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Realism's Kick

Abstract: Samuel Johnson claimed to have refuted Berkeley by kicking a stone. It is generally thought that Johnson misses the point of Berkeley's immaterialism for a rather obvious reason: Berkeley never denied that the stone feels solid, but only that the stone could exist independently of any mind. I argue that Johnson was on the right track. On my interpretation, Johnson's idea is that because the stone feels to resist our effort, the stone seems to have causal powers. But if appearances are to be taken at face value, as Berkeley insists, then the stone has causal powers. I argue that such causal powers threaten not only Berkeley's view that only minds are active, but also, and more fundamentally, his central claim that sensible things depend on perception.

Keywords: Berkeley, effort, realism, phenomenism, causal powers, perception
Johnson famously tried to refute Berkeley by kicking a stone:

After we came out of the church, we stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. I observed, that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, — "I refute it thus." (Boswell, 1826, 370)

Johnson's "refutation" is not only widely held to miss the point, it is held to do so for an obvious reason. Berkeley denies that the stone exists independently of its perception. As he stresses, this is wholly compatible with the stone feeling solid. Johnson's refutation would seem so question-begging that a sophism was named after it: *argumentum ad lapidem*.

I here argue that Johnson's refutation is indeed a refutation. I am not the first to attempt a rehabilitation of Johnson's kick. H. F. Hallett (1947) and D. L. Patey (1986) have already put forward extensive re-evaluations of the kick.¹ Indeed, I am sympathetic to their respective central claims. Hallett maintains that Johnson's refutation is primarily targeted at Berkeley's view that only minds are active. Patey, meanwhile, maintains that Johnson's refutation appeals to the view that the experience of resistance to our voluntary efforts presents us with the

1 To whom Silver (1993) may be added.

mind-independence of its objects. While these ideas tend in the right direction, in order to refute Berkeley's immaterialism we still need to do two things:

- First, with respect to Hallett's proposal, we need to understand the connection between immaterialism and the view that only minds can produce effects in nature: why can't immaterialists agree that stones are active, so long as stones and their activity depend on their perception?
- Second, with respect to Patey's interpretation, we need to address the worry that in appealing to the resistance of the stone to our will, Johnson changes the subject: Berkeley challenges the idea that perceptual objects are existentially independent *from our perception* of them, to which Johnson seems to answer that objects exist independently *from our will*. Such an answer, on the face of it, misses the point. Worse still, it expresses a view – namely, the will-independency of sensible things – with which Berkeley explicitly agrees.

In what follows, I hope to answer to these two concerns. First, I argue in section 1 that what Johnson seeks to establish by kicking the stone is not that the stone feels solid, but that the stone feels mind-independent. Such an experience of mind-independence may be understood as arising from ordinary perception, or as arising merely from a specific kind of experience: the experience of resistance to our effort. Next, I argue in section 2 that the idea that ordinary perception presents us with the mind-independency of its objects is untenable and unlikely to be the idea behind Johnson's kick in any case. Then, in section 3, I argue that Johnson endorses the plausible thought that, in experiencing resistance to our will, we are presented with the mind-independency of the stone. Finally, section 4 argues that relying on this form of mind-independence to refute Berkeley is not as question-begging as it might first appear. To the contrary, while independency from the will and independency from perception are indeed distinct, I argue that the kind of will-independency displayed by the stone entails its independency from perception.

1 Johnson's Refutation Reconstructed

What is immaterialism, the view that Johnson intends to rebut? Let us begin by defining *sensible things*, as Berkeley understands them:

Sensible things: the immediate objects of perception, e.g., heat, colour, extension, motion, solidity... and collections thereof.

Do sensible things exist independently of our perception of them? Those who answer positively, such as Thomas Reid, are called direct realists. Those who answer negatively divide into two sub-camps, depending on the answer they give to a second question: is there some mind-independent unthinking substance behind those mind-dependent sensible things? Proponents of the positive answer are, with Locke (or at least on the standard interpretation) indirect realists. Those who answer 'no' embrace Berkeley's phenomenalism or immaterialism (here I shall equate the two).

Phenomenalism/immaterialism: sensible things existentially depend on our perception of them, and there is no mind-independent unthinking substance beyond them.

