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Berkeley on God's Knowledge
of Pain

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In the *Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, Berkeley notes that despite the fact that God does not experience pain passively or by sense as we do, he nonetheless comprehends what pain is and what it means for us to suffer pain because he is omniscient and the cause of all our sensations. As he puts it:

That God knows or understands all things, and that He knows among other things what pain is, even every sort of painful sensation, and what it is for His creatures to suffer pain, I make no question. But that God, though He knows and sometimes causes painful sensations in us, can Himself suffer pain, I positively deny. (DHP 240)

Because nothing about God is passive, he cannot suffer anything (e.g. pain) as we do, nor does he “perceive” our pain. For even though he knows what we experience when we experience pain, he also knows how that experience of pain is dictated by the passive and limited character of the experience. But if God cannot perceive pain in suffering—since only beings with bodies and senses perceive particular sensible things—then it seems that, in fact, he does not really know what it is like for us embodied beings to experience pain.

Furthermore, if God does not experience pain as we do, then it seems he cannot be the cause of the specific ideas of pain we experience; for to be such a cause, he would have to know exactly what he is causing: otherwise, he would be a blind agent. After all, as Berkeley claims—at least in the first two editions of the *Dialogues*—“nothing can give to another that which it hath not itself” (DHP 236).¹ But if God's knowledge of

¹ It is noteworthy that Berkeley deletes mention of this principle in the 1734 edition of DHP. In the first two editions, he apparently thought that invoking the principle was strategically useful against those who believed that unperceiving, corporeal things could be causes of our perceptions. But by 1734 he had come to see that critics might inappropriately extend the application of the principle. For example, in a letter (September 10, 1729), Samuel Johnson had noted that if immoral actions are based on ideas caused by God, then God seems to have immoral ideas (LJ 274). And Andrew Baxter (1733) argued that if things exist because they are sensibly perceived, then the cause of those things (God) must be sensibly perceivable as well. (See McCracken and Tipton 2000: 200.) Rather than having to worry about such misinterpretations

sensible things like pain is not the same as *our* knowledge of sensible things, then it seems that God also cannot be the cause of the consistency, unity, or even existence of the things *we* experience.

So even though the question of God's knowledge of pain (or lack thereof) at first might look like a minor issue in Berkeley's thought, it thus quickly becomes evident that it is crucial for understanding how divine ideas can serve as archetypes for our experience of sensible things. Indeed, to say that God "perceives nothing by sense as we do" means that God "can suffer nothing, nor be affected with any painful sensation, or indeed any sensation at all" (DHP 241, my emphasis). Just as God cannot sense pain, he seemingly cannot sense colors, sounds, odors, flavors, or textures. But these are the very ideas that constitute the sensible objects we identify as real. So to claim, as Berkeley does, that when God "knows or understands" what pain or any sensation is, he seems to suggest that God he does not know the same things we know.

To avoid this problem, Berkeley refuses to model what it means for God to know on what it means for us to know. That is, instead of basing God's knowledge on perceptions that are passive and connected to discrete corporeal motions, Berkeley proposes that God knows what pain and all other sensations are by understanding them, as he says, "among other things." When he therefore says that "[God] knows what pain is among other things" (DHP 240), he is not simply listing pain as one idea that God happens to know among others—as if those ideas have identities apart from and prior to their relations to others. Instead, God's knowledge of pain (like his knowledge of red, bitter, or square) is part of his "com-prehension" of all things, in that God wills the whole integrated network of ideas in which finite perceivers and their ideas are differentiated and associated. To say, then, that God is omniscient does not mean that he just happens to perceive the aggregation of all things, as if their identities or distinctions were independent of his creating them in one harmonious act. Instead, it means that he knows all things as intrinsically related in virtue of his single act of willing that they be perceived by finite minds (passively) as contingently differentiated and related.

