**Was Berkeley a Subjective Idealist?**

Gene Callahan

Collingwood and British Idealism Centre

Cardiff University

gcallah@mac.com

**Abstract:** Subjective idealism can be defined as the view that ‘the objective world independent of man does not exist; it is the product of man's subjective cognitive abilities, sensations, and perceptions’.[[1]](#footnote-1) George Berkeley often is said to be the founder of this species of idealism, and when someone wants to offer an example of a subjective idealist, Berkeley is usually the first person who comes to mind. However, those making this claim largely seem to be only passingly familiar with Berkeley’s work, sometimes to the point that there have been doubts they had even read him. Meanwhile, many serious readers of Berkeley have rejected this reading of Berkeley, showing that it relies on a neglect of many of Berkeley’s own claims. How has this gulf between the common impression of Berkeley and the views of many of his most attentive readers arisen and been sustained? This paper suggests that, to a large extent, it has been due to neglecting to set Berkeley’s work in its proper historical context.

## Introduction

‘Descartes, Locke, and Newton, took away the world... Berkeley restored the world. Berkeley has brought us back to the world that only exist because it shines and sounds’. – W.B. Yeats

‘The vulgar view of Berkeley, then as now, was of a befooled enthusiast who sought notoriety by his paradoxes’. (Turbayne 1955: 244)

Bishop Berkeley is often thought to be the leading proponent of subjective idealism, and is commonly held to have endorsed scepticism about the existence of an external world. There is the famous incident of Samuel Johnson refuting Berkeley by kicking a rock, proving that the external world is real; similarly, over a century later, G.E. Moore held up his hand during a lecture, and declared it to be real, in order to refute idealism.

But is this common impression correct? This paper will look at several key figures in the long history of discussion on this question, and attempt to demonstrate that they have misread Berkeley. Firstly, Berkeley’s own words, as we shall see, often directly contradict this interpretation. Furthermore, as we shall see, there is widespread agreement amongst many serious students of Berkeley’s work that the answer to the above question is ‘no’: Berkeley was *not* a subjective idealist, at least if the meaning of that term is that the world is ‘all in our (human) heads’. (Indeed, some prominent Berkeley scholars have even denied that he was an idealist at all; instead, they contend, he was a common-sense realist, and at the same time an immaterialist.)

If that view prevalent amongst serious readers of Berkeley is correct, then it will also be interesting to investigate how the perception that he was a subjective idealist has persisted for so long. Therefore, this paper is, to some extent, an investigation as to how popular error can persist for centuries in the face of a great deal of evidence convicting the vulgar view of falsehood.

## Clarifying the Question

In trying to answer the titular question of this paper, it will be important to clarify what we mean by ‘subjective’ and what we mean by ‘idealist’. While ‘idealist’ is a much contested term, I think we can deal with ‘subjective’ fairly easily: when this adjective is applied to a thinker in terms of her metaphysics, it means that she holds that reality is nothing more or less than what an individual subject considers to be real: there is no subject-independent reality by which an individual’s judgment of what is real can be deemed either erroneous or valid.

‘Idealism’ is a much more ambiguous term. While many philosophers are termed ‘idealist’, they hold a wide variety of views about both epistemology and metaphysics. We will examine the various positions that may be designated as ‘idealist’, and try to see where Berkeley resides amongst them.

Furthermore, since the view of Berkeley as a subjective idealist relies heavily on his rejection of the concept of matter as understood before him by Galileo, Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke, we must be very clear about what Berkeley was and wasn’t denying the existence of. Sometimes it is said that Berkeley denied the existence of ‘the physical world’. This is true only if we take ‘the physical world’ in a special sense. Berkeley did not deny the real, independent existence of what any ordinary person before the 16th or 17th century would have called ‘the physical world’: the world that we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch, the world that has rocks in it that hurt us when we kick them, and hands that we can hold aloft and point to as real. What he denied existed was, instead, a very special and recently developed philosophical concept: the ‘matter’ recently posited by a number of thinkers preceding him, such as those mentioned above, a ‘substance’ that lacked the colour, texture, odour, and so forth that common sense associates with physical objects. Bakewell writes:

The chief object of Berkeley’s work was to demolish the matter fetish of his predecessors, the matter substance of earlier hypothetical realism, which was vaguely thought of as a something wholly inaccessible to experience, its underlying ground, unknown and unknowable except insofar as one through faith or instinct might bring himself to believe that his experiences more or less accurately copied or represented those in accessible realities. (1909: 505-506)

Or as Luce put it:

The material substance which Berkeley denied *(a)* is not sensible body or sensible parts of body, is not an actual or possible object of sense, is nothing that we see or touch (or hear or taste or smell), but *(b)* is a ‘something we know not what’, a guess-substance, a conjecture of the ancient Greeks, a something vaguely supposed to serve as invisible, intangible, non-spiritual support of all that we actually see and touch. (1945: 24)

## The Aspects of the Question

### Idealism

Idealism has had, at various times and for various users, at least the following meanings:

1. It designates a focus on ideals as opposed to pragmatic interests. It is used this way in common speech, but also sometimes by political theorists: noble idealism.
2. It refers to the belief that in history, the ideas of agents are the true driving force: personal historical idealism. (Weber)
3. It refers to the belief that in history, ideas writ-large are the true driving force: impersonal historical idealism. (Hegel)
4. It can mean that the world is entirely made up of thinking entities: pan-psychism. (Whitehead)
5. It designates the idea that the structure of reality is imposed by our (human) minds: transcendental idealism. (Kant)
6. It refers to the notion that the physical world is, in some sense, an illusion. (Vasubandhu: Yogacara)
7. It refers to the belief that what we think we know about the physical world is really only our own ideas. (Rorty)
8. It means the belief that the (quite real) physical world is, in fact, a world of ideas. (Berkeley, Oakeshott)[[2]](#footnote-2)

I contend that Berkeley is explicitly an idealist *only* in the last sense. He never weighed in on the first three senses of idealism, so it is indeterminate as to whether he would have accepted them, while he would have rejected senses four through seven.

