

Title: *A Mystery at the Heart of Berkeley's Metaphysics*

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## Part I

### The Generalized Intractable Problem

There is a problem regarding God and perception right at the heart of Berkeley's metaphysics. With respect to this problem I will argue for (A):

A) It is intractable.

Berkeley has no solution to this problem, and neither can we hope to offer one on his behalf. However, I will also argue for (B):

B) The truth of (A) need not be seen as threatening the viability of Berkeley's metaphysics. In fact, it may even be seen as speaking in its favor.

Needless to say, just how one can maintain both (A) and (B) requires some explanation. It also requires a revision in our current understanding of Berkeley's metaphysics in the form of (C).

C) Berkeley's metaphysics requires the truth not merely of theism, but of Christianity.

## The Intractable Problem

To his credit, Berkeley himself presented what I will call the “Intractable Problem” (IP) via Hylas in the third of his *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*:

HYLAS. Is it not an absurdity to imagine any imperfection in God?

PHILONOUS. Without doubt.

HYLAS. To suffer pain is an imperfection.

PHILONOUS. It is.

HYLAS. Are we not sometimes affected with pain and uneasiness by some other being?

PHILONOUS. We are.

HYLAS. And have you not said that being is a spirit, and is not that spirit God?

PHILONOUS. I grant it.

HYLAS. But you have asserted, that whatever ideas we perceive from without, are in the mind which affects us. The ideas therefore of pain and uneasiness are in

God; or in other words, God suffers pain: that is to say, there is an imperfection in the Divine Nature, which you acknowledged was absurd. So you are caught in a plain contradiction. (*TD*, v2, p. 240)<sup>1</sup>

Hylas' argument certainly appears solid. Philonous accepts both (i) and (ii):

- i) We are “sometimes affected with pain and uneasiness by some other being”.
- ii) God is the other being in question.

When put together with Berkeley's denial of “blind agency,” here expressed in the manner of (iii),

- iii) “whatever ideas we perceive from without, are in the mind which affects us”.

Hylas certainly seems entitled to the inference expressed by (iv).

- iv) “The ideas...of pain and uneasiness are in God.”

From which Hylas infers (v),

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<sup>1</sup> *TD*, vol. 2, p. 240. Volume and page numbers are for the Luce and Jessop edition of *The Works of George Berkeley* (Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948-57).

v) “God suffers pain”.

And (v) contradicts what Philonous has just granted, namely, (vi),

vi) God cannot suffer pain.

*Prima facie*, Hylas has adduced a contradiction. Philonous has some explaining to do.

Philonous’ Response: Disambiguating ‘hath’

Philonous’ response to the Intractable Problem is as follows:

PHILONOUS. That God knows or understands all things, and that He knows among other things what pain is, even every sort of painful sensation, and what it is for His creatures to suffer pain, I make no question. But that God, though He knows and sometimes causes painful sensations in us, can Himself suffer pain, I positively deny. ...To know every thing knowable is certainly a perfection; but to endure, or suffer, or feel any thing by sense, is an imperfection. The former, I say, agrees to God, but not the latter. God knows or hath ideas; but His ideas are not convey'd to Him by sense, as ours are. Your not distinguishing where there is so manifest a difference, makes you fancy you see an absurdity where there is none.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *TD*, vol. 2, p. 241.

The basic strategy is clear. Philonous continues to maintain premises (i-iv). However, he denies that (v) can be validly inferred from (iv) because it involves an ambiguity. Although God and I both “hath” the ideas of pain and suffering we do not both hath them in the same sense of ‘hath’. We have the ideas of pain and suffering “*by sense*,” but God does not have them by sense but in some other way which allows him to “know or understand” pain and suffering without himself being in pain or suffering. This allows him to maintain (iii) in conjunction with (iv) without licensing the inference to (v) and therefore to deny any contradiction with (vi).