This way of formulating the problem avoids having to assume that God has ideas (including that of pain) apart from his willing that there be perceivers whose existence is intelligible only in terms of their having specific ideas. That is, God does not first create minds and then, in a second act, give them ideas modeled on his own. Rather, he creates minds as active principles by which ideas are identified and related. In other words, a particular mind is the *active identification* of ideas in relations that do not exist apart from that identification. Any archetypes of our specific ideas can thus be called divine "ideas" only in a derivative sense, in that the identities of particular divine ideas (including "every sort of painful sensation") are modeled on the differentiations and associations of our ideas.

of his doctrine, Berkeley removed the passage. In any event, it is doubtful that Berkeley ever really endorsed the principle, for as early as in NB 780 (which he marks as relating to God) he writes, "Nihil dat quod non habet or 'the effect is contained in the cause' is an axiom I do not understand or believe to be true."

I argue, then, that for Berkeley, God's ideas can be said to be identical to our ideas only if we note that God always knows or comprehends things as being in harmony, but we perceive things sometimes in harmony (in which case we experience pleasure) and sometimes in disharmony (in which case we experience pain). Our perception of pain is thus not of a specific idea—as if pain were a distinct kind of sensation—nor is it the perception of the *fact* that some ideas are in disharmony. For I could perceive a knife cutting through my skin without necessarily experiencing pain *if* the pain were a “fact” about the knife's interaction with the skin that any mind (including God's) could know. But because *we experience* the lack of harmony between the knife and the skin, we experience pain in a way that God cannot.

9.1 Divine Perception

This way of framing the question of God's knowledge of pain must certainly sound strange, for it suggests that in one sense at least, God does not know what we experience. In the sense that our experience of pain is inherently passive and linked to sense, then God—whose ideas are not based on sense—would not have the same qualia of experience that we have in perceiving pain. But Berkeley has no problem with that, for as he observes, to “suffer, or feel anything by sense, is an imperfection,” whereas “to know everything knowable, is certainly a perfection” (DHP 241). Typically this is understood to mean that because God is perfect, he knows everything. But what I want to emphasize is how, in truly knowing anything, God knows all things, because for God nothing other than his own activity is the principle by which things are identified and related. Indeed, nothing can be *known* apart from how God experiences it in relation to *all* other things; but to the extent that things are sensed, they are “known” only imperfectly.

In this way, “There is no sense nor sensory, or anything like a sense or sensory, in God . . . God knoweth all things as pure mind or intellect; but nothing by sense, nor in nor through sensory” (Siris 289). God knows “all things” not as an infinite collection of discrete, sensed ideas but as the comprehensive totality of necessarily connected effects of his activity. Because we do not know how our ideas are related other than “by the law of our nature”—that is, in terms of the limited “correspondence in the order of nature” between our perceptions and corporeal motions (DHP 241)—we cannot justifiably be said to *know* anything based on sensation.

It seems, then, that God could not cause a *specific* idea of pain in us without having sense-based knowledge of what he is causing; otherwise, he would be a blind agent. Of course, for Berkeley, God is not a blind agent, for as the principle by which all things have their identities and relations, God can be said to know all things. In this sense, “The propertys of all things are in God, i.e. there is in the Deity understanding as well as will. He is no blind agent & in truth a blind agent is a contradiction” (NB 812). But this is not to say that God knows everything there is to know about the things he wills,

since it says nothing about understanding “all things” as discrete or only related to one another contingently.

Indeed, Berkeley makes clear in his discussion of God’s knowledge of pain in the *Dialogues* (241–2), that God knows what he wills without having to rely on the “natural ties” to corporeal motions that form the basis for our experience of pain or pleasure. As Berkeley writes, “God is a pure spirit, disengaged from all such sympathy or natural ties. No corporeal motions are attended with the sensations of pain or pleasure in his mind” (DHP 241). Because God’s knowledge of pain (and for that matter of any sensation) is essentially different from ours, his knowledge cannot be used to explain how discrete sensible things perceived by different finite perceivers at different times can be the same. Nor can God’s knowledge be used to explain how those *different* things can be said to exist when no finite mind perceives them, for in God’s mind, “they” are not different. In this way, the issue of God’s knowledge of pain—which seemingly is concerned with a relatively small aspect of Berkeley’s epistemology—opens up a host of problems about Berkeley’s views on our knowledge of reality, unperceived objects, and archetypes.

