Confusion in the Bishop's Church

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Abstract

Kearns (2021) reconstructs Berkeley's (1713) Master Argument as a formally valid argument against the Materialist Thesis, with the key premise the Distinct Conceivability Thesis, namely the thesis that truths about sensible objects having or lacking thinkable qualities are (distinctly) conceivable and as its conclusion that all sensible objects are conceived. It will be shown that Distinct Conceivability Thesis entails the Reduction Thesis, which states that *de dicto* propositional (ordinary or distinct) conceivability reduces to *de re* propositional (ordinary or distinct) conceivability. While Kearns (2021) set out to avoid the confusion of a *de re* claim with a *de dicto* claim, which Prior (1955) accused Berkeley of, Kearns can be accused of making a similar conceptual confusion.

Keywords George Berkeley; Master Argument; Distinct Conceivability Thesis; idealism; *de dicto* conceivability; *de re* conceivability

In section 1 we will give a brief exposition of Kearns (2021)'s version of Berkeley (1713)'s so-called 'Master Argument'.[1] The key premise is the Distinct Conceivability Thesis, which states that, if a sensible object has or lacks a thinkable quality, then that it is distinctly conceivable it is the case. The conclusion is the denial of the Materialist Thesis, which states that there is some sensible object that is unconceived. Not only is the Master Argument thus reconstructed formally valid, but Kearns also claims that the Distinct Conceivability Thesis has initial plausibility and that denying it solely to save 'materialism' is dialectically suspect. In section 2 we will show that the Distinct Conceivability Thesis, once some implicit assumptions are made explicit, entails a reduction of *de dicto* propositional (ordinary or

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[1]The title 'The Bishop's Church' refers to Bishop Berkeley and Church (2009), who discovered the knowability paradox. Kearns (2021, p. 176, 187) sees Berkeley's Master argument as a 'precursor' to and 'variation' on Church's knowability paradox. A discussion of this falls outside the scope of this discussion note.

distinct) conceivability to *de re* propositional (ordinary or distinct) conceivability. This Reduction Thesis does not only lack the initial plausibility of the Distinct Conceivability Thesis but there is also a case to be made against its plausibility. The Reduction Thesis is not just any consequence of the Distinct Conceivability Thesis: it entails the impossibility to (distinctly) conceive that the Materialist Thesis is true. Here the materialist can fault the Reduction Thesis, not on (dialectically suspect) ontological grounds, but on (independent) conceptual grounds.

1 Kearns's version of Berkeley's Master Argument

First, we will introduce a couple of notions. Subsequently, we will introduce two key theses, in which these notions figure. Then we will proceed to discuss Kearns (2021)'s version of Berkeley (1713)'s Master Argument, which demonstrates a logical incompatibility between the two theses. Finally, we discuss the dialectical situation.

1.1 Conceptual preliminaries

Let us begin with the conceptual preliminaries. In the Master Argument the first-order quantifiers range over *sensible objects*: $\forall s$ means 'for all sensible objects s' and $\exists s$ means 'there is at least one sensible object s'. Moreover, the higher-order quantifiers range over *thinkable qualities*: $\forall F$ means 'for all thinkable qualities F'. Kearns (2021, p. 182) describes a thinkable quality as follows:

> [...] is one that can be conceived to belong to some object or other — a quality that *some mind can grasp* as being had by something.

The natural language formulation is ambiguous between the following two versions, one in which $\Diamond C_P$ has narrow scope (TCn) and one in which $\Diamond C_P$ has wide scope (TCw):

TCn F is a thinkable quality if and only if $\exists s \Diamond C_P F s$;

TCw F is a thinkable quality if and only if $\Diamond C_P \exists s F s$.

But later Kearns (2021, p. 182) makes it clear that he intends the wide-scope reading:

> [The property of being conceived] is a *thinkable* quality simply because it can be *thought* that something is conceived (or not conceived). It is only in this thin sense do I use the term "thinkable quality."