What, then, is Johnson's refutation of immaterialism? The common (and I think *uncharitable*) interpretation goes as follows:

P1 The stone feels solid.

C1 Some sensible things seem solid. (from P1, by existential generalization)

C2 Some sensible things are mind-independent. (from C1, allegedly)²

The move from C1 to C2 is, of course, unwarranted: there is no logical connection between *seeming solid* and *being mind-independent*.

The first step on the way to fixing the refutation is to modify P1. What Johnson wants to call our attention to, I suggest, is not the fact that the stone feels *solid*, but that the stone feels *mind-independent*. With this amendment, the refutation reads as follows:

P1' The stone feels mind-independent.

C1' Some sensible things seem mind-independent. (from P1, by existential generalization)

C2 Some sensible things are mind-independent. (from C1, allegedly)

Again, the move from C1' to C2 is unwarranted, but we are getting closer since the two propositions now bear on the same property: mind-independence. The premise needed in order to render the argument valid is now clear:

P1' The stone feels mind-independent.

² The 'solidity' reading of the argument was proposed early on by Kearney, in an added note to Edmund Malone, who helped Boswell to compile his biography, as well as providing extensive annotation: "Dr Johnson seems to have been imperfectly acquainted with Berkeley's doctrine; and his experiment only proves that we have the sensation of solidity, which Berkeley did not deny. He admitted that we had sensations or ideas usually called sensible qualities, one of which is solidity: he only denied the existence of matter." (Boswell 1826: 370)

C1' Some sensible things seem mind-independent. (from P1, by existential generalization)

P2 Sensible things are as they seem.

C2 Some sensible things are mind-independent. (from C1, P2)

This argument is valid (one quibble is the move from “feel” in P1 to “seem” in C1', which is, I assume, unproblematic). I believe that this is the argument that Johnson had in mind. This may sound like a bold claim. After all, Johnson's refutation is highly enthymematic: from no premise – but merely a gesture – a conclusion is drawn. Can such a terse argument really contain two premises?

Let us begin with P2. One may wonder whether appealing to such a premise is not question-begging in the context of an argument against immaterialism. After all, isn't it an obvious consequence of immaterialism that things are not as they seem? Berkeley answers negatively. P2 is in fact a strongly Berkeleyan premise. One chief motivation driving Berkeley's immaterialism is precisely to rebut the sceptics, who are defined as those who refuse to trust their senses: “I am of a vulgar cast, simple enough to believe my senses, and leave things as I find them.” (Berkeley: *Three Dialogues*: 229).³

The main point of immaterialism – bracketing theological considerations – is to enable one to take appearances at face value. P2, therefore, is not a premise that Johnson either needs to defend or state: his opponent grants it.

This, then, leaves us with P1': the claim that the stone feels mind-independent. This is, I believe, the bone of contention – *der Stein des Anstosses* – between Johnson and Berkeley. P1' is the only premise that Johnson needs to state and defend. He does this by kicking the stone.

Now, there are two main ways of interpreting P1':

1. It is a feature of ordinary perception to present us with the mind-independence of its objects.
2. Only a very specific form of experience (viz., the experience of resistance to our will) embeds a presentation of mind-independence.

I argue in the next section that the first proposal is untenable and unlikely to be the idea behind Johnson's kick in any case.

³ Pagination refers throughout to the Luce and Jessop's edition. See also *Three Dialogues* 113, 173–4, 215; *Principles* §40, §101 and Saporiti (2008) for discussion.

2 Experiencing Mind-Independence: Ordinary Perception

Before considering whether ordinary perception presents us with the mind-independency of its objects, let us take pause to distinguish clearly between two questions that we are concerned with here. Recall that we began with the question: *are* sensible things mind-independent? We are now interested in the question: do sensible things *seem* mind-independent? Call the former, *the question of the reality of appearances*, and the latter *the question of the appearance of reality*.⁴ These two questions are distinct and in principle independent, unless, as we saw, one admits that sensible things are as they seem, and they seem mind-independent. In such a case, phenomenalism is refuted.

Focusing henceforth on the question of the appearance of reality, Berkeley consistently answered negatively to that question:

[our senses] do not inform us that things exists without the mind, or unperceived. (*Principles*, §18; see also *Three Dialogues*: 201)

On this, he was followed by Hume:

As to the independency of our perceptions on ourselves, this can never be an object of the senses. (Hume 2007: 1.4.2.)