### Subjectivism

Let us turn now to subjectivism: did Berkeley believe reality is ‘all in our heads’? We will begin by considering some of the many passages from Berkeley himself that explicitly contradict that idea. For instance, in *Alciphron*, he writes:

The soul of man actuates but a small body, an insignificant particle, in respect of the great masses of nature, the elements and heavenly bodies, and system of the world. And the wisdom that appears in those motions, which are the effects of human reason, is incomparably less than that which discovers itself in the structure and use of organized natural bodies, animal or vegetable. (Berkeley and Clarke 2008: 274)

Do those look like the words of a thinker who believed the world was all in his head? Or consider this passage from *Siris:*

What entertainment soever the reasoning or notional part may afford the mind, I will venture to say the other part seems so surely calculated to do good to the body that both must be gainers. For if the lute be not well tuned, the musicians fails in his harmony. And, in our present state, the operations of the mind so far depend on the right tone or good condition of its instrument that anything which greatly contributes to preserve or recover the health of the body is well worth the attention of the mind. (Berkeley and Clarke 2008: 315)

This is from an essay advocating the drinking of tar water for health. So those who contend that Berkeley ‘thought the external world didn't exist’ would have us believe that he wrote an entire essay on the importance of putting imaginary tar water into his imaginary body.

In *The Querist*, Berkeley asks, ‘Whether the natural body can be in a state of health and vigour without a due circulation of the extremities, even?’ (2008: 190) Again, are we to suppose that Berkeley was concerned about the imaginary circulation of imaginary blood through an imaginary body?

Berkeley himself firmly rejected the view that his own work was sceptical about the external world; he held that he was *battling* was scepticism. The hero of his *Three Dialogues*, Philonous, responds to Hylas’s charge that his doctrines are a ‘revolt [against] the plain dictates of nature and common sense’, as follows:

That there is no such thing as what *philosophers call material substance*, I am seriously persuaded: but if I were made to see anything absurd or sceptical in this, I should then have the same reason to renounce this, that I imagine I have now to reject the contrary opinion… Well, then, are you content to admit that opinion for true, which upon examination shall appear most agreeable to common sense, and remote from scepticism?’ (1996: 108, emphasis mine)

The above passage contains a key phrase for the purposes of this essay: Berkeley rejected, not the common-sense idea of physical reality, but only ‘what philosophers call material substance’. Even so, a critic may complain: ‘Well, it is true that Berkeley *claims* that he is not a sceptic, but in that he is denying an aspect of common-sense reality, the existence of matter, he is a sceptic nonetheless.’ This objection might be telling if what Berkeley was denying was an important component of common-sense reality. But the ‘matter-in-itself’ of Locke, sans colour, sans taste, sans smell, sans texture, that abstraction that Berkeley was refusing to deem real, had never been a part of common-sense reality; rather, it was purely an invention of the natural philosophers. Collingwood noted the inherent weakness of the Lockean concept of matter, and the precision of Berkeley’s attack on it, in the following passage:

Here [in Galileo] the character of the mind-dependent or merely phenomenal character of secondary qualities, as taught by Locke, is already full-grown. English students of philosophy, finding this doctrine in Locke, do not always realize that it is by no means an invention of his, but had been long ago taught by Galileo as an important truth, and was in fact one of the leading principles of the whole scientific movement of the preceding two centuries; and that by the time it reaches Locke it is already somewhat out of date, and ready to collapse at the first touch of Berkeley's finger. (1960: 102)

And here is Turbayne on the same point:

Then [after showing where the Lockean view of matter leads] he turns the argument of scepticism against itself to provide (up to his time) a unique proof of the external world. Since Berkeley's death, commentators have tended to emphasize the first half of his argument, which they have seen as an attempt to refute materialism or realism, and have been notorious in their neglect of the last. (1955: 229)

## A History of Error

Let us now look at a few episodes in the history of this understanding of Berkeley as a denier of the external world; this error has been repeated many times, and it would take a book-length work to trace its progress in any depth: we must contend ourselves with examining a few key exponents of this view.