We will distinguish between *propositional conception* and *objectual conception*, as does Kearns (2021, p. 4). Let us use the unary propositional operator C_P for 'someone conceives that' (propositional conception) and let us use the unary predicate C_O for 'is conceived of by someone' (objectual conception). In contrast, Kearns formalizes only the notion of objectual conception. Propositional conceivability is then formalized as $\Diamond C_P \phi$ (for some formula ϕ) and objectual conceivability is then formalized as $\Diamond C_O t$ (for some term t). Kearns (2021) accepts a bridge principle for those two notions:

> As I understand it, conceiving that Tree is green (or next to a dog, etc.) suffices for Tree's being conceived, because what is meant by "Tree is conceived" encompasses "It is conceived that Tree is some way." (p. 183)

> In both cases, having a certain mental attitude (knowledge or conception) towards a certain type of proposition (a conjunction, or a claim about a sensible thing) entails having this attitude towards some element of the proposition (a conjunct of the conjunction, or the sensible thing that the proposition concerns). (pp. 186-187)

With the help of our propositional conception operator, this can be formalized as follows:

BP $C_P Fs \rightarrow C_O s$

Kearns (2021, p. 179) introduces the new notion of *distinct conception*:

> It is possible, for instance, that grass is green and that someone conceives that grass is green. On my understanding, this is all it takes for it to be distinctly conceivable that grass is green.

With D for 'someone distinctly conceives that', one can analyze distinct conception as follows:

DC $DFs \leftrightarrow (C_P Fs \wedge Fs)$,

which entails that
$$\Diamond DFs \leftrightarrow \Diamond(C_P Fs \wedge Fs).$$

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1.2 The Distinct Conceivability Thesis and the Materialist Thesis

Now let us two introduce the two main theses. The first one is the Distinct Conceivability Principle (DCP):

> For any sensible thing, s, and any thinkable quality, q, if s has q (or lacks q), it is possible to distinctly conceive that s has q (or lacks q). (Kearns, 2021, p. 8)

One can formalize DCP as follows (Kearns, 2021, p. 186):

(DCP) $\forall s \forall F (Fs \to \Diamond \mathrm{D} Fs)$

The second one is the Materialist Thesis (MT), which says that there is something that is unconceived. It can be formalized as follows (Kearns, 2021, p. 186):

(MT) $\exists s \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} s$

Everything is set for the introduction of the Master Argument, which is divided in three parts. The first part goes as follows:

0.1	$\forall s \forall F (Fs \to \Diamond \mathrm{D} Fs)$	DCP
0.2	$\exists s \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} s$	MT
1.	$\neg C_{\mathrm{O}} t$	From 0.2 by EI
2.	$\neg C_{\mathrm{O}} t \to \Diamond \mathrm{D} \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} t$	From 0.1 by UI
3.	$\Diamond \mathrm{D} \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} t$	From 1, 2 by MP

The second part starts from the following assumptions:

(A) $\mathrm{D} Fs \vdash C_{\mathrm{O}} s$

(B) $\mathrm{D} \phi \vdash \phi$

(C) If $\vdash \phi$, then $\vdash \Box \phi$

(D) $\Box \neg \phi \vdash \neg \Diamond \phi$

Note that (A) follows from DC and BP and that a restriction of (B) follows from DC. Assumptions (C) and (D) belong to any normal system of modal logic. The second part goes as follows:

4. $D\neg C_O t$ Red. ass.

5. $C_O t$ from 4 by (A)

6. $\neg C_O t$ from 4 by (B)

7. $C_O t \wedge \neg C_O t$ from 5 and 6

8. $\neg D\neg C_O t$ from 4, 7 by RAA

9. $\Box\neg D\neg C_O t$ from 8 by (C)

10. $\neg\Diamond D\neg C_O t$ from 9 by (D)

The third part goes as follows:

11. $\neg\exists s\neg C_O s$ from 0.2, 3 and 10 by RAA

12. $\forall s C_O s$ from 11

1.3 The dialectics

The dialectial situation can be summarized as follows: one's modus ponens is another's modus tollens. In other words, one can accept the DCP and therefore one has to accept the rejection of MT, or one can accept the MT and therefore has to reject DCP. Regarding the second option, Kearns (2021, p. 14) provides two reasons for not rejecting DCP too easily. The first reason is that it is more plausible than the Knowability Thesis, namely the thesis that all truths are knowable. Indeed, DCP is not about all truths but only about those truths that involve sensible objects having or lacking thinkable qualities. Moreover, distinct conceivability is weaker than knowability. While this is only a claim about the relative plausibility of DCP, Kearns (2021, p. 188) also makes an absolute claim about DCP's plausibility:

> DCP is a simple, rather elegant, and even *plausible* principle absent any murkily motivated modifications. [...] Thinkable truths are, very plausibly, *open to the mind*—facts which some mind can grasp (i.e., distinctly conceive). [Emphasis by Kearns]

The second reason is that rejecting DCP on this basis alone is question-begging against the idealist.

2 From *de dicto* propositional conceivability to *de re* propositional conceivability

We will start by making some implicit presuppositions of DCP explicit. This will lead us to reconsider what the conclusion of the Master Argument really is. Next, it will be shown that DCP entails the reduction of *de dicto* propositional (ordinary or distinct) conceivability to *de re* propositional (ordinary or distinct) conceivability. Call this the 'Reduction Thesis'. It will then be argued that the Reduction Thesis not only lacks the initial plausibility of DCP but that there is even a case against it. Finally, we will show that a 'Master'-like argument can be made against the materialist and we will explain how the materialist might respond in a dialectically non-suspect way. It turns out that an old problem is showing up in new clothes.

2.1 An explication

There are some implicit presuppositions in DCP that we will bring to light. First, in section 1 we read $\forall s \forall F$ as follows:

> For all sensible objects and for all thinkable qualities ...

But $\forall s \forall F$ could also have been read as follows:

> For all objects, if the object is sensible then for all qualities, if the quality is thinkable, then ...

The difference is that between restricted quantifiers with an implicit restriction to a certain class and unrestricted quantifiers with an explicit restriction to that class. Importantly, the two readings are equivalent. In what follows, I will retain the restricted quantifiers $\forall s$, $\exists s$, with their implicit restriction to sensible objects, because the focus will be on thinkable qualities. From now on $\forall F$ has to be read as 'for all qualities'. Moreover, we will use TCw to formalize the explicit restriction to thinkable qualities:

$$\forall F(\Diamond C_P \exists s F s \to \ldots$$

Second, we can use in addition DC to rewrite DCP as follows:

$$\forall s' \forall F(\Diamond C_P \exists s F s \to (Fs' \to \Diamond(C_P Fs' \land Fs'))). \tag{1}$$

Let us now reconsider the Master Argument. First, step 2 can now be reformulated as follows:

$$2.^* \quad \Diamond \mathrm{C_P} \exists s \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} s \rightarrow (\neg C_{\mathrm{O}} t \rightarrow \Diamond(\mathrm{C_P} \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} t \wedge \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} t)) \qquad \text{Instance of (1)}$$

We now have the following conclusion:

$$12.^* \quad \forall s'(\Diamond \mathrm{C_P} \exists s \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} s \rightarrow C_{\mathrm{O}} s')$$

What follows from step 12^* and MT is the following:

$$\neg \Diamond \mathrm{C_P} \exists s \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} s. \tag{2}$$

In other words, it is impossible to conceive that MT. This is a serious blow to defenders of MT. Note that (2) entails that

$$\neg \Diamond \mathrm{D} \exists s \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} s. \tag{3}$$

In other words, it is not distinctly conceivable that there is something that is unconceived. In the opinion of Prior (1955), the latter is the claim that Berkeley had to establish to support his idealism, but which he failed to do. Berkeley's Master Argument, in the version of Kearns (2021) and with the implicit presuppositions of DCP made explicit, does lead to the needed conclusion.

