George Santayana on George Berkeley

George Santayana writes of Berkeley’s notion of ideas.

They are visible or tangible words, in which God is continually speaking

to us with an overwhelming eloquence, marshalling them in irresistible

cohorts, in order to manifest his power, guide our affections,

and prove his love [Santayana (1937), p. 206] (my italics).

The passage raises a number of issues. Berkeley indeed claimed

we are bodiless spirits. What exists in his spare ontology are minds

(spirits) and ideas. Those ideas that constitute the material world,

including our bodies are objects of sense; both elementary sensory

objects, colors, sounds, tastes, smells, tactile and kinesthetic sensations,

and material objects, coats, cherries, trees, tulips, animal and

human bodies (among those he mentions). Th ese latter are complexes,

or ‘congeries ‘of elementary sense objects that hang together,

and as Berkeley puts it, “given one name.”

Though scholars differ on how much Berkeley’s Anglicanism

motivated his immaterialism, (certainly it was important) there

are, as Santayana recognized, arguments Berkeley gave defending

it.2 Those arguments depend in part on Berkeley’s conception of

(1) material substance, (2) the relation of ideas (objects of sense)

to minds, and (3) the metaphysics of indirect realism (ir) he inherited.

I begin with the third. Berkeley shared with Descartes,

Locke, Malebranche, and others the view that in perception we

are only immediately acquainted with mind-dependent objects,

“ideas” in the parlance of the early moderns, “sense-data” for later

philosophers, for example, Bertrand Russell, C.D. Broad, and

A.J. Ayer. Berkeley’s critique of it is in my view quite trenchant.

Though Locke and others thought ideas, both simple sensory ideas,

colors, sounds, tastes, etc., and complex ideas of sense (ships,

coats, sealing wax) represented a mind-independent world (hence

realism) Berkeley’s maintained there was no way of demonstrating

a representative function for ideas, since, as indirect realists

admitted, we had no independent access to the world allegedly

represented. In this sense Berkeley simply makes manifest confusions

inherent it.

Santayana to some extent notes this confusion in IR when he

writes, “that [for Berkeley] material things are nothing but images

in our minds” [Santayana (1937), p. 206.] This is misleading since

Berkeley doesn’t think—and is at pains to make clear—ideas are

not in minds, as apples in a barrel or the impression of a seal in wax.

Berkeley, represented by Philonous, says to Hylas (a Lockean indirect

realist) in *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*.

Look you, Hylas, when I speak of Objects, as existing in the

Mind, or imprinted on the senses; I wou’d not be understood in

the gross, literal Sense, as when Bodies are said to exist in a place,

or a Seal to make an Impression upon Wax. My Meaning is only,

that the Mind comprehends, or perceives them… [Berkeley (1948/2),

p. 250] (my emphasis.)

Ideas, then, are in our minds by way of perception. And Berkeley

thinks complexes of ideas, (material objects) like elementary ideas

themselves (sounds, colors, etc.) are mind-dependent in the sense

they couldn’t exist without minds. For Berkeley finite minds don’t

create sensible ideas, simple or complex; they are created by God (in

some fashion) and communicated to us. We apprehend them, again,

by perception. On the other hand, we allegedly strictly cause ideas

of imagination. The coherence of this contrast has generated much

discussion, but I don’t pursue it.

Santayana does recognize the conflict, alluded to by Berkeley,

between IR and an alleged representative function of ideas of sense,

writing:

In order to escape such evil omens and prevent the collapse of his mystical

paradoxes, Berkeley keeps in reserve a much more insidious weapon,

the sceptical doubt as to the representative character of anything

mental, the possible illusiveness of all knowledge. This doubt he invokes

in all those turns of thought and phrase in which he suggests

that if an idea is in the mind it cannot have its counterpart elsewhere,

and that a given cognition exhausts and contains its object [Santayana

(2011), p. 72, my italics].3

Leaving aside comments about “evil omens” and “mystical paradoxes,”

Santayana does grasp the philosophical problem of how indirect

realism, held, again, by Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke—

the thesis we are, in sense experience, only directly acquainted with

ineluctably mental sense data—can square with a representative

function for perception. The issue became known as the “veil of

perception” problem, shared even by Hume who, however, chose

essentially to ignore it.

But what of Matter? Berkeley’s argument against the existence

of matter is that the concept hides a contradiction, both not referring

to a property like the color or shape of things, but to a property

which allegedly underlies and supports those other properties.