### Johnson

One of the early, notable misunderstandings of Berkeley was that of Samuel Johnson. A famous incident where Johnson took on Berkeley is described by Boswell, his biographer:

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 every thing 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*.’ (1952: 129)

In another passage relating to Berkeley, Boswell writes:

Being in company with a gentleman who thought fit to maintain Dr. Berkeley's ingenious philosophy, that nothing exists but as perceived by some mind; when the gentleman was going away, Johnson said to him, ‘Pray, Sir, don’t leave us; for we may perhaps forget to think of you, and then you will cease to exist.’ (1952: 442)

Of course, both of these episodes egregiously misunderstand Berkeley’s position. As we saw above in the passages where Berkeley discusses the importance of the body to our overall well-being, and where he touts the health benefits of tar water, he in no way denied the reality of bodily phenomena. It would not have been of any surprise to him that Johnson’s foot bounced off of a large stone, or that Johnson’s ‘refutation’ hurt him more than it impacted Berkeley’s actual views. The idea that other conscious beings would ‘cease to exist’ if Johnson was not thinking of them is obviously an even sillier interpretation of Berkeley, because spiritual beings for him are minds and thus do not need to be ‘in mind’ to exist.

Bruce Silver (1993) attempts to defend Boswell’s interpretation of this incident, but as his effort rests on the notion that Berkeley was a ‘subjective idealist’, the conclusions of this paper (and numerous other Berkeley scholars) undermine this defence of Boswell.

### Kant

Two towering philosophers are probably most responsible for the common misinterpretation of Berkeley among the philosophically educated: Kant and Hegel. Let us first turn to Kant, whose Berkeley is an idealist bogeyman having little to do with Berkeley’s actual views. Kant claims that Berkeley is a ‘dogmatic idealist’, by which he means:

Idealism—meaning thereby *material* idealism—is the theory which declares the existence of objects in space outside us either to be merely doubtful and indemonstrable or to be false and impossible… the latter is the *dogmatic* idealism of Berkeley. He maintains that space, with all the things of which it is the inseparable condition, is something which is in itself impossible; and he therefore regards the things in space as merely imaginary entities. (1965: 244)

Kant believes that idealism such as Berkeley’s puts things perceived ‘inside the mind’, whereas his critical philosophy corrects this by placing them outside it:

Thus perception of this permanent is possible only through a *thing* outside me; and consequently the determination of my existence in time is possible only through the existence of actual things which I perceive outside me…Idealism assumed that the only immediate experience is inner experience, and that from it we can only infer outer things… But in the above proof it has been shown that outer experience is really immediate… (1965: 245-246)

But Berkeley’s understanding of the nature of our perceptions implies that they are not ‘inner experience’ but publicly accessible; as Pappas writes:

I know of no reason to think that Berkeley is committed to holding that each idea is private in the sense described. After all, any idea immediately perceived by a finite perceiver is also immediately perceived by God. So, Berkeley is committed to the contrary line, viz., that ideas are publicly perceivable entities. (1982: 9)

Kant again attempts to differentiate himself from Berkeleyean idealism in that he does not doubt ‘the existence of things’: ‘My idealism concerns not the existence of things (to doubting of which, however, constitutes idealism in the ordinary sense)…’ (2001: 34). But here is what Berkeley actually says on this very point: ‘I might as well doubt of my own being as of the being of those things I actually see and feel’ (1996: 173).

Or consider what Kant says about Berkeley and the senses:

The dictum of all genuine idealists, from the Eleatic school to Bishop Berkeley, is contained in the formula: ‘All cognition through the senses and experience is nothing but sheer illusion…’ (2001: 107).

Or this:

Experience, according to Berkeley, can have no criteria of truth because its appearances (according to him) have nothing *a priori* at their foundation, whence it follows that experience is nothing but sheer illusion… (2001: 108).

Once again, compare these to what Berkeley actually wrote: ‘Let me be represented as one who trusts his senses, who thinks he knows the things he sees and feels, and entertains no doubts of their existence…’ (1996: 180)

It is hard to see how any description of Berkeley’s views could be further from Berkeley’s views than is Kant’s. But what is the cause of this vast gulf between what Berkeley wrote and what Kant wrote about what Berkeley wrote? Some have concluded that Kant was almost completely unfamiliar with Berkeley’s works and was relying on hearsay. (Colin Turbayne, 1955, in his first footnote, cites five prominent sources forwarding this view.)

In an intriguing alternate hypothesis, Turbayne first demonstrates that Kant and Berkeley are actually quite close in their critique of the Lockean concept of matter. Turbayne continues to note that, for both Berkeley and Kant:

The distinction between reality and illusion retains its full force. Its criterion is not the futile correspondence of our ideas with external archetypes, but merely their coherence within our experience. In effect, there are no illusions of sense, only delusions of the understanding, because the senses tell no lies. Kant declares, ‘It is not the senses, however, which must be charged with the illusion, but the understanding’ (Proleg. 13). Error occurs on the level of judgment. (1955: 236)

The difference between the two in this respect is that for Berkeley the objective basis of what we term ‘reality’ is its existence in the mind of God, whereas for Kant it lies in the transcendental object. (We might suspect that Kant’s basis is not an improvement on Berkeley’s, given the mysterious nature of ‘the thing in itself’.)

