

Berkeley, Suárez, and the *Esse-Existere* Distinction

by Stephen H. Daniel

There is no doctrine more commonly associated with Berkeley than his claim that *esse est percipi*, to be is to be perceived. As he remarks, “the existence of an idea consists in being perceived ... I think an intuitive knowledge may be obtained of this, by anyone that shall attend to what is meant by the term *exist* when applied to sensible things ... Their *esse* is *percipi*.”¹ Exactly what he means by this has, of course, been the topic of a great deal of speculation. But most commentators agree that, because his remark applies specifically to ideas, it needs to be augmented to account for the existence of minds and the activity of perception itself. That is what seems to be behind the American Samuel Johnson’s question to Berkeley about whether the *esse* (or existence) of spirits is *percipere*.² It also seems to be what guides A. A. Luce’s editing of Berkeley’s *Philosophical Commentaries* entry #429, which he transcribes as “Existence is percipi or percipere.”³

However, subsequent work by George H. Thomas and Bertil Belfrage has revealed that Berkeley did not write, “Existence is percipi or

¹George Berkeley, *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, § 2–3, in *The Works of George Berkeley*, 9 vols., ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson, 1948–57), 2: 42; and Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, *ibid.*, 230.

²Johnson to Berkeley, 10 September 1729, *ibid.*, 277.

³Berkeley, *Philosophical Commentaries* 429, in *Works* 1: 53.

percipere"; rather, he wrote, "existere est percipi or percipere."⁴ This distinction between *esse* (or existence) and *existere* might not seem philosophically significant, especially when viewed, as is typically done, through the lens of Locke (who does not appeal to it at all). But for scholastics such as Francis Suárez the *esse-existere* distinction is crucial for understanding what it means for an idea or a mind to have an identity.

According to Berkeley this distinction is so fundamental and commonplace in Scholastic manuals that, more often than not, he simply uses it without seeing a need to explain it. When he does note that "being itself should be attributed analogically to God and creatures" and that God "must not be supposed to exist in the same sense with created beings," he explicitly refers to Suárez and other Schoolmen.⁵ And when he rejects Locke's Thomistic account of abstract existence, he proposes instead the Suárezian treatment endorsed by Descartes.⁶

For Berkeley, the issue is rather straightforward. To say that a thing exists means, first, that it has an identity or is a thing or being (*ens*). Second, to be a thing means *being* that thing. That is, to *be* a thing means being thought of or perceived as *that thing*. So the existence (or *esse*) of a thing is nothing other than *its* being perceived. Since the perception or cognition of a thing is its existence, it makes no sense to talk about the *existence* of minds, for that would be like talking about what it means for existence to exist.⁷

To ask, therefore, as Johnson does, about the *esse* of spirits is to assume that the existence or "being" of actual beings can be abstracted from them and then reasserted of the act of being in terms of which they are originally identified. In short, it is to assume that existence itself has an essence or identity that can be considered in itself (that is to say, *ipsum esse*).

Berkeley rejects this way of thinking by insisting that the existence of minds differs radically from the existence of ideas—so much so that it is

⁴George Berkeley, *Philosophical Commentaries*, ed. George H. Thomas (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), 53. Citations of this revised version of the *Philosophical Commentaries* [PC] are from Berkeley's *Philosophical Works*, ed. Michael R. Ayers (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1992).

⁵Berkeley, *Alciphron* 4.20, in *Works* 3: 168–69.

⁶See Berkeley to Johnson, 24 March 1730, in *Works* 2: 293.

⁷See John Wild, *George Berkeley: A Study of His Life and Philosophy* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 318, 337, 430.

more appropriate, he notes (adopting the classic Stoic distinction), to say of minds that they *subsist* rather than *exist*. Of course, minds or souls are real in that ideas exist. But the subsistence of minds or souls is nothing other than the existence of ideas. In short, because minds or souls *are* the existence of ideas, they cannot be identified as independently existing things or realities.

