is in strict propriety of speech a *spirit*." The conclusion of this passage suggests, however, that a single causal argument requires the operation of a being who has both will and understanding.

ley, I experience tangibly or kinesthetically. There is a way or ways it feels to go from where I am standing to the corner. Because visual experiences are reliably correlated with tangible experiences, I come to learn what distance looks like, or I come to read my visual experiences as having a distance meaning. Just as the immediate visual experiences are independent of my will, so the distance meanings with which my visual experiences are invested are also involuntary. They are a habit I fall into when my visual and tangible experiences are regularly correlated. The existence of the distance meaning is dependent on these regular correlations and is therefore distinct from my own existence. The standards I learn and employ, while cashed out in terms of my tangible and kinesthetic experiences, are nevertheless independent of my mind.

Exactly the same can be said about any of my experiences of sensible things. If I am seeing a cherry, then my immediate visual experiences stand for a range of perceptual experiences with which these immediate visual experiences are reliably correlated and which they have come to mean. The cherry, although mind-dependent, has an existence that is distinct from and independent of *my* mind. Berkeley's claim that our sensory ideas are governed by law amounts to the claim that the sensible things for which our ideas stand have a distinct existence, independent of any particular finite perceiver. From the fact that we do, and therefore can, make sense of our experience because of its regular and orderly (language-like) nature, we can conclude the items of our experience have a distinct existence. This claim is established entirely through the God-free resources of the *New Theory of Vision.*

It is useful, in getting a handle on the way in which sensible things have an existence that is distinct from any particular (finite) perceiver, to keep Berkeley's distinction between immediate and mediate perception in mind. According to Berkeley, I may be said to immediately perceive whatever my sense organs are equipped to register, whereas I mediately perceive those meanings I have learned to attach to what I immediately perceive, which constitutes the greatest part of what I may be said to perceive. I immediately perceive lights and colors, but mediately perceive distance or cherries. Things that are sensible, like cherries or coaches or trees, are all mediately perceived.[11] While it seems reasonable to say what

11. NTV 9, D 174–75. The account I am giving here is the one I defend in *Berkeley's Revolution in Vision.* It is not entirely in accordance with others that have appeared in the recent literature. See Winkler's *Berkeley*, pp. 149–61, and George Pappas, "Berkeley and Immediate Perception," in Sosa, pp. 195–213.

I immediately perceive exists in my mind for only so long as I am perceiving it, the same is not true for the sensible things I mediately perceive. Two people do not feel the same twinge of pain or sense the same flash of light, but they do see the same distance or the same cherry. Just as the immediate ideas I hear and see are different but of the same coach (so long as they form part of the same congeries of ideas I have come to expect to mean coach), so the immediate ideas you and I have are of the same coach. On the basis of what I immediately see, I expect to be able to touch the coach, and I expect you to be able to touch it too. We can be confident we attach the same meanings to what we perceive, because our perceptions are governed by the same laws of nature.

The distinction between immediate and mediate perception is also useful in understanding how Berkeley thinks he can argue it is God who causes our ideas. Berkeley himself says God causes ideas in us in the same way in which I cause ideas in myself, but it is, I believe, more helpful to think about the more strictly analogous situation where I cause ideas in someone else by speaking to them, by making noises they hear as meaningful. Berkeley thinks, after all, it is a strength of his position that his argument that God is the cause of our ideas relies on the same evidence as that by which we convince ourselves that other minds exist. But it is not apprehension of immediately perceived sounds that convinces us that we are in the presence of another mind, but rather the mediate perception of meaningful language. Similarly, what convinces us of the existence of God is the meaningful units we mediately perceive. Looking at things in this way not only makes plain why Berkeley is so clear that the cause of our sensible ideas must be a mind, but also shows that Berkeley's proof for the existence of God depends upon his theory of sensory representation.

Not perhaps surprisingly, what I am saying is that, according to Berkeley, the natural world is mind-dependent, but independent of any particular mind, such as my own, in exactly the same way language is a mind-dependent phenomenon, but independent of any particular mind. If all minds were annihilated, clearly language would also be annihilated; but the existence of language is distinct from that of any one mind, in the same way that the law-governed world we learn about via our senses is independent of any one (finite) mind. The annihilation of a single English speaker does not cause English to go out of existence, and similarly, the items of the natural world are not dependent on the ideas of some one perceiver.

This point is consonant with various remarks Berkeley makes in the *Principles* that have been cited as reflecting his interest in the continued

existence of objects. Consider his reply, in PR 48, to the objection that so long as the existence of things depends on their being perceived, then everything goes out of existence whenever it is not being perceived:

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

To be a sensible body is reliably to present a certain range of experiences to perceivers. Sensible bodies will continue to exist so long as the conditions exist that enable perceivers to make sense of their experiences, to experience them as bodies.[12] Berkeley, of course, further supposes that God is the cause of those conditions that enable perceivers to understand what they are perceiving. Ultimately, through the laws that preserve the regularities that allow us to make sense of what we perceive, God preserves the continued existence of sensible things. The issue of the distinct and continuous existence of sensible things is not absent from the *Principles*. In the *Principles*, the proof for the existence of God, from the premise that our experiences are orderly and according to the laws of nature, establishes the existence of a God who is responsible through these laws of nature for the distinct and continued existence of sensible things.