Somewhat like Aristotelian prime matter, although Berkeley doesn’t

pursue historical connections. For him, Matter, referring to a property

of things which supports all other properties, can’t in principle

exist. If it is a property of material things, it too would, qua property,

need support (“turtles all the way down”). Berkeley has his sights on

Locke here, who thought of Matter in that Aristotelian sense; some

unknown substance which underlies properties, but other than having

that character, can’t be described. But regardless of Berkeley’s

argument, which is perhaps a cheap shot at Locke, Santayana takes

Berkeley, in denying material substance, to have removed the resistance,

or materiality of the world. He (Santayana) writes:

It sufficed him to have shattered the illusion that we are living in an obdurate

material world, and to feel instead that this world was nothing

but a beautiful picture-book, a book of fables, in which God was teaching

our childish minds his admirable ways [Santayana (1937), p. 203].

Santayana’s criticism echoes Samuel Johnson’s well-known poke

at Berkeley made in 1791. Boswell, Johnson’s biographer, writes:

After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together

of Bishop Berkeley’s ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that everything in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are

satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget

the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, ‘I refute it thus.’4

This criticism of Berkeley—that he denies the “obdurateness”

of the world, though polemically attractive, misunderstands him.

Tactile experiences including pain from kicking stones are objects

of sense, or ideas. Assuming all ideas are mind-dependent, (require

minds to exist) tactile sensations can’t exist without minds.

Th e roughness and relative impenetrability of the world, at least for

Berkeley, remains.

But Boswell’s claim immaterialism is irrefutable is too quick. In

the Principles of Human Knowledge, and more particularly in the

*Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1732), Berkeley develops

arguments for immaterialism that most later philosophers

find wanting. In the Dialogues Berkeley considers pain sensations

the central example to illustrate the mind-dependence of

objects of sense. Pain is necessarily linked to perception. If sense

properties like sounds, colors, tastes etc., were like pain, the contention

all sense-data are mind-dependent gains credence. But the

analogy is weak, and Berkeley later uses other arguments for the

mind-dependence of color and extension (shape). None of them

are decisive, but considering them in detail here isn’t useful. Yet,

the argument from the obvious mind-dependence of pain to the

mind-dependence of all ideas of sense, though false, is crucial for

Berkeley, and he develops it in The Three Dialogues Between Hylas

(materialist) and Philonous (lover of wisdom who represents

Berkeley). But again, we might agree some objects of perception,

like pain, can’t exist without minds but not others like shape. And

if the analogy to pain doesn’t hold up, an ontological distinction

between perceiver and perceived is much more difficult to refute.

In Reason and Common-Sense Santayana writes:

It is a truism to say that I am the only seat or locus of my ideas, and

that whatever I know is known by me; it is an absurdity to say that I

am the only object of my thought and perception [Santayana (2011),

pp. 69-70]. Berkeley would have put the point somewhat differently; not

that I am the object of my perceptions, but rather there can’t be any

perceptions without minds to have them.

In any case, aside from arguments for and against the mind-dependence

of the world, Santayana recognized the significant issue

of embodiment. Berkeley does acknowledge the special relation we

have to our own bodies.5 Against Malebranche’s occasionalism, he

claims we “move our limbs ourselves.” My actions, for example, moving

my arm “at will” exemplify, for Berkeley, sufficient freedom for

actions to be morally assessed. Berkeley knew and rejected Locke’s

arguments for the compatibility of freedom and determinism. Freedom,

exhibited in action, Berkeley believed, demonstrated an agent

causality so basic to our conception of ourselves as persons, no argument

for it, he thought, is required beyond introspection. He makes

much of this interior (“from what I find within”) sense of freedom

when acting. I would stress the (perhaps equivalent) phenomenological

character of continuous control. Not simply that I could begin

and end behavior at will. I could do that, after all, passively riding

a lawnmower I stop and start with a switch. Rather it’s to start

or stop something without an instrument. For human agents, that

something is their limb motions, what others have called “basic actions.”

Berkeley recognized I couldn’t move my hand simply by willing

it to move, as I couldn’t so move your hand. But I can move my

hand at will, and this basic action expresses our freedom. In the

late work, *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher*, (1732) Berkeley (as

Euphranor) says, “Man, therefore, acting in accordance with his will

is to be accounted free” [Berkeley (1901), p. 353]. In fact, in the earlier

work, the *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Berkeley

(as Philonous) uses human action to illustrate how God creates

a world without tools by willing it into existence. “I never use an instrument

to move my finger, because it is done by volition” [Berkeley

(1948/2), p. 218].

But, as Santayana suggests, there is a fundamental mystery concerning

that special relation to our bodies that grounds basic actions.

My hand as a material object like coats or oranges is, in Berkeley’s

philosophy, a congeries or bundle of mind-dependent sense-data.