As Berkeley observes, the proper understanding of the distinction of ideas and mind thus depends on clarifying the meanings of *thing*, *reality*, and *existence*. That effort involves his repeated (though unacknowledged) appeal to the Suárezian distinction between existence and subsistence. By recognizing how he appropriates certain Scholastic rather than Lockean strategies, we can begin to solve some of the more intractable problems raised in Berkeley's texts, including what he means by saying that ideas exist "in" minds and that minds are free, spiritual *substances*.⁸

I.

Suárez and Being. When Johnson fails to get a reply to his question about the *esse* of minds, he presses Berkeley to explain what he means by the existence of spirits. Berkeley responds first by rejecting the view he ascribes to Locke and the Schoolmen (specifically, Thomists), that existence is distinct from perceiving and being perceived. As he remarks, "[a]bstract general ideas was a notion that Mr. Locke held in common with the Schoolmen.... He holds an abstract idea of existence; exclusive of perceiving and being perceived. I cannot find I have any such idea."⁹ Existence or being is not an abstraction nor can it be thought abstractly. Contrary to the Thomistic notion of God, *ipsum esse* (being itself) cannot be the ultimate metaphysical principle, because that would mean that the act of being of all beings is itself a being (an "absolute thing" or "thing considered in itself") which is not any particular being—which Berkeley says is nonsense.¹⁰ If we adopt Locke's position and say that existence is an abstract idea, we have to entertain a contradictory idea, one that is simultaneously something and nothing.

⁸On Berkeley's positive assessment of Scholastic thought, see *PC* 449, 716, 797.

⁹Berkeley to Johnson, 24 March 1730, in *Works* 2: 293; see Johnson to Berkeley, 5 February 1730, in *Works* 2: 285, 289. Also see *PC* 552, 725, 772.

¹⁰See *PC* 832.

An alternate view adopted, according to Berkeley, by Descartes (who gets it from Suárez) claims that there is no existence apart from the existence of individual beings. No thing or being (*ens*) has more existence than another, because being a thing in the first place means having a determinate existence. As Berkeley tells Johnson, “any degree of perception being sufficient to Existence, it will not follow that we should say one *existed more* at one time than another, any more than we should say a thousand yards of snow are whiter than one yard.”¹¹ Just as one square yard of snow is as white as a thousand square yards, so one idea, perception, or thing is as real as a multitude or even the totality of all things. In this Cartesian view, the ultimate metaphysical principle—being (*ens*) in general—is understood to include all things.

Berkeley dismisses the Cartesian view as nothing more than a verbal variation on Locke’s view, because both Locke and Descartes assume that it makes sense to talk about being without recognizing how in such a discussion being becomes an abstract general idea. Even in the Cartesian (Suárezian) account, God and all other beings are intelligible as beings only in virtue of their inclusion within an abstract idea of *ens*, that is, being in general. So according to Berkeley, the conclusions about existence drawn by Suárez are just as confused as those of the Thomists and Locke.

This is not to say that Berkeley ignores Suárez’s ideas. Indeed, he (like Descartes, Locke, and the Protestant textbook authors influenced by Suárez) often invokes the terminology of the Scholastics and fashions his distinctive positions in terms of their strategies (if not their doctrines). Even though he generally criticizes their labyrinthine arguments, Berkeley acknowledges that it would be a mistake to reject their discussions outright because they often speak about “great and important subjects.”¹²

However, to appreciate how Suárez’s treatment of existence might inform Berkeley’s doctrines, we have to consider the possibility that Berkeley could have adopted Suárezian views or strategies without being aware of having done so. Even if he were aware of the impact of those views on his own ideas, he would not have had to acknowledge it. Indeed, for an Anglican cleric, there might have been a variety of reasons not to do so. So our justification for considering Suárez’s treatment of existence

¹¹Berkeley to Johnson, 24 March 1730, in *Works* 2: 293. Also see *PC* 408.

¹²*PC* 449, 716.

consists in seeing how it clarifies a central doctrine in Berkeley's thought, not in displaying explicit Berkeleyan references to Suárez.