Before we proceed, let us consider what would be the case if we had used TCn rather than TCw. (But recall that there is an exegetical reason to employ TCw rather than TCn.) So, DCP would be rewritten as follows:

$$\forall s' \forall F (\exists s \Diamond \mathrm{C_P} F s \rightarrow (F s' \rightarrow \Diamond(\mathrm{C_P} F s' \wedge F s'))). \tag{4}$$

Then step 2 of the Master Argument could be reformulated as follows:

$$2.^{**} \quad \exists s \Diamond \mathrm{C_P} \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} s \rightarrow (\neg C_{\mathrm{O}} t \rightarrow \Diamond(\mathrm{C_P} \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} t \wedge \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} t)) \qquad \text{Instance of (4)}$$

We would then have the following conclusion:

$$12.^{**} \quad \forall s'(\exists s \Diamond \mathrm{C_P} \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} s \rightarrow C_{\mathrm{O}} s')$$

Finally, the combination of step 12^{**} and MT is the following:

$$\neg \exists s \Diamond \mathrm{C_P} \neg C_{\mathrm{O}} s. \tag{5}$$

Syntactically speaking, the difference between (2) and (5) is that the first is a *de dicto* claim, whereas the second is a *de re* claim. Dialectically speaking, (2) is a serious blow to the defenders of MT, whereas it is not obvious that (5) is similarly disconcerting to them. The first says it cannot be conceived

that MT, but the second does not say anything directly about MT. Note that (5) entails that

$$\neg\exists s\Diamond\mathrm{D}\neg C_{\mathrm{O}}s \qquad (6)$$

In other words, there is nothing that one can distinctly conceive to be unconceived. In the opinion of Prior (1955), (6) is the claim that Berkeley did establish, but it is not the one that he needed to support his idealism, namely (3). (Here we find a non-exegetical reason to use TCw rather than TCn.) Henceforth, we will focus on DCP with explicit restriction to thinkable qualities and a wide-scope conception of thinkable qualities, namely (1), rather than on DCP with explicit restriction to thinkable qualities and a narrow-scope conception of thinkable qualities, namely (4).

2.2 The Reduction Thesis

We will now show the consequences of (1) for the relation between *de dicto* (distinct) conceivability and *de re* (distinct) conceivability. First, it follows from (1) by universal instantiation and existential generalization that:

$$\Diamond\mathrm{C_P}\exists sFs \rightarrow (Ft \rightarrow \exists s\Diamond(\mathrm{C_P}Fs \wedge Fs)). \qquad (7)$$

Second, one can apply universal generalization to (7) to obtain the following:

$$\forall s'(\Diamond\mathrm{C_P}\exists sFs \rightarrow (Fs' \rightarrow \exists s\Diamond(\mathrm{C_P}Fs \wedge Fs))).$$

Next, one distribute the universal quantifier to obtain the following:

$$\forall s'\Diamond\mathrm{C_P}\exists sFs \rightarrow \forall s'(Fs' \rightarrow \exists s\Diamond(\mathrm{C_P}Fs \wedge Fs))).$$

Given that $\forall v\,(\phi \rightarrow \psi)$ entails $\exists v\phi \rightarrow \exists v\psi$, one can derive that:

$$\forall s'\Diamond\mathrm{C_P}\exists sFs \rightarrow (\exists s'Fs' \rightarrow \exists s'\exists s\Diamond(\mathrm{C_P}Fs \wedge Fs))).$$

Since s' does not occur freely in the antecedent of the main conditional nor in the consequent of the right-nested conditional, so one can derive that:

$$\Diamond\mathrm{C_P}\exists sFs \rightarrow (\exists s'Fs' \rightarrow \exists s\Diamond(\mathrm{C_P}Fs \wedge Fs)).$$

Relettering of bound variables then results in:

$$\Diamond\mathrm{C_P}\exists sFs \rightarrow (\exists sFs \rightarrow \exists s\Diamond(\mathrm{C_P}Fs \wedge Fs)). \qquad (8)$$

Third, note that $\Diamond(\phi \wedge \psi) \rightarrow \Diamond\phi$ is valid, so one can derive the following from (8):

$$\Diamond\mathrm{C_P}\exists sFs \rightarrow (\exists sFs \rightarrow \exists s\Diamond\mathrm{C_P}Fs).$$

Fourth, it follows by tautological reasoning that:

$$\exists sFs \rightarrow (\lozenge C_P \exists sFs \rightarrow \exists s \lozenge C_P Fs). \tag{9}$$

In other words, *de dicto* propositional conceivability entails *de re* propositional conceivability, under the condition that there is at least one sensible object that has the property within the scope of the conception operator.