As well as Reid:

It is evident, that we cannot, by reasoning from our sensations, collect the existence of bodies at all. This has been proved by unanswerable arguments by the Bishop of Cloyne, and by the author of the "Treatise of Human Nature" (Reid 2000: 687)

Let us make a quick comment on Reid. It may be found surprising that Reid (a direct realist who subscribed to the mind-independence of sensible things) nevertheless rejects the view that sensible things are experienced *as* mind-independent. However, on his account, our belief in the mind-independency of perceptual objects is not grounded in our experience of their mind-independency, but in our

⁴ Siegel (2006) draws basically the same distinction between these two questions, and addresses a version of second one. She doesn't address however the question of whether or not perceptual objects seem *existentially* independent from us, but the question of whether or not they seem to *have and keep the same properties* independently of the location from which we perceive them.

very nature. Although mind-independence cannot be perceived, we cannot help believing that what we perceive exists independently from us.

Clearly, then, even direct realists were prone to reject the view that mind-independence can be perceived at the time. This stands in stark contrast with contemporary philosophers of perception, who tend to take P1' for granted:

Mature sensible experience (in general) presents itself as [...] an *immediate* consciousness of the existence of things outside us. (Strawson 1979)

All (or almost all) serious theories of perception agree that our perceptual experience *seems as if* it were an awareness of a mind-independent world. (Crane 2005)⁵

Perceptual experience subjectively presents as if it puts us in touch with mind-independent objects. (Allais 2015: 53)

I side with Berkeley, Hume, and Reid. Ordinary perception, I believe, is silent with respect to the mind-independency of its objects. Why? One argument against the possibility of experiencing mind-independence is given by Hume. After having argued that the claims '*x continues to exist when unperceived*' and '*x exists independently from its perception*' entail each other, Hume continues:

To begin with the SENSES, 'tis evident these faculties are incapable of giving rise to the notion of the continu'd existence of their objects, after they no longer appear to the senses. For that is a contradiction in terms, and supposes that the senses continue to operate, even after they have ceas'd all manner of operation. (Hume 2007: 1.4.2.)

Perceiving independence would be as hopeless as trying to see whether the light in the fridge stays on when we close the door. In order to perceive something as mind-independent we would have to perceive it when it is unperceived—a patent impossibility.

Hume's argument is, however, flawed. It relies on the assumption that the only way to perceive the mind-independence of *x* is to perceive *x* when it is not perceived. This is arguably too strong a requirement. In order to perceive *x* as mind-independent, we do not need to perceive it as actually existing unperceived: we only need to perceive it as *possibly* existing unperceived. That is, if, while seeing *x* we have the impression that *x* would exist even if we were not perceiving it, then we are presented with *x*'s mind-independence. No contradiction ensues.

⁵ This so, Crane suggests, because "One's awareness of the *objects* of one's perceptual experiences does not seem to be an awareness of something which depends on experience for their existence." But this is a non-sequitur: perception might simply be mute with respect to the mind-(in)dependency of its objects, as I shall argue below.

Such an answer nevertheless raises new worries that, I believe, renders the view that mind-independency is presented in ordinary perception highly implausible. Though no more contradictory, the perception of independence now appears very demanding. It requires that, together with the perception of the object, we be presented:

1. With *counterfactual* states of affairs: we must be aware of a situation *distinct from the one we are actually in*, in which the object exists while we do not perceive it.
2. With *negative* states of affairs: we must be aware of a situation distinct from the one we are actually in, in which the object exists while we do *not* perceive it.
3. With *reflexive* states of affairs: we must be aware of a situation distinct from the one we are actually in, in which the object exists while *we do not perceive it*.⁶

It has been claimed in various places that modal properties or states of affairs can be perceived, that negative properties or states can be perceived, and that reflexive properties or states of affairs can be perceived. But to claim that all these three suspect kinds of properties are presented together in all perceptions is another matter. That a presentation of a counterfactual, negative, reflective states of affairs is embedded in every ordinary perception strikes as implausible. It is not the case that, looking at a ladybird, we see, on top of its shape, redness, motion, etc., its property of *possibly existing unperceived by us*.