In Suárez's account, the *esse* or act of being by which all things are what they are (or have essences) does not itself have an essence. Lacking all determinate features, "being itself" (*ipsam esse*) is not an "it" as much as a space for the designation or supposition of existence. Suárez describes this space in terms of its two modes, subsistence and inherence. These two "modes of being" are the means by which things are identified as having essences, but they themselves have no identity. They identify those things that exist (*existere*) in the order of nature as either substances or accidents, and in doing so they open up the possibility for speaking about things as things. But to speak of the *esse* of all beings (including God) is to speak of that in terms of which all things are intelligible and discernible, and *that* has no identity.

To put this slightly differently, for Suárez the actual existence of a thing—its act of being (*ens* as a participle)—identifies it as that thing (*ens* as a noun).¹³ For example, being human is what identifies and constitutes a human being. Its essence does not exist other than in terms of its being identified, cognized, or objectified as a particular kind of thing,¹⁴ and its act of being is the "formal concept" by which it is known.¹⁵ Its act of being is not something that it *does* but is rather what it *is*. In creatures there is no real distinction between *what* they are (their essence) and *that* they are (their existence), because their being what they are is a function of how they exist and vice versa.¹⁶ Anything that can or does exist thus has a real essence (or "objective concept") in terms of which it has an identity.¹⁷

¹³See Francis Suárez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae* [DM] 2.4.3, in Suárez's *Opera*, 26 vols. (Paris: Vives, 1856–66), 25: 87–92. See Norman J. Wells, Introduction to *On the Essence of Finite Being*, by Francis Suárez, trans. Norman Wells (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1983), 3–43, at 33; and John P. Doyle, "Heidegger and Scholastic Metaphysics," *The Modern Schoolman* 49 (1972): 201–20, at 204.

¹⁴See DM 33.1.1; 33.11.7; 34.4.6. See also John D. Kronen, "The Importance of the Concept of Substantial Unity in Suárez's Argument for Hylomorphism," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 65 (1991): 335–60, at 339n, 341.

¹⁵See DM 31.5.1.

¹⁶See DM 7.1.11, 19; DM 31.11.7; see also Jorge J. E. Gracia, "Francis Suárez," in *Individuation in Scholasticism: The Later Middle Ages and the Counter-Reformation 1150–1650*, ed. Jorge J. E. Gracia (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 475–510, at 499.

¹⁷See DM 31.2.8; 31.2.10–11; see also Wells (intro.), *Essence of Finite Being*, 11.

In turn, the identification by a mind—or to use Suárez's term, the "supposition"—of the actual existence of a thing as a substance is its *subsistence*, the mode of being in terms of which it is identified as a real thing. A thing (for instance, a human being) is a "supposit," the supposition of there being some identified, and thus identifiable, thing. That supposition is not merely an existential instance of an abstract essence, nor is it (to use the Aristotelian-Thomistic term) the formal cause of a substance. Rather, it is the termination (or determination) of the thing *as an existing substance*, an act of being in what Suárez calls the order of nature.¹⁸ In the order of nature the act by which all things are *real or exist (existere)*—that is, that act by which God is immanent in creation—is the very same act by which *they in particular* have the potential to be. Insofar as all beings have the same *esse*, they are indistinguishable and are the same being (*ens* as a noun). But the *esse* of a particular thing (say, a human being) is its real, determinate existence. A human, therefore, is a *particular way of being (ens as a participle)* which cannot be conceived distinct from God's decree that specific real things exist.¹⁹

Unlike in the order of nature, however, determinate beings in the order of substance can exist potentially insofar as their actual subsistence has been posited in eternity.²⁰ That is, only those beings that are supposited in the order of nature as things terminated by subsistence have determinate identities and are substances or real beings (*entia*). And this means, in Berkeley's expression, that only *persons* (that is to say, things that are intentional and conscious) are existences (or acts of being); all other things are manners of existing persons.²¹ Imaginary beings (that is to say, beings of reason such as unicorns) not only do not exist but also cannot possibly exist, because in order for them to exist they would have to have a determinate identity that contradicts the actual or real natures of other beings in the order of nature.²²

¹⁸See *DM* 31.5.7; 31.5.13; 31.12.29.