Commentators have attempted to avoid these problems by appealing to various explanations of how, for Berkeley, God knows what it is for us to experience pain. For example, George Thomas argues that, because perception is unavoidably passive, God does not “perceive” anything at all; rather, he “contains and supports” everything in the sensible world (including our perceptions of pain) (Thomas 1976: 163–7). To support this view, Thomas cites NB 301, where Berkeley remarks, “Whatsoever has any of our ideas in it must perceive, it being that very having, that passive reception of ideas that denominates the mind perceiving, that being the very essence of perception, or that wherein perception consists” (see also NB 378). This is not to say that God perceives or “has” ideas (*contra* Thomas), for that would use *our* ideas as a model for God’s ideas and our *having* ideas as a model for God’s having ideas. Instead I propose that we say (as Berkeley carefully does) not that God “perceives” everything as discrete or isolated individuals that happen to be united collectively in God’s mind, but that all sensible things “are perceived” by God together as one unity.

This shift from the active voice to the passive voice highlights how God perceives all things *in toto* rather than as a collection of individuals first perceived as individuals. Instead of saying that God perceives all things—as if their identities as individuals exist prior to his perception—Berkeley insists that God “contains and supports” all things in the sensible world. Only in this sense can those things be said to be perceived by him. In this way, Berkeley shifts the focus away from thinking of God’s activity as a series of discrete (even if continuous) acts to one simple, eternal act in which “all sensible things” are perceived by him not as a collection of individuals but as one complex totality (DHP 212). This move makes the dispute about whether we (a) “concur” with God’s creation of individuals, (b) are the “occasions” of God’s creation of individuals, or (c) are the particular results of God’s “continuous creation” beside the point, for God

does not know *as discrete individuals* the things we perceive.² As such, he also does not know things in terms of their incompatibilities with one another, and thus does not know them in terms of pain. No doubt, what makes something in our experience (e.g. a tree) exist is that it “is truly known and comprehended by (that is, *exists in*) the infinite mind of God” (DHP 235). But for God it is not known as some isolated idea; rather, it is known as part of an infinite continuum of what would be perceived were God to will there to be some particular perceiver.

To say that God knows “every sort of painful sensation” does not mean, then, that he has such sensations or knows what it is like for us to have such sensations; for that would mean he would have to know what it is like to be passive in virtue of being tied to a body. Instead, as a pure spirit, God knows all possible painful sensations—just as he knows all possible sensations in general—by virtue of knowing the continuum of what is perceivable. Since whatever is perceivable must be an idea (DHP 234), God can thus be said to have such ideas inasmuch as they are implicit in his comprehension of all the possible variations of corporeal motions to which finite perceivers are naturally linked. However, because God’s ideas “are not conveyed to him by sense, as ours are” (DHP 241), to say they are perceivable means something “manifestly” different for God and us. For us an idea is perceivable if it is actually perceived either in our own minds or in the infinite mind of God (DHP 234–5). But since such perceptions are so different for us and God, Berkeley prefers to say that, unlike our discrete sense-bound perceptions, something is “truly known” only when it is “comprehended” with all other things in the infinite mind of God.

God’s knowledge of pain thus includes the knowledge that an intense heat is incompatible with the well-being of sensing beings like us. But this does not imply that God knows what we experience when we experience pain. For in conceiving our ideas, God would know only *intellectually* what we experience sensibly.³ And that would mean that God does not really have a sense of what it is for us to experience pain. So Berkeley concludes that just as we can imagine the pain of a burn without any misery, “God may comprehend all ideas, even the ideas which are painful & unpleasant without being in any degree pained thereby” (NB 675; also Siris 289). The difference, of course, is that unlike us, God does not draw on sensible experiences to imagine an idea, nor is there for God a difference between an actual experience and an imagined one, for the comprehension of any idea for God is simultaneously his comprehension of all ideas. We are never in that situation, because for us sense perception is always tied “by the law of our nature” to alterations in our body (DHP 241).⁴ So as several commentators conclude, if God’s comprehension of our idea of pain is only like our imagining or remembering being in pain, then God does not know what it is we experience when we

² Cf. McDonough (2008: 580–1), Lee (2012: 539–40, 556–9), and Winkler (2011a: 291, 307–8).