One may reply that I am here using “perception” in too conservative a sense, and that a more liberal account of the contents of perception would capably accommodate the complexity of perceptual content. But recall that we are here assessing *Berkeley's* claim that perception cannot present us with the mind-independency of its objects. If we are to reply that perception *does* present us with the mind-independency of its objects, we need to use “perception” in the same way that he does. And he uses the term in a conservative manner: everything that is perceived is perceived directly and consists in sensory qualities. Even if there is a sense of “perception” in which the counterfactual-negative-reflexive property of “possibly existing unperceived” is systematically perceived (which I doubt), relying on that sense is irrelevant in the present context. Berkeley would retort that in his terminology we are merely claiming that mind-independence can be *inferred* or *conceived* (a view he also rejected, for different reasons).

⁶ A point rightly pressed by Hume: “Now if the senses presented our impressions as external to, and independent of, *ourselves* both the objects and ourselves must be obvious to our senses, otherwise they cou'd not be compar'd by these faculties. The difficulty, then, is how far we are ourselves the objects of our senses.” (Hume 2007: 1.4.2)

But perhaps we are being led astray by the tacit assumption that mind-independence should be understood *modally*. Thus far, we have implicitly defined mind-dependence in terms of possible unperceived existence:

Modal account of mind-independence: x is mind-independent $=_{df}$ it is possible that x exists without being perceived.

But there are reasons to think that this modal account of mind-independence is mistaken. Suppose, as many believe, that God exists, that he is a necessary being, that he sees everything, that he created the world and its laws a long time ago and that he no longer intervenes in the world except for sporadic miracles. According to the modal conception of independence, the world then *existentially* depends on the perception of God: no objects are real since nothing could possibly exist without his perception.⁷ But this is strongly counter-intuitive: for even if the world cannot exist without being perceived by God, it is not the case here that the world exists *because* God perceives it. Instead of being a sense-datum of God, the world appears to follow its course independently of God perceiving it.⁸ Thus, the modal view of mind-independence appears to be false: possibly existing unperceived is a sufficient but not a necessary condition for existential independence. The general problem with the modal approach to existential independence, to paraphrase Fine, is that it registers only the fact that in each world where x exists, y exists, but it remains silent about the *source* of such a modal correlation. The correlation may be due to the dependent nature of x , but it may also be due to the necessary nature of y . We want to exclude the latter case. How can we do so?

As an alternative, K. Fine (1995) and J. Lowe (1998) have proposed to define existential dependence with the help of the notion of the identity (or essence) of an object. The notion of essence is taken to be modally irreducible: the essence of a thing is what makes it what it is: its real definition (Fine 1994). Every essential property is a necessary property but not every necessary property is an essential one. To take an example from Fine: it is necessary that Socrates is distinct from the Eiffel Tower, but this is not essential to him. The idea is then that x depends on y if and only if the existence of x necessarily implies the existence of y *in virtue of the identity of x* . In other words, the source of the necessary correlation must rely on the dependent object in order to avoid the conclusion that everything is

⁷ I've adapted the God example proposed by Simons (1987: 295) to the case of perception. For more detailed criticisms of the modal conception of dependence, see Fine (1994, 1995); Lowe (1998, chap. 6); Correia, (2005). Jenkins (2005) applies this criticism to the definition of realism in terms of mind-independence.

⁸ If God is passive or not almighty, the world may even end up failing to comply to his will.

dependent on necessary beings. Thus, although it is necessary that if John exists, then $2+2 = 4$, John is not ontologically dependent on $2+2$ being 4 because this necessity does not find its source in John's nature. This solves our problem of the all-seeing God: while it is true in this situation that the world cannot exist without being perceived by God, *this is not true in virtue of the nature of the world* –but in virtue of the nature of God. What the world is doesn't necessitate that God perceives it. Thus, we arrive at the following essential definition of independence:

Essential account of mind-independence: x is mind-independent =*df* it is not true in virtue of the nature of x that x exists only if it is perceived.

On this account, the mind-independence of x is compatible with its being necessarily perceived.⁹ Furthermore, this account, one might think, paves the way for the possibility of perceiving the mind-independence of perceptual objects, since this no longer entails perceiving such objects as possibly existing unperceived.