Turbayne notes how Kant’s main critique of Berkeley fails:

It is the existence of the things behind the appearances, causing these appearances in us, which makes Kant's doctrine 'the very contrary' of idealism. Berkeley's idealism fails because it denies, not the existence of bodies in space, but things-in-themselves. This recourse is completely out of line with the other 'refutations ', and indeed, with the Critical philosophy. The illegitimate appeal to this criterion, coming as it does, just after Kant had read the Garve-Feder review [which was critical of the first edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*], gives the impression of desperation. (1955: 238)

Then he declares Berkeley and Kant to be the pre-eminent anti-sceptics:

Finally, in their refutation of dogmatic idealism (the deepest scepticism) with its attendant proof of an external world, they leave the whole field far behind. Berkeley's refutation of scepticism, with his parallel vindication of common-sense, was one of his main aims. (1955: 239)

What, then, are we to make of Kant’s hostility to Berkeley’s philosophy? Turbayne continues:

Clearly, Berkeley did not deny the reality of the sensible word; Kant says that he did. Such gross misinterpretation surely indicates profound mis-understanding. However, this first set of facts, when properly assessed and interpreted, yields a contrary view. (1955: 240)

This ‘gross misinterpretation’ can be explained as follows:

Kant's official view does seem to arise from a misconception of Berkeley's doctrine, and therefore to stem from ignorance. This accords with the accepted theory. However, such a theory loses weight immediately, when it is pointed out that Kant rarely agrees with anyone, and that his customary procedure in discussing the views of other philosophers, is to present, not their real views, but rather the consequences he considers to be entailed by them. These Kantian consequences are then ascribed to the philosophers as their own views. (1955: 240)

There is a genuine difference between Kant’s and Berkeley’s view of the real basis of the sensory world, but it consists in a fine philosophical distinction as to the nature of space:

Here we see that Kant departs from Berkeley's view, not on the question of the ideality of space and its appearances, but on its *a priori* nature. The distinction between *ideality* and the *a priori* (often neglected by authorities) is clarified in this passage. Kant agrees with Berkeley that space is ideal, but whereas the latter holds that it is learned from experience, Kant holds he has proved that ‘it inheres in us as a pure form of our sensibility before all perception or experience’. Because of this, it can afford the certain criterion for distinguishing truth from illusion therein. (1955: 242)

As a result of this difference, Kant concludes that Berkeley *ought* to believe that physical objects are illusory:

Kant thus holds that illusion is a necessary consequence of Berkeley's view, not that it is Berkeley's view. His highly significant admission makes it more than likely that Kant's repeated assertions elsewhere to the effect that Berkeley actually believes in dogmatic idealism are instances of Kant's habit of ascribing to other philosophers what are, in fact, consequences drawn by Kant himself. It follows that Kant's knowledge of Berkeley's philosophy is still more accurate than was previously thought. Since the misinterpretations stem from accurate knowledge, they are deliberate, and are, therefore, more properly called 'perversions '. The same analysis comprehends Kant's denial that his doctrine at all resembles Berkeley's. For this just is not so. We have Kant's own admission that it is not. (1955: 243)

So, in the end, does Kant really grapple with Berkeley? Turbayne says no:

This brings us to the question of Kant's promise, in the first edition of the *Critique*, to deal with Berkeley's doctrine, and his failure to do so. In the fourth *Paralogism*, Kant's position is made to resemble Berkeley's more closely than anywhere else. We now know that there is, not only resemblance, but Kant's awareness of it. If he had sought to refute Berkeley in the next section, he must have ended in hopeless confusion, for he would have been refuting himself. He therefore did not even try. A niggardly description of Berkeley's doctrine was his only recourse. (1955: 243)

### Hegel

As mentioned above, Hegel is another leading source of the idea that Berkeley was a ‘subjective idealist’, and it was on the rejection of this subjective view that he opposed his own ‘objective idealism’. He begins the section on Berkeley of *The History of Philosophy* by declaring: ‘This idealism, in which all external reality disappears, has before it the standpoint of Locke, and it proceeds directly from him.’ (1896: 364). Thus, he was a sufficiently sound historical thinker to understand that Berkeley’s philosophy was a response to Locke’s (and others with similar views), something ignored by some later critics of Berkeley. But he has goes badly astray in claiming ‘all external reality disappears’: as we have seen, Berkeley most emphatically sought to assert the reality of the external world, and fight the scepticism about its existence that he saw as the consequence of the Lockean view.

And how does a thinker as acute as Hegel miss this point? As with many others, it is by ignoring the role of the mind of God in Berkeley’s thought: ‘we have the point of view that all existence and its determinations arise from feeling, and are constituted by self-consciousness’ (1896: 365). Berkeley never would have accepted this formulation of his ideas; quite the contrary, for him, in confronting reality we find ourselves constantly being made aware of the presence of another consciousness, the unlimited one that is keeping this world present before us. One may find this notion of Berkeley’s unsound, but it will hardly do to characterize it as being one in which existence is merely self-consciousness. And Hegel makes the same error just a little later: ‘Berkeley thus indeed acknowledges the distinction between Being-for-self and Other-Being, which in his case, however, itself falls within the ‘I’’ (1896: 365).

It is interesting that in later lecture series on the same topic Hegel did not even address Berkeley.

### Russell

Bertrand Russell devotes a chapter of his *History of Western Philosophy* to Berkeley. After a generally accurate discussion of the role of God in Berkeley’s metaphysics, he claims:

If there were no God, what we take to be material objects would have a jerky life, suddenly leaping into being when we look at them; but as it is, owing to God’s perceptions, trees and rocks and stones have an existence as continuous as common sense supposes. (1945: 647)

But this is absurd: for Berkeley, without God, there would simply be *no* ‘material’ objects (or other beings to see their jerky existence, for that matter). What characterizes something for Berkeley as being a part of the physical world is that it has existence not just in a human mind, but in the mind of God: it is God willing it to be so that gives it its solidity, its ineluctable character.