It is finally interesting to note there are two entries in the *Philosophical Commentaries* that are relevant to our understanding of Berkeley's proof for the existence of God. PC 838 reads: "Every sensation of mine which happens in consequence of the general, known Laws of nature and is from without i.e. independent of my Will demonstrates the Being of a God. i.e. of an unextended incorporeal Spirit w^{ch} is omniscient, omni-

12. This thought seems to be what is captured by the more phenomenalist passages of the *Principles*, such as PR 3: "The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see it and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it."

potent etc." This entry indicates Berkeley considered the proof for the existence of God to follow not only from the fact that ideas are independent of my will but also from the fact that my sensations are in accordance with the laws of nature. A further entry also shows Berkeley's conception of the independence of my ideas is not limited to their independence of my will: "I will grant you that extension, Colour etc may be said to be without the Mind in a double respect i.e. as independent of our Will & as distinct from the Mind" (PC 882). These entries make clear Berkeley was thinking about the issues surrounding the distinct existence of ideas before he published the *Principles*, and further suggest it is unlikely they would form part of a new proof, introduced only in *Three Dialogues*.

Once it becomes clear the position in the *Principles* is that God is the cause of ideas that are both independent of my will and distinct from my understanding, then it is hard to find any new element introduced in *Three Dialogues*. Berkeley's proof for the existence of God spreads over several pages of the second dialogue, or more accurately, it is discussed twice, once at D 212–13 and again, after a digression where Berkeley distinguishes his position from that of Malebranche, at D 214–15. The second occurrence is a fairly straightforward causal argument, not different in any way from that of the *Principles*:

> It is evident that the things I perceive are my own ideas, and that no idea can exist unless it be in a mind. Nor is it less plain that these ideas or things by me perceived, either themselves or their archtypes exist independently of my mind, since I know myself not to be their author, it being out of my power to determine at pleasure, what particular ideas I shall be affected with upon opening my eyes or ears. They must therefore exist in some other mind, whose will it is they should be exhibited to me.

Michael Ayers says of this argument that Berkeley has built into it "certain elements of the Passivity Argument,"[13] and if by this he means that it relies, as does the *Principles'* proof, on the claim that sensible ideas are independent of my will, then this is certainly the case. Ayers is also of the opinion, however, that the first occurrence of the proof, at D 212–13, lacks any reference to passivity, but this seems to me less clear. Berkeley says, in D 212: "To me it is evident, for the reasons you allow of, that sensible things cannot exist otherwise than in a mind or spirit. Whence I

13. Ayers, "Divine Ideas," p. 121.

conclude, not that they have no real existence, but that seeing they depend not on my thought, and have an existence distinct from being perceived by me, *there must be some other mind wherein they exist.* As sure therefore as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite omnipresent spirit who contains and supports it." The only reason I can see for distinguishing this proof from the one given slightly later in *Three Dialogues*, or from the proof in the *Principles*, is that here Berkeley speaks of his ideas as independent of his *thought* instead of independent of his *will*. But I think this is to place too much weight on an implied sharp distinction between will and understanding. Berkeley is quite prepared to use "thought" as a general term for what goes on in his mind, and he is suspicious of attempts to separate the will from the understanding. I think it is reasonable to see this proof, too, as arguing for the need to provide an explanation for ideas that are both causally independent and ontologically distinct from my mind. There is no serious discrepancy between the proofs of the *Principles* and the proofs of the second dialogue.

Furthermore, once it becomes clear Berkeley was arguing from the start that sensible things, while mind-dependent, are distinct from my mind, then it is also clear, as Ayers and Grayling argue, that the "continuity argument" of D 230 does not present a startling departure from what has gone before. For since what makes it possible for us to perceive the world of sensible things is their dependence on the laws of nature, then it is obvious this world is not only distinct but continuous, preserved by the continuing operations of the laws of nature. Thus the "continuity argument," far from introducing any novelties, is, as Ayers says, an "enrichment," doing no more than spelling out the implications of what has gone before.

IV

It seems reasonable to say, then, that from the beginning, Berkeley intends our sense experience to be of sensible things having a continued and distinct existence. From entries in his philosophical notebooks to *Alciphron*, Berkeley has based his argument for the existence of God on the claim that the natural world is governed by law, and hence is meaningful to us. We can reject Berkeley's proof for the existence of God and still accept his theory of sensory representation. We can accept that we live in a world in which, thanks to the regular and orderly nature of our

experience, we perceive distance or cherries or trees in the quad. Without God, we obviously lack a cause or an explanation for the theory of sensory representation, but the theory itself stands.[14]

In arguing for the existence of a viable Berkeleianism without God, I am not trying to downplay the importance of theological considerations in Berkeley's own motivations. On the contrary, I believe them to be central. I am only claiming that Berkeley's theological purposes required him to have a freestanding theory of sensory representation to which he could then appeal in proving the existence of God. If it is concluded that Berkeley's proof for the existence of God is unconvincing, then we have no account of the cause of sensory representation, but the details of the theory are untouched.[15]

14. In what I am saying here, I am agreeing with Grayling, who argues there is a lot of value left to Berkeley's theory even if God is removed. I am going slightly beyond his claims, however, in seeing the residue as consisting not only in the view of the world, as Grayling has it, as mental, together with a negative thesis about materialism, but also in a positive theory of sensory representation. I have written more about this in *Berkeley's Revolution in Vision*.

15. This essay took its inspiration from a paper Charles McCracken read at an International Berkeley Society session at the 1991 Central Division Meetings of the APA, in which he complained that the doctrine of the *New Theory* cannot be used as a guide to understanding the theologically based doctrines of the *Principles* and *Dialogues*. I do not know that what I have written here satisfies him any more than what I said to him there, but this is my considered response. I am also grateful to Robert Schwartz and Robert McKim for their help, as well as to Lorne Falkenstein, who commented on this essay at the University of Western Ontario's conference on Berkeley's Metaphysics.