However, such hopes are vain.¹⁰ Yes, we have gotten rid of modal properties in the content of the alleged perception of the mind-independence of external objects: we have replaced them with essential ones, and these are arguably less problematic. Thus, those who uphold the revelation thesis about colours, for instance, find it natural to claim that visual perception presents us with the nature of colours. Note first, however, that perceiving mind-independence of some object still requires us to perceive some negative and reflexive properties of it: that of *not being essentially such that one's existence requires one's being perceived*.

Second, the replacement of modal properties by essential ones may be a merely pyrrhic victory. In order to experience that it is not in the essence of a to require b , one must be aware that *nothing* in the nature of a requires b . For this, one must experience that one is presented with the *whole* nature of a . Short of

⁹ Correia (2005) has given another definition of dependence in terms of *ground*, which avoids the reference to essences or natures while still excluding the trivial dependence on necessary beings. According to Correia, x depends on y iff “ y 's existing helps makes x exist.” That is, one entity existentially depends on another when its existence is *explained* (in an objective sense), or *grounded* in, the existence of the other. From this, mind-independence can be defined as follows:

Foundational account of mind-independence: x is mind-independent =*df* x 's existence is not grounded in x 's being perceived.

The foundational account also avoids the conclusion that the world is a sense-datum of the all-seeing God, for clearly, in this example, the world does not exist because God perceived it. The differences between the essential and foundational accounts of mind-independence can be ignored for our present purpose. What matters is that in both cases mind-independence is no longer defined in terms of possible existence unperceived.

¹⁰ Notwithstanding having claimed the contrary in Massin (2011).

such complete awareness, we would not be in a position to exclude the idea that some unrepresented part of *a*'s essence requires *b*. Put differently: it is not enough not to be presented with any part of *a*'s nature that requires *b*; one must, furthermore, be positively presented with the fact that *this is all there is to a's nature*. Such a totalling condition, it seems, is as elusive to perceptual awareness as counterfactual situations. The appeal to an essential account of mind-independence saves us from one difficulty only to land us in another: we have expunged modal content at the price of introducing an equally suspicious totalling content.

I conclude that Berkeley, Hume, and Reid were right to hold that perception cannot present us with the mind-independency of its objects. Does it follow that Johnson's refutation is rebutted? Only if "feel" in P1' is a perceptual verb. However, there is good reason to think that Johnson was calling our attention to a distinct sort of non-perceptual (or at least not *only* perceptual) experience. For suppose that Johnson only had in mind some ordinary tactile experience of the stone—such as feeling the pressure or solidity of the stone. What then would be the reason for kicking the stone, instead of merely pointing at it? It is hard to see. After all, it is unclear why touch should be in a better position than sight or hearing when it comes to the presentation of the mind-independency of its objects. Against the view that some sensory modalities are trust-worthier than others, Gibson (1966: 55) notices that: "To kick a stone is no better guarantee of its presence than to see it".¹¹ If Johnson's kick is to avoid this worry, the relevant experience that ensues from it had better be of a non-perceptual kind.

Owing to this, Johnson must be calling our attention to something other—or something more—than mere tactile experience. What is this special experience that presents us with the mind-independence of the stone? In Scheler's words:

(1) What is the givenness of reality? What is experienced [*erlebt*], when anything whatever is experienced as real? This is the question of the phenomenology of the lived-experience of reality. (2) In what sorts of acts or modes of human behavior is the factor of reality [*Realitätsmoment*] originally given? (Scheler 1973 [1927]: 313)

¹¹ Cf. Destutt de Tracy, 1801, pp. 113–4.

3 Experiencing Mind-Independence: the Feeling of Resistance

Johnson's suggested answer is, I submit: *the experience of resistance to our voluntary effort*.¹² (This, incidentally, is also the answer endorsed by Scheler). Call this the Resistance Thesis:

Resistance Thesis: the feeling of the resistance of the stone against our voluntary effort presents us with the independency of the stone from our mind.