Russell goes on to discuss Berkeley’s ‘argument against matter’ (1945: 648), and, as with many others, ignores the fact that it is an argument against matter *as conceived by Locke et al*.

Russell then attempts to show various fallacies committed by Berkeley. First he takes up the nature of objects of the senses:

[Berkeley] says: ‘That any immediate object of the senses should existing in an unthinking substance, exterior to all minds, is in itself an evident contradiction.’ This is here a fallacy, analogous to the following: ‘It is impossible for a nephew to exist without an uncle; now Mr. A is a nephew; therefore it is logically necessary for Mr. A to have an uncle.’ It is, of course, logically necessary given that Mr. A is a nephew, but not from anything to be discovered by analysis of Mr. A. (1945: 652)

But what Berkeley is claiming is that ‘analysis’ of objects of the senses *does* show that they cannot exist in an unthinking substance. Of course, this is not analysis in the sense recognized by analytical philosophers; instead it is an analysis of the metaphysical nature of these objects: if there really were such an unthinking substance as that posited by Locke et al., mind would have no way to establish any relationship with it, and thus it would remain forever beyond the reach of mind, along the lines of Kant’s das Ding an sich. It is one thing to contend that Berkeley is wrong in this contention,

but Russell has seriously misunderstood what Berkeley is doing in thinking it is analogous to his nephew example. This is possibly due to the fact that Berkeley’s ‘analysis’ is not recognized as such by Russell, who only would admit logical deduction of analytical truths and induction from empirical regularities as possible sources of knowledge. But, as T.H. Green noted about an idealist argument similar to Berkeley’s:

Proof of such a doctrine, in the ordinary sense of the word, from the nature of the case there cannot be. It is not a truth deducible from other established or conceded truths. It is not a statement of an event or matter of fact that can be the subject of experiment or observation. It represents a conception to which no perceivable or imaginable object can possibly correspond, but one that affords the only means by which, reflecting on our moral and intellectual experience conjointly, taking the world and ourselves into account, we can put the whole thing together and understand how... we are and do what we consciously are and do. (1986: 250)

Russell continues:

There is a somewhat analogous fallacy as regards what is conceived. Hylas maintains that he can conceive a house which no one perceives, and which is not in any mind. Philonus retorts that whatever Hylas conceives is in his mind, so that the supposed house is, after all, mental. Hylas should have answered: ‘I do not mean that I have in mind the image of a house; when I say that I can conceive the house which no one perceives, what I really mean is that I can understand the proposition 'there is a house which no one perceives’, or, better still, 'there is a house which no one either perceives or conceives’. The proposition is composed entirely of intelligible words, and the words are correctly put together. Whether the proposition is true or false, I do not know; but I am sure that it cannot be shown to be self-contradictory. Some closely similar propositions can be proved. For instance: The number of possible multiplications of two integers is infinite, therefore there are some that have never been thought of. Berkeley's argument, if valid, would prove that this is impossible. (1945: 652)

Berkeley would have benefited from the work of later idealists in making his argument more clear here. Of course one can formulate the propositions that Russell formulates without self-contradiction. But they are what later idealists would term ‘mere abstractions’. We can similarly formulate and even manipulate propositions about geometrical shapes lacking any colour or texture, about infinitely thin lines extending forever, and points with no magnitude whatsoever. And forming such abstractions may be very useful, but we should never confuse them with concrete reality: we can never go out into our back garden and hope to discover lying there a dimensionless point, an infinitely thin line, or a colourless triangle.

And Berkeley's answer to Russell on the proposition about multiplications ought to have been clear to Russell himself, had he not completely lost track of the mind of God after his initial, brief discussion of it: Berkeley would answer that God's infinite mind certainly has thought of the infinity of possible multiplications of two integers.

In another unwarranted swipe at idealism in general, Russell notes that ‘G.E. Moore once accused idealists of holding the trains only have wheels while they are in stations, on the ground that passengers cannot see the wheels while they remain in the train’ (1945: 657).

Once again, Russell ignores the role of the mind of God in Berkeley's philosophy, as he does yet again here: ‘Such a statement as ‘there was a time before life existed on this planet’, whether true or false, cannot be condemned on grounds of logic...’ (1945: 657) Nor would Berkeley have tried to do so. Again, if Russell simply recalled what he himself had written only a handful of pages previous about the mind of God, he would have seen that the possible truth of this statement would not have troubled Berkeley one wit.

Russell concludes by offering his own definition of matter, thinking that he is correcting Berkeley: ‘My own definition of ‘matter’ may seem unsatisfactory; I should define it as what satisfies the equations of physics’ (1945: 658). But Berkeley would not have objected at all to the idea of matter existing in the sense of there being entities which satisfy the laws of physics.

Russell also criticizes Berkeley for the mixed nature of his arguments: ‘To begin with, it is a sign of weakness to combine empirical and logical arguments, for the latter, if valid, make the former superfluous’ (1945: 653). Here, Russell is presupposing an *essentially* unintelligible world where human knowledge is restricted to tautologies and empirical regularities. (How we could detect empirical regularities from a mass of themselves unintelligible ‘sense data’ is a vexing question for this view that we will not delve into here.) But Berkeley does not share this presupposition: for him, the world is a world of ideas, in which ‘logical’ and ‘empirical’ arguments are complementary, and combine in revealing to us the true nature of reality. Once again, one may reject Berkeley’s view after recognizing it for what it is, but I think it is clear that Russell, in fact, failed to see this difference, and so evaluated Berkeley as an incompetent analytical philosopher, rather than as a philosopher who did not share his presuppositions.