³ Cf. Pitcher (1977: 145–75, 285).

⁴ It is not enough to say, then—as Kail (2014: 96) does—that “to perceive by sense requires the perceiver to be passive.” We want to know why (and how) sense perception is necessarily passive; and that, I have suggested, is due to how bodily alterations are not self-caused. Cf. Stoneham (2006: 219).

really are in pain.⁵ Indeed, as John Roberts notes, this difference in the qualia of what we and God know would imply that God cannot have knowledge of any of our ideas of sense or, for that matter, anything about the sensible world.⁶

9.2 God's Comprehension of Pain

To forestall this apparent denial of God's omniscience, Charles McCracken proposes that we stop trying to relate our perception of pain as an idea to some (perhaps Malebranchian) eternal idea and instead focus on how our perception of pain is, for Berkeley, the result of divine decrees.⁷ God's knowledge of sensible qualities could thus be understood as based on his willing that individual minds have certain perceptions in certain circumstances. Ken Winkler and Melissa Frankel endorse this strategy, shifting emphasis away from how God's perception of pain resembles ours to how God can be said to perceive our experience of pain in virtue of having caused it.⁸ In this "deflationary" account, pain is not some pre-existing idea in the mind of God but rather is whatever is produced by his decree. Or as Winkler puts it, the archetype of our idea of pain is "whatever is required for God to cause our ideas" (1989: 232).⁹ But how God can intend to cause this or that specific idea, or how a sensible idea can be said to resemble what God intends, is left unexplained in this phenomenalist account.¹⁰ Also unexplained is how God can decree something without having an idea of what he is decreeing.¹¹ So we are left, as Winkler concedes, with a difficulty that cannot be resolved due to "the limitations of a finite mind" (1989: 228).

As I have suggested, I think we can move past this less than satisfactory conclusion by noting how DHP 241–2 occurs within the broader discussion of Berkeley's account of what it means for God to "comprehend" all things, including pain (DHP 230–1, 235). In that discussion he links God's comprehension of all things to how God exhibits those things to us specifically in the universal and orderly patterns we identify as laws of nature. As Berkeley points out, "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*" (DHP 231). Just as no idea can exist apart from mind, and no mind can be abstracted from the cogitation by which it differentiates and associates things (PHK 98, NB 842), so no thing can be abstracted from the comprehensive order in terms of which God simultaneously creates finite minds and their ideas.

This crucial insight about how God's comprehension of things is not fragmented like our perceptions highlights how, instead of treating pain (or any idea) as discrete,

⁵ See Dicker (2011: 264), Bettcher (2007: 76, 2009: 151), Hight (2008: 188), and Pitcher (1977: 179).

⁶ See Roberts (2010: 221–5). Experiences of the God-man Jesus seem to be exceptions.

⁷ See McCracken (1979: 288–9).

⁸ See Winkler (1989: 228–32) and Frankel (2012a: 391–2).

⁹ Also see Frankel (2012a: 394).

¹⁰ Cf. Winkler (1989: 222). ¹¹ See McCracken (2008: 35).

Berkeley insists that it be understood as embedded in a coherent network of ideas. Our sensation of pain is thus not the perception of a separate idea given to us by God but our experience of other things as inconsistent with our well-being. In rehab or working out in the gym, we might think of what we experience as pain; but it is not, since it is consistent with our long-term well-being. But when we cannot see the point of what we experience (as in the case of intense heat that has no long-term benefit), we rightly think of it as pain. In that case, we do not experience intense heat and the pain associated with it as two separate ideas, for when we experience intense heat-as-it-relates to us, we experience it as being inconsistent with our well-being, and the experience of that inconsistency is our experience of pain. That is why Philonous remarks:

Seeing therefore [intense heat and pain] are both immediately perceived at the same time, and the fire affects you only with one simple or uncompounded idea, it follows that this same simple idea is both the intense heat immediately perceived, and the pain; and, consequently, that the intense heat immediately perceived is nothing distinct from a particular sort of pain.