On an historical note, one of the first explicit formulations of this thesis is to be found in the work of the French philosopher Destutt de Tracy (1803): "What ensures us of the existence of beings other than us is their resistance to our acting will". The view became very influential in many different areas and schools of thought (see Massin 2018, for a detailed list of references). Indeed, fewer than 80 years later, James (1880) writes: "There is no commoner remark than this, that resistance to our muscular effort is the only sense which makes us aware of a reality independent from ourselves." Although some anticipations of the Resistance Thesis may arguably be found in Malebranche, Hartley, and Condillac¹³, it is fair to say that at the time Johnson kicked the stone, the thesis had not yet been explicitly defended. Johnson's kick, therefore, may constitute the first endorsement of the Resistance Thesis in philosophical history. (As we shall see, the Resistance Thesis is not to be conflated with the cognate view, endorsed by Berkeley, according to which sensible things, contrary to ideas of imaginations, cannot be modified at will).

What, then, is an experience of resistance? Paradigmatic experiences of resistance occur when we carry a heavy bag, when we swim against the stream, or

¹² This is also the interpretation of Johnson's kick endorsed by Bain (1855: 377), Patey (1986), Baldwin (1995), Williams (2002, 136). Hallett defends a cognate but distinct interpretation, according to which "the essence of [Johnson's] argument is plainly the inference from his own experienced physical agency with that of the stone (with which it is the same in kind)". Although there is a lot to be said in favour of Hallett's interpretation—as we shall see—I believe that the agency of the stone is not *inferred* from the experience of our own agency, but that both are experienced together.

¹³ Malebranche (1991 [1687]: 40-43) argues that if resistance to our physical effort gives us reason to believe in the reality of solid bodies, then, *a fortiori*, resistance to our will should give us reason to believe in the reality of ideas.¹³ Hartley (1749) introduces the genetic question of how the self distinguishes itself from the external world, hinting at the role of muscular feelings; Condillac (1997 [1754], part II, chap. V) argues that it is only when equipped with effortful touch and capacity of motion that his statue becomes aware of a world distinct from itself.

when we hold back a pram on a staircase. I shall here assume the following views (for a full defence see: Massin 2010; Massin 2018; and Massin & de Vignemont, forthcoming).

1. A body, B , resists an agent, A , iff A makes an effort on B .
2. A makes an effort on a body $B =_{df}$
 - (i) A exerts a force F_1 on B in order to make it (or some of its parts) move (or stay at rest);
 - (ii) A resistive force F_2 partly or fully counteracts the force F_1 exerted by A .¹⁴

This corresponds to the following schema:

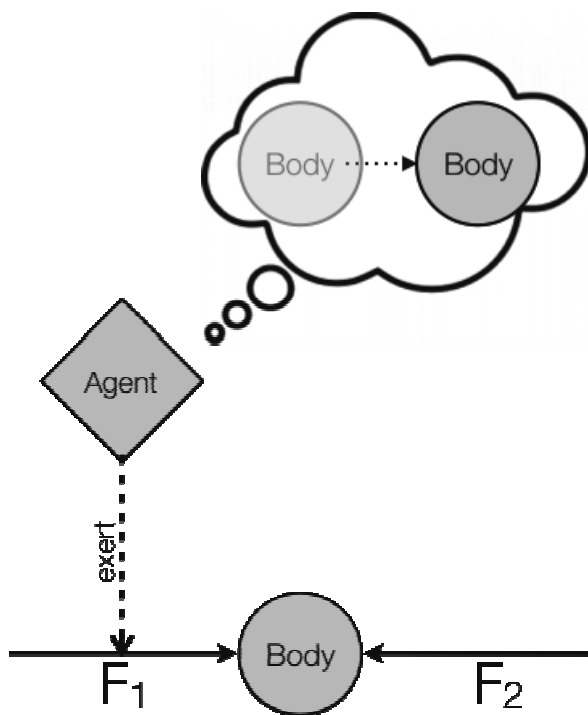


Fig. 1: The structure of an effort

When Johnson kicked the stone, he exerted a force on it (not least a “mighty” one, according to Boswell), and the stone exerted in return a resistive force, causing his foot to rebound. The relation between the two forces at stake here—the one exerted by the agent and the one exerted by the stone—is a relation of mutual

¹⁴ NB: fully counteracted efforts are not necessarily failures. One might make an effort to ensure that the body does not move. And partly counteracted efforts might be failures, e.g., if we wanted the body to stay where it is.

causal prevention: each force prevents the other from causing the acceleration of the stone it would have caused, had it acted alone (Massin 2017).