### Stove

David Stove, in his essay ‘Idealism: a Victorian Horror Story (Part One)’, begins by at least granting Berkeley his historical context, as we saw Hegel also did:

Berkeley is one of those philosophers who are always arguing, and he gave a number of arguments for abridging the Cartesian world-view to the exclusive benefit of its mental half. Once he had done it, everyone could see, even if they had not seen before, that Cartesianism *had* begged for an idealist abridgement, *and* that it had got it from Berkeley. (1991: 102)

But what he gives with one hand he immediately takes away with the other: ‘There was only one catch; but it was a rather serious one. This was that no one could believe the world-view to which those arguments of Berkeley led.’ (1991: 102) Stove is certainly correct here in so far as *his* depiction of Berkeley’s world-view strains credulity, as it is as follows:

You cannot expose yourself to even a short course of Berkeley’s philosophy, without contracting at least some tendency to think, as he wants you to think, that to speak of (say) kangaroos is, *rightly understood*, to speak of ideas of kangaroos, or of kangaroo-perceptions, or ‘phenomenal kangaroos’. But on the contrary, all sane use of language requires that we never relax our grip on the tautology that when we speak of kangaroos, it is kangaroos of which we speak. Berkeley would persuade us that we lose nothing, and avoid metaphysical error, if we give up kangaroos in favour of phenomenal kangaroos: in fact we would lose everything. Phenomenal kangaroos are an even poorer substitute for kangaroos than suspected murderers are for murderers. At least a suspected murderer *may* happen to be also a murderer; but a phenomenal kangaroo is a certain kind of experience, and there is no way it might happen to be also a kangaroo. (1991: 110)

Once again, we find Berkeley’s case being badly misconstrued, in this instance in order to make it appear crazy. Berkeley certainly does not want us to ‘give up kangaroos in favour of phenomenal kangaroos’. As he writes in the *Dialogues*, ‘I do therefore assert that I am a certain as of my own being that there are bodies or corporeal substances...’ (1996: 181) Or, as Doney contends, ‘[Berkeley believes] that when we perceive we are directly confronted with the real things and not be representations or effects of the real things’ (1952: 382). In fact, the very view he is *criticizing* is the Lockean one that drives a wedge between the real world and the phenomenal world, that, indeed, creates the idea that there is a phenomenal world separate from the real world in the first place. Berkeley is insisting that the kangaroos you see in front of you are not ‘phenomenal kangaroos’ at all: no, the kangaroos you are perceiving are the real things. For Berkeley, we directly perceive reality, and we can do so because reality is a world of ideas. It is by first adopting a view that idealists reject, that ideas are ‘just in our heads’, and then reading idealist metaphysics through this anti-idealist filter, that misunderstandings like Stove’s are generated.

Stove goes on to attribute more denials of reality to Berkeley: ‘...*his* idealism... denies the existence of human beings. Indeed, there are no land-mammals at all in Berkeley’s world. In fact there is not even any land’ (1991: 111). Again, it is only necessary to point out that it is the very reality of all of these things that Berkeley set out to assert to see that Stove has seriously misinterpreted him.

To Stowe’s credit, he does avoid one frequent error committed by Berkeley’s critics:

People think, that is, that Berkeley maintained a causal dependence of physical objects on perception: that things go in and out of existence, depending on whether or not we are perceiving them… [this view] is certainly not Berkeley… The benevolence and steadiness of the Divine Will, and nothing else, ensure that the ideas produced in the various finite spirits are, on the whole, in harmony with one another. (1991: 108)

But as before, having gotten that much right, Stove immediately goes very wrong, claiming that it follows that ‘there are no physical objects Berkeley’s world’ (1991: 109). Once again, we must point out that Berkeley never denies the existence of the physical world *of common sense*: the wall you see in front of you is really there in the exact way common sense thinks it is, as a solid, say red, flat surface, which, if you try to run through it, you will fail and be hurt in the process. As Laird put it, ‘[Berkeley] gloried in being a realist because he affirmed and proved the full reality of what any sane man regards as real, just as he regards it before he allows himself to become debauched with learning’ (1916: 309). What Berkeley is doing is trying to get at the *source* of why the common sense world is the way it is, and his answer is, ‘Because God wills it’. One may not like that answer, but it is far from the nonsense Stove attributes to Berkeley: there certainly *are* physical objects in Berkeley’s world, just as God wills there to be.

In part two of the ‘Horror Story’ essay, Stove accuses Berkeley of having reached a contingent conclusion from a tautological premise. As he puts it, one of Berkeley’s central arguments for idealism, which he calls ‘the Gem’, runs: ‘You cannot have trees-without-the-mind in mind, without having them in mind. Therefore, you cannot have trees-without-the-mind in mind.’ (1991: 139) This is basically a rehash of Russell’s critique, discussed above, of this contention of Berkeley’s, and it is flawed in a similar way, but let us address this particular formulation of it: Stove had to add a step to Berkeley's argument to make it appear so bad: ‘without having them in mind’. The actual argument is that you cannot have trees-without-the-mind in mind, period. What Berkeley is noting in the passage Stove cites is that when you attempt to have trees-without-the-mind in mind, *you fail*. And that failure is inevitable. ‘Trees-without-the-mind’ is a mere abstraction, and to mistake mere abstractions for things that actually exist is what Whitehead called ‘the fallacy of misplaced concreteness’ (1967: 51).