(DHP 176)

Intense heat can be *intense* only relative to a particular perceiver, that is, in the context of a limited set of other perceptions. In that specific context, the experiences of the intensity of the heat, on the one hand, and the pain, on the other, are identical precisely because they cannot be perceived as dissociated without abstracting them from the context in which they are perceived.

Just as no idea can be perceived apart from mind (i.e. the simple, unified activity by means of which the idea is differentiated from and associated with other ideas), so no idea can be comprehended apart from the context in which it is intelligible. In perceiving something whose place in the order of nature we do not comprehend, we fail to see how it relates to us and other things; and to the extent that we find it puzzling, arbitrary, or painful, we are displeased by our experience of it. That is why, as infants and small children, we experience things as pleasurable or painful without knowing why we do. But the more we understand the world, the less puzzling, arbitrary, and painful we find it. Indeed, when we *comprehend* something, we are pleased to see how it relates to us—even when it is to our disadvantage. Because everything we perceive is perceived either as complementing or frustrating our existence, we never perceive things indifferently, “there being no ideas perfectly void of all pain & uneasiness but what are preferable to annihilation” (NB 833).¹² So Hylas is led to conclude, “It is evident, things regard us only as they are pleasing or displeasing: and they can please or displease only so far forth as they are perceived” (DHP 262). We thus become the active (and morally responsible) beings we are in virtue of how we agree with or rebel against God’s will that we “comprehend” those ideas.

¹² It is not accidental that this Spinozistic-sounding remark occurs immediately after a series of notes in which Berkeley discusses Spinoza.

Therefore, God does not cause us to have a separate idea of pain modeled on his own idea, for God literally does not have any specific “idea” of pain. Nor does he *perceive* pain—not because his perceptions are eternal or active and our sensible ideas are not, but because what we perceive (passively) as unconnected and painful ideas, God comprehends as unified and harmonious items of experience.¹³ As Berkeley puts it in the *Principles*:

As for the mixture of pain or uneasiness which is in the world, pursuant to the general laws of nature, and the actions of finite, imperfect spirits: this, in the state we are in at present, is indispensably necessary to our well-being. But our prospects are too narrow: we take, for instance, the idea of some one particular pain into our thoughts, and account it *evil*; whereas, if we enlarge our view, so as to comprehend the various ends, connexions, and dependencies of things, on what occasions and in what proportions we are affected with pain and pleasure, the nature of human freedom, and the design with which we are put into the world; we shall be forced to acknowledge that those particular things, which considered in themselves, appear to be *evil*, have the nature of *good*, when considered as linked with the whole system of beings.

(PHK 153)

We experience pain because our view is too narrow and we fail to “comprehend” how our ideas are really in harmony with others. But that we experience things as being painful is necessary for our well-being, for in perceiving things pleasurable or painfully, we learn how to accommodate ourselves to God’s design by thinking of how we relate to things in nature not as they are in themselves (i.e. as isolated particulars) but as essentially linked to “the whole system of beings” (PHK 153). What thus looks like an appeal to standard theodicies—the narrowness of our view, the benefits of being challenged by evils, human sinfulness, the moral requirement of being free—thus becomes instead an indictment of attempts to treat things in the world as irrevocably fragmented.

Framing the explanation of God’s knowledge of pain in this way avoids having to assume that God has an idea of a thing independently of his willing it to exist relative to a perceiver. For if God has to know objects of his will before he wills, then those objects themselves would have to be differentiated through a prior act of will, setting up an endless regress. Instead, in willing that an idea be perceived by a mind, God simply wills that something be differentiated from and related to all other things by means of the perceiving activity of a mind. In this way, in willing that there be minds, God wills that there be a differentiation and association of objects. But the only way that one idea can be differentiated from another is in terms of how a mind perceives the objects it identifies. That, in turn, means that our minds are differentiated in terms of our bodies, simply because our acts of perception are distinguishable only in terms of their objects. So unlike God, who as a pure spirit is not differentiated from other minds in terms of his perceptions of objects, we are. Indeed, as Berkeley notes in the central passage on

¹³ See Daniel (2001a: 254).