Now, *experiencing* resistance (or effort) is experiencing all of this: it is to experience that, in response to the force that one exerts in trying to move it, the stone exerts a resistive force. Why, then, should the experience of resistance give us a presentation of mind-independence? Simply put, if the body on which we act opposes and resists us, this suffices to show that it is not under the immediate control of our will. Unlike (many) ideas of our imagination, physical bodies do not comply with our demands without resistance (resistance that may or may not be insuperable). The behaviour of bodies is partly independent of our will.

Owing to this, P1' is vindicated: by kicking the stone, Johnson experiences its resistance to his will, which amounts to an experience of its mind-independence. From this and P2 (the anti-sceptical premise granted by Berkeley), Johnson concludes that the stone is mind-independent. Is Berkeley thereby refuted?

4 One Dialogue Between George and Samuel

George. I read your “refutation”, dear Samuel. It is rather terse, but here is my best reconstruction of it: because the stone resists your will, it appears to you to exist outside of your mind. And this, you think, contradicts my immaterialism. Tell me, Samuel: did I get you right?

Samuel. Absolutely!

George. In that case, I am afraid your “refutation” does not contradict me in the least. For I have never denied that the stone exists independently from my will. Quite the contrary! This is precisely how I distinguish ideas of the senses—such as your stone—from ideas of imagination. The latter, but not the former, are dependent on our will.¹⁵ You are equivocating, I fear, between two forms of dependency on our mind: the dependency of sensory things *on our perception*, which I defend, and the dependency of sensory things *on our will* – which, like you – I reject.

Samuel. You seem to me to be the one equivocating here between two senses of “independence from our will”. For in the sense I have in mind, your ideas of perception do not oppose the slightest resistance to my will. The stone does.

¹⁵ *Three Dialogues*, 235.

George. What? If ideas of perception do not resist your will, then explain to me, pray, how you manage to see the sky green or my face square?¹⁶

Samuel. I happily confess that I cannot. But this inability of mine is not owing to colours *resisting* my endeavours to change them.

George. What else?

Samuel. My aboulia, George.

George. I am very sorry to hear that Samuel, I had no idea.

Samuel. This is no disease of mine, good George. It is our normal human condition with respect to colours and other sensible qualities. The source of the impossibility to modify colours at will does not lie in *their* resistance. It lies in the limits of *our* will: colour changes are not the kinds of changes that we can will.

George. And are you going to claim that pain, for which we have the strongest aversion, can never become an object of our will either? How absurd! Don't you want your pain to cease?

Samuel. Desiring, wanting...none of this is willing. I do *desire* and *want* the cessation of my pain. But I cannot *will* it. To will to modify a thing, I must be able to directly act on it. How else could this thing *resist* my will? I know how to make a stone move: I should push it, or kick it. But, unfortunately, I cannot immediately act on my pain. Hence, stones, but not pains, can resist my will.

George. So long as in both cases things fail to comply with our will, I do not see much of a difference here.

Samuel. But my point is precisely that these are two very different ways for things to fail to comply with our will. Being deaf to orders is not the same as refusing to obey them. Among the things that cannot be modified at will, some are beyond its reach, others are resistant to it. To ideas of the senses (contrary to ideas of imagination) belong the first ones—you are right. But the stone I kicked displays another kind of independence from my will: I acted on it and it resisted.

George. Perhaps Samuel, perhaps. But will you stop splitting hairs and tell me now how these fine-grained distinctions between varieties of will-independency can help you to prove the *perception*-independency of sensible things?

Samuel. We are nearly there. Note, first, that the fact that the stone resists my effort directly runs counter to two theses of yours.

George. Well! Which ones?

Samuel. What is resistance if not a force?

George. I cannot see what else it could be.

Samuel. So, if resistance can be felt and is a force, forces are neither abstractions nor occult qualities, as you claim. They are sensible things.

¹⁶ *Principles*, §29; *Three Dialogues*, 196.