## The Real Berkeley Recognized

The idea that Berkeley thought the physical world was ‘an illusion’, ‘just in our heads’, or something of the sort, has been debunked many times, but, like a zombie, it just won’t stay dead. We have already encountered scholars pointing out that this understanding is mistaken. I will offer a few more examples in this section. For instance, Barzun says of Berkeley:

As Coleridge put it, matter is like an invisible pincushion that we suppose necessary to hold the various ‘pins’ that are our sensations... Berkeley asked: is the pincushion needed? Dr. Johnson—no professional philosopher—hearing of Berkeley's critique of matter, kicked a large stone ‘with mighty force until he rebounded from it’, and said, ‘I refute it thus’. But Berkeley never denied that things were real, hard as stone and heavy as Dr. Johnson. He pointed out—and he has never been refuted—that matter is a notion added to what the senses actually report. (2000: 367)

Woodbridge argues that ‘Berkeley’s realism’ was ‘the controlling motive in his philosophy’ (1918: 188). Alexander notes that ‘Berkeley’s idealism did not deny material things, but only gave them a new interpretation or rather orientation…’ (1914: 22). Hicks writes of how Berkeley’s ‘*realism*… was opposed to the psychological idealism of the 18th century…’ (1911-1912: 184, emphasis mine). Bakewell, who includes Berkeley among the idealists he examines, says, ‘idealism, from its first appearance in the Western world has been a conscious repudiation of subjectivism’ (1909: 507).

In their *Idealism: The History of a Philosophy*, Dunham, Grant, Watson spend some time refuting the very common notions that:
1) Berkeley was an anti-realist; and
2) Idealism ‘denies physical reality’ (or the external world, or something along such lines).

The authors note ‘that idealism is the position that reality is mind-dependent has proved extraordinarily resilient to correction... As with the anti-realism charge, [idealism's] deep claim about universal-mindedness is not destructive, but rather constitutive of reality...’ (2011: 4)

Another false claim about idealists is that ‘philosophers committed to the mind-dependent existence of entities cannot maintain, it is held, the existence of physical reality’. To the contrary, they assert, ‘We know of no idealist for whom this is true’ (2011: 5).

R. G. Collingwood similarly rejects this criticism of idealism such as Berkeley’s, noting its historical falsity:

If nature is created by mind as the product of its thinking activity, what mind is it that thus creates nature? Obviously it is not the self-contained mind of this or that human individual. Neither Berkeley nor Kant nor any of their followers ever thought for a moment that Copernicus created the heliocentric planetary system, or Kepler its elliptical orbits, or Newton the inverse relation between the mutual attraction of two bodies and the square of the distance between their centres. Berkeley asserted quite definitely that the creator of the physical world was not any human or finite mind… (1960, 115)

## Why Does This Error Persist?

I suggest that the chief sustenance for this error is ignorance of the historical context in which Berkeley was writing. As Bosanquet wrote: ‘It is impossible to state [an] idea fully and correctly without including the environment on which it rests, and the activities in which it is realized’ (1910: 172).

Collingwood describes the intellectual milieu regarding matter in which Berkeley worked as follows:

Here [in Galileo] the character of the mind-dependent or merely phenomenal character of secondary qualities, as taught by Locke, is already full-grown. English students of philosophy, finding this doctrine in Locke, do not always realize that it is by no means an invention of his, but had been long ago taught by Galileo as an important truth, and was in fact one of the leading principles of the whole scientific movement of the preceding two centuries; and that by the time it reaches Locke it is already somewhat out of date, and ready to collapse at the first touch of Berkeley's finger. (1960: 102)

Given this situation, Berkeley solved the problem he confronted ‘in the only possible way’:

Thus we get a wholly new metaphysical position. Taking the elements of the traditional seventeenth-century cosmology and simply rearranging them, Berkeley shows that, if substance means that which exists in its own right and depends on itself alone, only one substance need be asserted to exist, namely, mind. Nature as it exists empirically for our everyday perception is the work or creature of mind; nature in Galileo's sense, the purely quantitative material world of the physicist, is an abstraction from this, it is so to speak the skeleton or armature of the nature we perceive through our senses, and create in perceiving it. To sum up: we first, by the operation of our mental powers, create the warm, living, coloured, flesh-and-blood natural world which we know in our everyday experience; we then, by the operation of abstractive thinking, remove the flesh and blood from it and are left with the skeleton. This skeleton is the ‘material world’ of the physicist.