Let us now retrace a couple of steps and start from (8) again. Note again that $\lozenge(\phi \wedge \psi) \rightarrow \lozenge\phi$ is valid, so one can derive the following from (8):

$$\lozenge(C_P \exists sFs \wedge \exists sFs) \rightarrow (\exists sFs \rightarrow \exists s \lozenge(C_P Fs \wedge Fs)).$$

Next, it follows by tautological reasoning that:

$$\exists sFs \rightarrow (\lozenge(C_P \exists sFs \wedge \exists sFs) \rightarrow \exists s \lozenge(C_P Fs \wedge Fs)).$$

Finally, one may reformulate the above using DC as follows:

$$\exists sFs \rightarrow (\lozenge D \exists sFs \rightarrow \exists s \lozenge D Fs). \tag{10}$$

In other words, *de dicto* propositional distinct conceivability entails *de re* propositional distinct conceivability, under the condition that there is at least one sensible object that has the property within the scope of the distinct conception operator.[2]

It is instructive to compare (9) and (10) to their purely epistemic counterparts (without the modal $\lozenge$ operator):

$$\exists sFs \rightarrow (C_P \exists sFs \rightarrow \exists s C_P Fs); \tag{11}$$

$$\exists sFs \rightarrow (D \exists sFs \rightarrow \exists s D Fs). \tag{12}$$

In other words, *de dicto* propositional (distinct) conception entails *de re* propositional (distinct) conception, under the condition that there is at least one sensible object that has the property within the scope of the (distinct) conception operator.[3] The antecedents of the right-nested conditionals of

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[2]The version of DCP with explicit restriction to thinkable qualities but with a narrow-scope conception of thinkable qualities, namely (4) entails, in combination with DC, that $\exists sFs \rightarrow (\exists s \lozenge C_P Fs \leftrightarrow \exists s \lozenge D Fs)$. In other words, it entails that *de re* propositional conceivability and *de re* distinct conceivability are equivalent (if there is at least one sensible object that has the relevant quality).

[3]The right-nested conditional of (12) is relevant for the analysis of Berkeley's Master Argument that was given by Prior (1955). The latter posited that, while Berkeley had established the impossibility of the *de re* claim that there is something of which a person thinks truly (distinctly conceives) that is not thought-of by someone, he had not established the impossibility of the *de dicto* claim a person thinks truly (distinctly conceives) that there is something that is not thought-of by someone. If the right-nested conditional of (12) is true, then establishing the impossibility of the *de re* claim does suffice to establish the impossibility of the *de dicto* claim. So, Prior is committed to denying the right-nested conditional of (12) – see also Levine (2016, pp. 3560–3561).

(11) and (12) are logically stronger than the antecedents of the right-nested conditionals of (9) and (10), whereas the consequents of (11) and (12) are logically weaker than the antecedents of the right-nested conditionals of (9) and (10). This implies that (11) and (12) are neither logically stronger nor logically weaker than (9) and (10) respectively.

Suppose that there is life on Europa, one of Jupiter's moons. Someone is (distinctly) conceiving that there is life on Europa, but there is no sensible object of which it is true that someone (distinctly) conceives that it lives on Europa. Of course, one could look at a living being with which one is into epistemic contact, for example one's cat, and conceive it to live on Europa, but one does not have a distinct conception of one's cat living on Europa, because it does not live on Europa. So, the example works best against (12). Still, it also casts some doubt on (11). It is implausible that, every time someone conceives that there is life on some astronomical object, there is some particular object about which someone conceives that it lives on that particular object.[4]