¹⁹See *DM* 31.3.6; 31.6.12; 31.6.23; 31.11.22; also see 31.5.5.

²⁰See *DM* 31.11.5–7.

²¹See *PC* 24.

²²See John A. Trentman, "Scholasticism in the Seventeenth Century," in *The Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Norman Kretzmann et al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 818–37, at 826.

This is not to say that a thing's actual existence is part of its intrinsic essence. Rather, its existence defines its essence extrinsically.²³ Accordingly, *the fact that* a thing exists in the world in certain relations is part of its essence. The actual existence of a thing *in rerum natura* could be different from its actual essence only if it were considered apart from the act of being that identifies or “causes” it to be that thing.²⁴ But since the actual existence of a thing constitutes what it is (that is to say, its formal existence), its actual essence is its objective existence. So the objective existence of a substance is not the *existence of* the substance—as if “the substance” could be thought of apart from that by which it is identified—but is rather the *subsistence* of the substance, the supposition of a thing in relation to other things.²⁵ In creatures, this act of being is simultaneously their actual existence and actual essence, because no being is determinate apart from its act of being what it is. As Suárez says, “an actual entity cannot be prescinded from existence.”²⁶ There is no such thing as a human being apart from the specific acts of intentionality that designate being human. All acts of human-being are suppositions (or more specifically, differentiations) of things-in-relation to one another. That is why the necessary condition whereby an actual essence comes to exist is its subsistence or, in the case of accidents, their inherence in a substance.²⁷

Here Thomists object to Suárez's line of thinking, noting that if the distinction between a being's essence and existence is only a distinction of reason, then God's creation of specific creatures as actual existents would not be free. But Suárez responds that this objection is based on the mistaken assumptions that *ens* as a noun has priority over *ens* as a participle, that *esse* is prior to *existere*, that *essentia* is prior to *existentia*, and that the objective concept of a thing is historically or logically prior to its formal concept.²⁸ In fact, he counters, the essence of a thing cannot be identified apart from the act by which it is conceptualized formally as a distinct thing. So if a thing's essence is conceptualized as an object of thought, its existence as *that particular object of thought* is conceptualized as well.

²³See *DM* 31.6.21–24.

²⁴See *DM* 31.6.23; also see Berkeley, *PC* 535.

²⁵See *DM* 31.5.5.

²⁶*DM* 31.6.15.

²⁷See *DM* 31.4.7.

²⁸See *DM* 31.6.21; also see Wells (intro.), *Essence of Finite Being*, 15.

Because the subsistence of a substance is a mode of existence, it does not itself “exist” but is rather the completion or termination of existence. In other words, subsistence is the way in which the substance exists (or is “supposited”) as a specific thing supporting specific accidents.²⁹ In this respect, subsistence and inherence are alike, in that both are modes of the act of being in virtue of which a being exists. But since neither subsistence nor inherence are beings themselves, they are not modes of any being (*ens* as a noun) and thus are not modes of God.

This strategy for avoiding a Spinozistic conclusion about the relation of God and creatures is possible only because Suárez insists that subsistence and inherence are modes of the act of being whereby substances and accidents are identified. That is, those things that are identified as having essences and accidents are not modes of God as a being (*ens* as a noun) but are modes of the act of being (*ens* as a participle) and thus comprise the order of substantial existence. In the order of nature, substances and accidents are said to exist in relation to one another rather than in terms of their dependence on God. Their mode of being is properly described in terms of *existere*, not *esse*, because (as Suárez claims) the existential positing of a thing in the order of nature is understood in terms of natural events instead of divine decrees.³⁰ God’s mode of being is the supposition (that is to say, identification, differentiation) of all things in relation. And since the supposition of all acts of being is properly the activity of subsistence itself, only God is properly said to subsist.³¹ All other beings are said to “receive” their existence in being supposited as actual identities.³²