How can I move at will the bundle constituting my hand, and

to do it without an intermediary instrument, but I can’t move anything

else that way? Even if I move my shoe by moving my foot, then

moving my foot is the instrument. But there is no comparable intermediate

instrument for basic actions, like moving my foot. I simply

move it. The difficulty here stems from Berkeley’s spare ontology;

the only things that exist are minds (spirits, souls) and ideas. Ideas

constituting perceived objects (as opposed to ideas of imagination)

are created, Berkeley claims, by God. And the order of those

ideas are natural laws He institutes. Yet Berkeley thinks I have control

over some complexes of ideas, e.g., my hand when, for example,

I raise it to salute the flag.

As critics of Berkeley remarked, in moving by limbs at will, I

seem to have God-like powers. This is not just a theological problem

for him, but raises the deeper question of embodiment. I interact

with the material world through my body, but in Berkeley’s ontology

human bodies like chairs or coats are complexes of ideas created

by God. If God moves the material world, then the special dominion

a finite mind has over its body—”we move our legs ourselves”

(Berkeley’s response again to Malebranche)—remains a mystery.

Berkeley’s immaterialist cum idealist perspective is anathema to

Santayana. He writes:

The Life of Reason is not concerned with speculation about unthinkable

and gratuitous “realities”; it seeks merely to attain those conceptions

which are necessary and appropriate to man in his acting and

thinking. Th e first among these, underlying all arts and philosophies

alike, is the indispensable conception of permanent external objects,

forming in their congeries, shift s, and secret animation the system and

life of nature [Santayana (2011), p. 71].

Santayana then is a realist, though of a pragmatist bent. That

is, realism, since it posits mind-independent objects, including our

bodies, is essential to our practical and intellectual life. However, interpreting

Berkeley, he writes:

These images—including that image of our own bodies to which we

seem so mercilessly tied-though unsubstantial in themselves are full of

significance. They are visible or tangible words, in which God is continually

speaking to us with an overwhelming eloquence, marshalling

them in irresistible cohorts, in order to manifest his power, guide our

affections, and prove his love [Santayana (1937), p. 206.]

Berkeley does, in the *Alciphron*, claim vision is a divine language,

which, through its association with tangible experience—associations

themselves established by God—makes human life possible.

It is ultimately, then, also a pragmatic conception. And, as I mentioned

above, Berkeley distinguishes sense perceptions from images.

But even allowing Santayana’s conflation of percept and image in

interpreting Berkeley, the former’s phrase (mentioned above), “including

that image of our own bodies to which we seem so mercilessly

tied,” is interesting. Translated into less excessive language it

means that even for an immaterialist like Berkeley we are connected

to our bodies in a way we are not connected to other objects,

including the bodies of others. That’s true for materialist/realists

as well as idealists/immaterialists. Making sense of embodiment is

crucial. Santayana, I believe, grasps that Berkeley’s philosophy fails

here. But not because ideas of sense, including those that constitute

our bodies, are somehow ethereal, but rather because all ideas

(objects) of sense are caused by God, as opposed to ideas of imagination

which we cause in some mysterious way.

Berkeley’s philosophy fails here, I think, because it makes no room

for an unconscious (essentially material) storage place where those associations occur

required to make sense of memory, anticipation, and other mental

states for which association is central. Santayana recognizes this,

commenting:

No idealist can go so far as to deny that his memory represents his

past experience by inward similarity and conscious intention, or, if he

prefers this language, that the moments or aspects of the divine mind

represent one another and their general system. Else the idealist’s philosophy

itself would be an insignificant and momentary illusion [Santayana

(2911), p. 72.]

Berkeley claims association takes place in imagination. But that

connecting process would often be unconscious, making mind substantial,

a view of mind/spirit/soul incompatible with his immaterialism.

If Santayana’s comments above mean this, I believe he is right.

The ontology of spirits and ideas, isn’t compatible with unconscious

mental processes. Santayana both somewhat misreads Berkeley, and

exaggerates when he writes of his immaterialism:

[He presents a] paradox, telling us that we are bodiless spirits, and

that material things are nothing but images in our minds [Santayana

(1937), p. 206].

But Santayana is ultimately correct to recognize that the special relation

to our own bodies excludes simply passive perception (“images

in our minds”) of those bundles of sense ideas that constitute

our own limbs, perception that would unfortunately be like

our passive perception of chairs, trees, and the bodies of others.

When I raise my hand at will, however, I produce rather than simply

perceive ideas in the world. Santayana’s worry about embodiment,

which I think on the mark, is that Berkeley can’t account

for this contrast.

Notes

1 In my discussion Concept names begin with a capital letter.

2 Most of Berkeley’s contemporaries didn’t share his view that mind-independent

material objects couldn’t exist; ironic perhaps as he often claimed to

be a philosopher of common sense.

3 I thank Professor Coleman for recommending this work.

4 James Boswell, Life of Johnson, quoted from Wikipedia.

5 On the difficulties of embodiment for Berkeley, see Stoneham (2017).

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