In the essence of Berkeley's argument as thus restated there is no flaw. He often expressed himself hastily, and often tried to support his contentions by argument that is far from sound; but no criticism of details touches his main position, and as soon as one understands the problem which confronted him one is bound to realize that he solved it in the only possible way. His conclusion may seem unconvincing, and the difficulties in which it places us are undeniable; but there is no way of escaping the admission that, if the conceptions of mind and matter are defined as they were defined by the cosmology of the seventh century, the problem of discovering an essential link between them can only be solved as Berkeley solved it. (1960: 114-115)

Another instance of ahistorical thinking that has plagued Berkeley commentary has consisted in ignoring the contemporary meaning of an ‘idea’ (which he uses for a sense perception) and a ‘collection of ideas’ (used for an object) at the time he was writing. Recent philosophers, such as Russell and Stove, are likely to interpret these terms as meaning something ‘all in one’s head’, and so arises their view of Berkeley as denying the existence of the external world. But as Luce notes:

‘Collection of ideas’—the words should be read, not in mockery, but with intelligent sympathy and in their historical perspective. They were written over two hundred and thirty years ago, and in the interval their colloquial meaning has not changed, but their philosophical suggestion has greatly changed. There lies the root of the trouble. The phrase occurs in Locke’s *Essay* (II xxvi I) whence, no doubt, Berkeley borrowed it. He did not mean by it quite what Locke meant; but the loan was useful, because Locke’s *Essay* was amazingly influential, and the phrase would not have sounded bizarre to philosophers of that day. Thanks to Locke, the term *idea* was then the recognized and normal description of the immediate object of sense, and Berkeley could not avoid it, any more than a philosopher writing on perception today can avoid using the term ‘sense datum’ or ‘sensum’ for that object. (1945: 41-42)

A third important factor underlying this misperception has been to overlook the role of the mind of God in Berkeley's metaphysics. This error, too, can be understood to arise from a failure to place Berkeley in his proper historical context: as contemporary philosophers aren’t likely to give God a very prominent place in their metaphysics, it is hard for them to recognize the place that He had in Berkeley’s system. Even Boucher and Vincent, in their otherwise excellent introduction to British Idealism, mention in passing ‘Berkeley’s radically subjective view of experience’ (2012: 63). But for Berkeley, human experience is certainly not ‘radically subjective’: humans find themselves confronted inexorably with an external reality not of their own choosing.

Let me offer a metaphor intended to clarify the objective nature of reality as Berkeley sees it: Berkeley's God is like the creator of the video game, Mind of God: from Genesis to RevelationTM, and all other conscious beings are akin to players in that game. (Note that this is only a metaphor, and as with all metaphors, if pushed too far it will yield ridiculous results. For instance, if you find yourself asking ‘What program debugger did God use?’ or ‘How many lines of code did he write?’ you have taken the metaphor too literally.)

For Berkeley, the ideas God had in programming Mind of God create the sights, the sounds, and the rules of the game. For the players in the game, these ideas are objectively real. If they travel down a road that comes to a fork, every one of them who is not hallucinatory will see the fork and have to choose the left or right path. And for someone who is hallucinatory, their attempts to neglect the fork will be thwarted. If a player tries to ignore the fact that in Mind of God there is a drop off of a tall cliff down to some jagged rocks immediately ahead of him, he will find his game player body smashed to bits on the rocks. If she attacks a monster too many levels above her rank, she will lose. If a player pretends he doesn't need to eat, he will see his life force points draining away. If a player tries to move something God has deemed immovable, she will fail.

Within the parameters set by God, the players are free: they may choose to fight a monster or not, to take a road heading east or one heading west, to unite with other players or to go it alone. They will also have their own judgments about the game: they may think a particular forest looks frightening, or be soothed by a seaside vista. But in so far as those judgments concern the actual ‘coding’ of the game, they are susceptible to being tested against that reality, and being proven objectively true or objectively false. If the player believes that the frightening forest is filled with goblins, when he heads into it he will discover either that it actually is and his judgment was correct, or it actually isn't, and he was wrong.

## Conclusion

Michael Oakeshott once said that reality is ‘not whatever I happen to think; it is what I am obliged to think’. And for Berkeley, what one is ‘obliged to think’ are the thoughts in the mind of God. The question any idealist metaphysics must face is, ‘Why do we seem to perceive a common reality with certain intractable features?’ Berkeley may not have answered that question in a completely satisfactory way, and perhaps other idealists have done better. But he did provide an answer, and that answer is why, in his view, (human) experience is not ‘radically subjective’, but is an objective world of ideas.

Hilary Putnam, in *Renewing Philosophy*, discusses the final arrival of esteemed analytical philosopher Nelson Goodman at a sort of radical relativism: ‘But if we choose to speak of worlds, where do these worlds come from? Goodman's answer is unequivocal: they are made by us. They are not made *ex nihilo*, but out of previous worlds... Springing full-blown within contemporary analytic philosophy, a form of idealism as extreme as Hegel's or Fichte's!’ (1992: 111)

Never mind that Putnam is almost certainly misreading Hegel and Fichte; his point is important nonetheless. I would not wish to suggest for a moment that Berkeley is the last word in metaphysics. If, for instance, someone rejects his concept of God, Berkeley’s basis for the objective reality of the world goes with it. But he was surely correct in arguing that it was the posit of an un-sensed matter, without colour, texture, warmth, tone, feel, or character, a ‘something we know not what’—what Whitehead called a ‘vacuous actuality’ (1969: 193)—that pointed the way down the road to scepticism.

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1. http://www.cognopedia.com/wiki/Subjective\_idealism [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As Laird says, ‘He regarded himself, we may say, as an idealist because he could offer (as he thought) a convincing proof of immaterialism and because he endeavoured to demonstrate that the entire system of things depends upon a supreme and benevolent mind’ (1916: 309). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)