Since the suppositing of a being in act simultaneously identifies the essence of a thing as that existent, both the fact and the mode of a thing’s existence are functions of supposition, that is, of subsistence. If the supposition of a substance (that is to say, its subsistence) is removed, it can continue to exist as a natural thing only if it is conserved in another supposition of subsistence.³³ (Or as Berkeley puts it, if my mind does not perceive a thing, it must be perceived by another.) But since it is inappropriate to say that subsistence “exists,” we cannot think of such

²⁹See *DM* 31.5.5–13; 33.1.1. See also Kronen, “Substantial Unity,” 339n.

³⁰See *DM* 31.6.20–24.

³¹See *DM* 31.13.16–17; see also Berkeley, *Siris*, § 344, in *Works* 5: 156.

³²See *DM* 31.13.18.

³³See *DM* 31.5.8.

conservation as the act of some determinate being. Instead, we should think of the support provided in subsistence (and inherence as well) in terms that do not assume that supposition is the act of any being at all. The activity whereby a thing is designated as having an identity and relations thus does not itself have an identity (and is not an "it") other than after the fact. "It" can be said to exist only derivatively, and that is why Berkeley (following Suárez's suggestions) prefers to say that minds (and other notions such as relations and actions) *subsist* rather than exist.

To say that an accident (for example, something's being red) cannot *exist* without inhering in a substance means that it exists only inasmuch as the substance exists. But because specific substantial natures can exist potentially in the mind of God, so also can their specific accidents. As Suárez observes, even though accidents by their very nature must inhere in a substance in order to exist, they can be conserved by God without actually existing, that is, without inhering in an actually existing substance.³⁴ Similarly, a substantial nature can be conserved by God even if its mode of existence (that is to say, its subsistence) is destroyed in nature.³⁵ However, neither substances nor accidents can be conserved by God without being posited as specific features of at least a potential and determinate substantial nature.³⁶ Since all existing beings (both actual and potential) are therefore particular and determinate, general or abstract essences (for instance, humanity, redness) do not exist, not even as divine ideas.

Berkeley makes the same point: abstract absolute existence (*esse*) is unintelligible; there are only particular acts of being that differentiate real things. This differentiation of beings must be understood as existence itself, not as something that precedes existence. Since things are not first designated as essences in the order of substance and only subsequently given existence in the order of nature, it would be improper therefore to say that *existere* is subordinate to *esse*. There is no *esse* (or abstract existence) distinct from actual existence (*existere*), just as there is no consciousness apart from consciousness of something.³⁷ So to exist eternally in the divine

³⁴See *DM* 31.11.27–30.

³⁵See *DM* 31.12.2–5.

³⁶See *DM* 31.9.21.

³⁷See Geneviève Brykman, *Berkeley et le voile des mots* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1993), 220; Margaret Atherton, "The Coherence of Berkeley's Theory of Mind," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43 (1983): 389–99, at 396.

mind means for a determinate thing to exist as the always already differentiated act of being that is re-cognized as what Berkeley calls “relative existence” in created minds. As he says in the *Dialogues*:

When things are said to begin or end their existence, we do not mean this with regard to God, but his creatures. All objects are eternally known by God, or which is the same thing, have an eternal existence in his mind: but when things before imperceptible to creatures, are by a decree of God, made perceptible to them; then they are said to begin a relative existence, with respect to created minds.³⁸

The decrees of God that make things perceptible to creatures also inscribe the identities of created minds. In fact, the order in which things are revealed in and as created minds specifies the relationships of those things to one another in virtue of their juxtapositions in and as those minds. These existential juxtapositions of ideas in created minds reinscribe the differentiation of objects in and as God’s mind. Indeed, the fact that absolute being (*esse*) cannot be interpreted apart from relative existence (*existere*) unites created minds to God’s mind and reveals the perfection of human knowledge.³⁹ Because Aristotelian, Thomistic, and Lockean metaphysics simply assumes the existence of substances without describing the *process* by which substances are differentiated as determinate and intelligible, it is no wonder that they are open to criticism by skeptics.