God's knowledge of pain on which I have been focused, our mind is identifiable specifically as this or that mind precisely because of the body we have:

We are chained to a body, that is to say, our perceptions are connected with corporeal motions. By the law of our nature we are affected upon every alteration in the nervous parts of our sensible body: which sensible body rightly considered, is nothing but a complexion of such qualities or ideas, as have no existence distinct from being perceived by a mind: so that this connection of sensations with corporeal motions, means no more than a correspondence in the order of Nature between two sets of ideas, or things immediately perceivable. But God is a pure spirit, disengaged from all such sympathy or natural ties. No corporeal motions are attended with the sensations of pain or pleasure in his mind. (DHP 241)

Our bodies cannot exist apart from our minds, but our minds are precisely those particular minds because of the way in which those bodies are ordered in terms of their sympathetic or natural ties to one another. Apart from the corporeal motions of bodies, there would be no "order of nature" because there would be no principle by means of which minds are differentiated and sympathetically related in terms of what they experience as pleasure or pain.

For Berkeley, then, God does not know what we experience in experiencing any *specific* thing (including our pains)—for that would imply that he is passively affected by something external to him. Rather, in creating finite minds, God has created us to be perceivers of ideas whose harmony we often fail to grasp, and this appropriate experience of ideas *as incompatible* is what we experience as pain. Our perception of pain is thus not the perception of the fact that some ideas are in disharmony, for it is to our benefit (and in accord with God's will) that we know such things in dealing with the world.

9.3 Concluding Remarks

It is not accidental that Berkeley brings up the necessary linkage of our minds to our bodies precisely when he discusses God's knowledge of pain. For a mind or an act of perception can be differentiated as this or that specific mind or this or that specific act only if it is differentiated by the objects or bodies it identifies. So God is not identified as this or that specific activity (since he is activity itself), and he does not need to be "chained to a body" to be identified as this or that mind, for his activity is not defined by specific acts or the objects of those acts (i.e. ideas). He thus has no specific ideas prior to his actions, because for God there is nothing "prior" to his actions. He engages in no specific natural acts, only in the one eternal activity by which all acts and objects of those acts are simultaneously identified as the order of nature.

This does not mean, however, that God acts blindly, for that would suggest that he acts without purpose. In fact, according to Berkeley, it is evident that God wills that all things be in harmony, and that "above all, the never enough admired laws of pain and pleasure" be considered as part of his design (PHK 146; also 151–3). Nor does it mean

that God does *not* act blindly, for that would imply that he could have a specific idea or object in mind (but just happens not to)—which would mean that his activities are differentiated by the corporeal motions of bodies. Instead, it indicates that to raise the question of whether God acts blindly or not is to misunderstand Berkeley's point, that in creating nature God creates a *comprehensive* order in which specific perceivers end up having specific ideas. As the ultimate cause of those specific ideas-in-relation-to-one-another, God's "perceptions" might just as well be understood as divine ideas or archetypes.¹⁴ But they cannot—or rather should not—be understood as objects or ideas in the mind of God that guide his creation of specific, isolatable objects in nature or perceptions (e.g. pain) in our minds.

In Berkeley's account of God's knowledge of pain, then, God's ideas are identical to ours, in that God wills that our perceptions be more or less comprehensive. But in decreeing that there be finite minds like ours (i.e. minds that do not perceive ideas comprehensively), God creates the conditions for creatures to experience pain. This does not mean that God experiences pain, because what we perceive as painful due to our limited perspective, God "comprehends" as harmonious. That is why I have suggested that, for Berkeley, the issue of God's knowledge of pain is not about what God knows but about the nature of pain itself.

¹⁴ See Daniel (2001a: 251–8) and Winkler (1989: 228).