The counterexamples to (11) and (12) do not straightforwardly carry over to (9) and (10). One has to find an F such that $\neg \exists s \Diamond \mathrm{C_P} Fs$ or $\neg \exists s \Diamond \mathrm{D} Fs$. There are examples where the possibility of (distincly) conceiving that a particular (sensible) object has a certain property is quite remote or perhaps even nonexistent. There are astronomical objects that are megaparsecs away and it is (distinctly) conceivable that there is life on those objects, but it is comparatively much harder to distinctly conceive of a particular sensible object (with which one is in epistemic contact) that it lives on one of those astronomical objects, especially if it is practically (e.g., the astronomical objects are at a large distance) or even physically (e.g., the astronomical

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[4]Berto (2017) and Berto and Jago (2019) present a logic of (propositional) imagination, which is taken to be the same as 'positive conception'. (Chalmers (2002) introduced the distinction between positive and negative conceivability, which corresponds to a distinction between positive and negative conception.) According to Berto and Jago (2019, pp. 151-152), the following inference is invalid: from 'it is imagined in the act whose explicit content is A, that $B \lor C$' to 'it is imagined in the act whose explicit content is A, that B' or 'it is imagined in the act whose explicit content is A, that C'. They call this the under-determinacy of imagination. The informal example that they give is the following: one can imagine Sherlock Holmes, who is left-, right- or two-handed, without imagining that he is left-handed and without imagining that he is right-handed and without imagining that he is two-handed. Their rejection of the inference is telling, since one can view an existentially quantified sentence as a (perhaps open-ended) disjunction of all the substitution instances (if there are no unnamed objects). However, Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character, whereas here we considering cases in which the relevant existence condition is satisfied. Still, the under-determinacy of imagination can be expected to make those inferences invalid, even when they are conditional on the truth of the imagined disjunctions.

objects are at 'space-like' distance) or perhaps even metaphysically impossible to make it true (e.g., the astronomical objects are in a disconnected spacetime).

2.3 A new Master Argument and an old problem in new clothes

One can give a new Master Argument by using $\neg C_O$ to instantiate (10):

$$\exists s \neg C_O s \rightarrow (\lozenge \mathrm{D} \exists s \neg C_O s \rightarrow \exists s \lozenge \mathrm{D} \neg C_O s). \tag{13}$$

The second part of the Master Argument shows that $\neg \exists s \lozenge \mathrm{D} \neg C_O s$. What follows from (13) and MT is (3). In other words, if *de dicto* distinct conceivability reduces to *de re* distinct conceivability, then it is impossible to distinctly conceive that MT, if indeed MT is true. Recall that, in the opinion of Prior (1955), (3) is what Berkeley needed to establish.

Once again, one's modus ponens is another's modus tollens. The defender of MT can insist that the fault lies with (10). One might once more reply that this is dialectically suspect. But now the defender of MT has a retort: the reduction of *de dicto* propositional distinct conceivability to *de re* propositional distinct conceivability blurs a *conceptual* distinction, namely between distinctly conceiving a *general* proposition versus a *singular* proposition. This conceptual blurring can be resisted even without taking into account *ontological* considerations (i.c., the existence of things outside our mind, outside our light-cone or outside our island universe).

Ironically, Kearns (2021, p. 182) reconstructed Berkeley's Master Argument with the Distinct Conceivability Thesis precisely to avoid a 'logical confusion': Prior (1955) had accused Berkeley of confusing the *de re* claim that there is something of which a person thinks truly (distinctly conceives) that is not thought-of by someone with the *de dicto* claim a person thinks truly (distinctly conceives) that there is something that is not thought-of by someone. The reason for attributing a logical confusion was that, according to Prior, Berkeley had only argued for the *de re* claim, whereas he needed to establish the *de dicto* claim. If the quantification over thinkable qualities in Kearns' version of Berkeley's argument is made explicit, there is a choice between a wide-scope conception of thinkable qualities and a narrow-scope conception of thinkable qualities. If one opts for the narrow-scope conception, then one only has an argument for the *de re* claim. If one opts for the wide-scope conception, then one has an argument for the *de dicto* claim. However, in that case the Distinct Conceivability Thesis entails the reduction of *de dicto* propositional distinct conceivability to *de re* distinct

conceivability. In the end Kearns can be accused of succumbing to the same conceptual confusion attributed by Prior to Berkeley.

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