However, in Berkeley’s eyes, by retaining the notion of *ens* as an ultimate unifying metaphysical principle, Suárez fails to see how on his doctrines alone it should be rejected as a merely abstract idea. This same criticism can be made of Descartes as well. What Berkeley finds useful in the Suárezian account, though, is how it helps us understand what a real thing is and how existence differs for spirits and ideas. It also provides a basis for responding to skeptics about knowledge of the existence of things, the self, and other minds. By appropriating Suárez’s insight but not his conclusions, Berkeley undermines the effort to reduce existence to a fundamental principle of self-identity and thus forestalls attempts to summarize his thought simply in terms of either idealism or immaterialism.

³⁸ *Dialogues*, 252; also 212, 253.

³⁹ See *Dialogues*, title page.

II.

Berkeley on Spirit, Mind, Soul. In *Principles* 89 Berkeley suggests that the way to deal with skepticism begins with understanding what we mean by concepts that are central in Suárez's philosophy. The striking thing about this claim is that it appears not at the beginning of the *Principles* but halfway through it. Recognizing that the meanings of *thing*, *reality*, or *existence* can be understood only by appealing to derivative notions, Berkeley makes his proposal only after providing the discursive context in which those terms function. In this way, he endorses the very point that Suárez makes about existence, namely, that the identities of things—in this case, the meanings of terms—consist not in some eternal essence but in their actual, differential use. He remarks:

Nothing seems of more importance, towards erecting a firm system of sound and real knowledge, which may be proof against the assaults of *scepticism*, than to lay the beginning in a distinct explication of what is meant by *thing*, *reality*, *existence*; for in vain shall we dispute concerning the real existence of things, or pretend to any knowledge thereof, so long as we have not fixed the meaning of those words. *Thing* or *being* is the most general name of all; it comprehends under it two kinds entirely distinct and heterogeneous, and which have nothing common but the name, to wit, *spirits* and *ideas*. The former are *active*, *indivisible substances*: the latter are *inert*, *fleeting*, *dependent beings*, which subsist not by themselves, but are supported by, or exist in minds or spiritual substances.⁴⁰

In order to know whether something exists, Berkeley observes, we first have to know what existence is and what a thing is. But that, in turn, is not enough, since questions could always be raised about whether the things we claim to know exist really do exist. Given the possibility that the discursive structure in which we ask such questions is itself riddled with indeterminacy, the only thing we can do is to acknowledge that abstract ideas of quiddity, entity, or existence are incomprehensible apart from their

recognized juxtaposition in the structure.⁴¹ So there must be “spiritual” juxtapositions of difference in the structure whereby things or beings (that is to say, “ideas”) come to have their identities as real, identifiable beings.

The unity (or “concretion”) of ideas, impressions, or qualities with one another (for instance, in volitions) is, of course, itself a real thing (even though, as Berkeley says, it is not an idea nor does *it* exist).⁴² That is why he concludes that the term *thing* must include ideas, actions, the will, and volitions as well as minds.⁴³ But contrary to what materialists think, there can be no thing that has an “absolute” existence independent of a mind—what Berkeley calls a “natural subsistence”—because no thing can exist without existing as a particular reality.⁴⁴ Since mind is the act by which such an identification occurs and through which real or natural existence is engendered, it makes no sense to talk about any supposed concept of “natural subsistence” or material substance.

In his *Commentaries* Berkeley worries that this way of speaking about all real things as functions of mind might imply that they are all beings of reason (*entia rationis*). Of course, in the sense that the only things that have a distinct identity are those that are the objects or operations of mind, they are beings of reason. But in saying that, Berkeley does not think that that makes them any less real.⁴⁵ The existence of an idea is real in that it is actually perceived as *that* being (in Suárez’s terms, *ens* as a noun). And the perceiving or thinking of the idea—which is always affective and thus a function of volition as well—is real in that it is the thing’s specific act of *being* (*ens* as a participle).⁴⁶

However, since imaginary beings (for example, chimeras) are often referred to as beings of reason, it is important to point out that by identifying things with ideas, Berkeley is in no way equating real things with those that are imaginary.⁴⁷ In fact, like Suárez, he doubts whether talk of truly imaginary beings is intelligible, in that “the existence of anything imaginable is nothing different from imagination or perception.”⁴⁸ Because

⁴¹See *Principles* 17, 81.