George. I reluctantly grant this to you. For my view that forces are abstractions is anyway incidental to my immaterialism: put forces in the same group as colours, shapes, and sounds if it befits you. Forces will, then, be sensible things depending on our perception of them. While we are here, put as many other chimeras among sensible things as you please: unless their independency from perception is itself perceived – an obvious impossibility – it will remain true that their *esse* is *percipi*.

Samuel. You underestimate, George, how much your immaterialism depends on your view about forces. To see that, consider the second claim of yours that the resistance of the stone contradicts.

George. Now! Which scholium of mine are you going to attack this time?

Samuel. The view that only minds are active. Do you still accept this?

George. I surely do! Only minds can produce effects on nature; no sensible thing, be that solidity, figure, motion...can produce any effect in another sensible thing.¹⁷

Samuel. But I felt the resistance of the stone, and since appearances are not deceiving, the stone has to be endowed with some causal power. The stone seems to have – and therefore actually has – the power of exerting forces against what strikes it.

George. Truth be told, I cannot make sense of the idea of a stone being active and resisting your effort. When I kick things, I feel discomfort, pain;¹⁸ I experience the constant conjunction between the motions of my foot and that of other corporeal things, but I experience nothing like a force or resistance actively exerted by them. Sensible things are visibly inactive.¹⁹

Samuel. Not muscularly! Don't you feel tensions in your muscles?

George. This strikes me as a highly implausible description of what I experience, but I am ready to grant it to you as well—on one condition, however.

Samuel. What is it to be?

George. That you stop attacking my turrets, and that you finally launch your assault against my dungeon: will you tell me at last how all of this is relevant to your self-proclaimed refutation of my immaterialism, and not to you rejecting some side-theses of mine?

Samuel. Here is the problem, George. Consider the motion of my foot. This motion, you maintain, depends on its being perceived. But my foot was repelled by the stone, as you conceded. Hence its motion is also explained by the resistive

¹⁷ *Principle*, §61; *Three Dialogues*, 196

¹⁸ *An Essay on Motion*, §4.

¹⁹ *Principles*, §25.

force exerted by the stone. The same bounce ends up being explained twice: once by the activity of the soul, the other by the force of the stone. There is one principle of motion too many.²⁰

George. Hold on, Samuel. The soul is real, but the force isn't. I granted you—reluctantly—that forces, instead of being abstractions, are sensible things; I never conceded that forces can exist unperceived!

Samuel. But I am not relying on that hypothesis, George. There are two main ways in which philosophers have tried to make sense of the notion of real being. Those who, following the Eleatic stranger of Plato's *Sophist*, said that being real is to have causal power; and those who said that to be real is to exist independently from perception. I claim that those two criteria of reality are not independent: being endowed with causal powers entails existing independently from perception.

George. How so?

Samuel. Once sensible things are acknowledged to have causal powers, they start banging against each other and have a causal life of their own. Perception becomes incidental to the explanation of their behaviour, which amounts to saying that their behaviour is independent from perception.

George. That would be true if sensible things had causal powers. But I doubt that your inference to the effect that sensible things have causal powers is correct.

Samuel. But I am drawing no inference George: that sensible things have causal powers is something we know by experience: kick a stone!

George. Ideas may seem to bang against each other to you, but as a matter of fact they don't: only minds affect ideas.

Samuel. Can ideas seem to be one way and be another?

George. Certainly not.

Samuel. So, if ideas seem to affect each other, they do.

George. That is precisely the point, Samuel: you and I disagree on appearances. Ideas, I maintain, do not seem to act on each other. Indeed, I conceded the contrary to you, and I am grateful to you for having helped me see how tightly connected my immaterialism and views about forces and activity are. But don't be too quick to shout victory. For all that you have shown is that immaterialism is false under a far-fetched description of sensory appearances.

Samuel. Far-fetched?

George. To say the least! It is not just appearances that you overloaded with kooky ideas of forces and powers: the very concept of an active body is so extravagant that only metaphysicians desperate enough to distinguish themselves from the

²⁰ See Winkler (1994: 116) for a close consideration.

vulgar would endorse it. Frankly, Samuel, an obstructing being, so powerful as to oppose invincible resistance to your most resolute endeavours, so alert as to immediately react to your smallest pushes, so recalcitrant as to thwart all your attempts: what else could it be but another mind?

Samuel. A stone!

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