⁴²See *Principles* 99.

⁴³See *PC* 689, 806, 872.

⁴⁴See *Principles* 3, 91; *Dialogues*, 235.

⁴⁵See *PC* 474, 474a, 535, 546, 546a, 807.

⁴⁶See *PC* 808.

⁴⁷See *Principles* 90–91; *PC* 644, 807.

⁴⁸*PC* 792.

the existence of imaginary beings is nothing other than the act of imagining such beings, it is impossible for so-called imaginary beings to be things at all because by definition they are not actually perceived or perceivable by any mind.

To say, then, that ideas exist “in” a spiritual substance or mind simply means, for Berkeley, that they are comprehended or perceived. But as he notes, this does not require that we think of the mind as if it is an Aristotelian substance that supports qualities and about which one predicates perceptions or sensations.⁴⁹ Nor does it commit us to the belief that minds are substrata in which modes, attributes, or properties inhere.⁵⁰ Rather, he claims, we must describe the “substance” of souls as the consciousness of ideas.⁵¹ That is, the substance of souls is the perceptual identification of ideas as real things or beings. To be “comprehended” by a mind means that ideas, sense impressions, or qualities are united with or related to other ideas, impressions, or qualities in a way that identifies them as real existents.⁵² In short, the act of perceiving identifies a thing and constitutes the existence of the idea. This activity is obviously not the same as the things it produces, so it is technically incorrect to say that spirits exist; rather, they subsist.⁵³

Of course, even though Berkeley invokes the distinction between existence and subsistence, he still occasionally refers to the existence of souls or spiritual substances to highlight the activity by which ideas are differentiated and identified.⁵⁴ But rarely does he say that spirits, minds, or souls exist, for that would imply that there is some thing that has a self-

⁴⁹See “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Berkeley’s Metaphysics: Structural, Interpretive, and Critical Essays*, ed. Robert G. Muehlmann (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 1–19, at 2–3, 7–8; and Robert Muehlmann, “Berkeley’s Ontology and the Epistemology of Idealism,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 8 (1978): 89–111, at 99. Also see Kenneth P. Winkler, *Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 192n, 309.

⁵⁰See *Principles* 49, 73–74, 89; *Dialogues*, 212, 237, 249. Also see Bertil Belfrage, “A Summary of Berkeley’s Metaphysics in a Heretofore Unpublished Berkeleyan Manuscript,” *Berkeley Newsletter* 3 (1979): 1–4, at 1–2; David Berman, “Berkeley’s Quad: The Question of Numerical Identity,” *Idealistic Studies* 16 (1986): 41–45, at 42; and L. Nathan Oaklander, “The Inherence Interpretation of Berkeley: A Critique,” *The Modern Schoolman* 54 (1977): 261–69, at 266–68.

⁵¹See *PC* 44, 577–578.

⁵²See *Dialogues*, 235; cf. 249.

⁵³See *Principles* 6, 87, 89, 90.

⁵⁴See, for example, *Principles* 139.

identity apart from its being the existence of ideas. Instead, by referring to the existence of spirits, he introduces a nuanced distinction among the meanings of *spirit*, *mind*, and *soul*.

For example, when he makes the comment on which Johnson latches—namely, that because “the soul always thinks,” the existence of a spirit cannot be separated from its *cogitation*—he suggests that *spirit* is not identical with its existence (*mind*) or with the activity of thinking called the *soul*:

Some ideas or other I must have so long as I exist or will.... It is a plain consequence that the soul always thinks: and in truth whoever shall go about to divide in his thoughts, or abstract the existence of a spirit from its *cognition*, will, I believe, find it no easy task.... Sure I am that should any one tell me there is a time wherein a spirit actually exists without perceiving, or an idea without being perceived, or that there is a third sort of being which exists though it neither wills nor perceives nor is perceived, his words would have no other effect on my mind than if he talked in an unknown language. 'Tis an easie matter for a man to say the mind exists without thinking, but to conceive a meaning that may correspond to those sounds, or to frame a notion of a spirit's existence abstracted from its thinking, this seems to me impossible.⁵⁵

Apart from determinate acts of perception, will, or other forms of cognition, there is no way to think about a spirit or mind as a determinate being. That is, there is no way to think of a mind's existence apart from its act of thinking or willing specific things. It is unnecessary, then, to portray the mind as some substance or substratum that is needed to unite or support perceptions. So Berkeley concludes:

⁵⁵PC 842, *Principles* 98, and MS addition to 98, in *Works*, 2: 84n. Also see PC 650–51. See Charles J. McCracken, “Berkeley on the Relation of Ideas to the Mind,” in *Minds, Ideas, and Objects: Essays on the Theory of Representation in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Phillip D. Cummins and Guenter Zoeller (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1992), 187–200, at 197; and Noel Flemming, “Berkeley and Idealism,” *Philosophy* 60 (1985): 309–25, at 316.

Mind is a congeries of perceptions. Take away perceptions and you take away the mind. Put the perceptions and you put the mind. Say you: the mind is not the perceptions, but the thing which perceives. I answer: you are abused by the words *that* and *thing*.⁵⁶

The *existence* of a spirit—that is, the mind—is the particular act of being by which things are differentiated. To the extent that things are conceived in relations constituted in created minds, they form the order of nature. Insofar as these ideas are “realized” in perception, they exist “in” a congeries or concretion of perceptions. It is the particular “conrescence,” comprehension, or cognition of ideas in relation to one another that comprises the mind and is made determinate in the order of nature as the *soul*.

I know that I exist, therefore, with as much certainty as I know that my ideas exist, precisely because *I* am the existence (or act of being) by which my ideas are identified.⁵⁷ I am not some thing that can be perceived or acted upon, for that would mean that I am an idea and not the active being (or act of being) that perceives or wills. As Berkeley indicates in his 1734 additions to the *Dialogues*, my *notion* of myself is not an idea of myself as an object of thought but is the very “being of myself” in the activity of thinking.⁵⁸ In this sense, I can be said to endure and to be distinct from any one perception or even a bundle of perceptions, for I am a “thinking principle,” not an aggregate of passive ideas or “only a system of floating ideas.” My being is the *very existence* of my ideas, that is, their differentiation and association with one another. I am not a substance independent from my ideas, nor am I an accidental, passive bundle of ideas. Instead, I am the bundling activity in terms of which ideas are identified as things.

When Berkeley’s so-called Humean definition of the self as a congeries of perceptions is understood in terms of the metaphysics of Aristotle and Locke (as is often done), it is obviously inconsistent with his more well-known descriptions of mind as a substance. No wonder, then, that scholars who are committed to a Lockean metaphysics of substance

⁵⁶PC 580–81.

⁵⁷See PC 563; *Principles* 40; *Dialogues*, 231.

⁵⁸See *Dialogues*, 233.

look for all kinds of reasons to argue that Berkeley ultimately rejects the congeries doctrine. But as I have suggested, we do not have to reject the doctrine if we recognize that it does not rely on a Lockean theory of substance. I suspect that even Hume's well-known bundle theory of the self might make much more sense if it were interpreted in terms of the Suárezian account of being. I do not claim that Hume is conscious of the pull of this alternative mentality. But I am suggesting that well-known Suárezian doctrines (filtered, perhaps, through Berkeley) can pop up in the strangest places. In the end, the fact that Hume ultimately decides not to develop his bundle theory may indicate—like Berkeley's abandonment of the second part of the *Principles*—that he is simply unable to retrieve such a different account of mind into an environment saturated with the Lockean mentality.

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