#### Evaluating Philonous’ Response

Is this an adequate response to the IP? Based on the text of the *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley appears to think that it is. Hylas is satisfied by Philonous’ appeal to the distinction; the dialogue moves on to other issues. In one sense, Philonous’ answer does the necessary work. If what gives the IP its force is nothing more than the trick of running roughshod over a legitimate distinction between senses or ways of “having ideas” then the IP is simply an instance of the fallacy of ambiguity.

On the other hand, it’s hard to imagine any flesh and blood Hylas being satisfied simply by the appeal to a distinction. A more aggressive opponent would want to be convinced that his objection hasn’t just been dismissed with a mere verbal maneuver. In particular I think he’d want to know two things:

- a) First, is the distinction between “having ideas by sense” and “having ideas by understanding” a meaningful distinction?

That is to say, given that it is clear enough what it means to ‘have an idea by sense’, can it be made clear what it means to have an idea not ‘by sense’ but ‘by understanding’.

b) Second, provided that (a) is answered satisfactorily, the question then becomes, can this explanation of what it means to ‘have an idea by understanding’ be used to resolve the IP?

The point of (b) is to simply to remind us that should one give a positive answer to (a) this does not necessarily mean the IP has been resolved. Philonous’ distinction may be a perfectly valid one and yet be irrelevant when applied to the IP.

### Activity and Ideas

In response to (a) I believe the answer is clearly, yes. To begin with, it should be emphasized that in Berkeley’s philosophy the distinction between ‘having an idea by sense’ and ‘having an idea by understanding’ is not some *ad hoc* convenience brought in to help Philonous out of a jam. It is of a piece with the fundamental distinction of Berkeley’s metaphysics, the active/passive distinction. The connection between the two is nothing less than the basic division of fundamental entities in his ontology.

Famously, the basic substances of Berkeley’s ontology are spirits (a.k.a. “minds,” “souls,” “selves”). A spirit, according to Berkeley, is an “active being.”<sup>3</sup> However, there are two kinds of spirits, finite and infinite or, if you like, “mixed” and “pure.” We are not

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<sup>3</sup> P 27, vol. 2, p. 52.

pure spirits because we are not purely active. This, Berkeley believes, is evident to experience.

PHILONOUS. When is the mind said to be active?

HYLAS. When it produces, puts an end to, or changes any thing.

PHILONOUS. Can the mind produce, discontinue, or change any thing but by an act of the will [and does it] depend on your will, that in looking on this flower, you perceive white rather than any other colour? Or directing your open eyes toward yonder part of the heaven, can you avoid seeing the sun? Or is light or darkness the effect of your volition?

HYLAS. No certainly.

PHILONOUS. You are then in these respects altogether passive. ...Tell me now, whether seeing consists in perceiving light and colours, or in opening and turning the eyes?

HYLAS. Without doubt, in the former.

PHILONOUS. Since therefore you are in the very perception of light and colours altogether passive, what is become of that action you were speaking of, as an ingredient in every sensation?<sup>4</sup>

We passively receive our various “ideas of sense.” This could not happen if we were not, in some sense, partly passive beings. It is due to our passivity that we can “have” ideas by sense. God, however is a purely active being and so God cannot have anything in his mind by sense.

There is no sense nor sensory, nor anything like a sense or sensory, in God. Sense implies an impression from some other being, and denotes a dependence in the soul which hath it. Sense is a passion; and passions imply imperfection. God knoweth all things as pure mind or intellect; but nothing by sense, nor in nor through a sensory.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, however, attention to this difference between God and ourselves also has the effect of bringing forward our key point of similarity: We are both *active* beings. This is important because in concert with premise (iii), Berkeley’s denial of blind agency, it helps buttress Philonous’ charge of ambiguity. As active beings, we are capable of volition. We can will various things. But as far as Berkeley is concerned, one can will that  $\phi$  only if one “knows or understand” what one is willing.

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<sup>4</sup> *TD*, vol. 2, p. 196.

<sup>5</sup> *S* 289, vol. 5, p. 134.

The property of all things are in God i.e. there is in the Deity Understanding as well as Will. He is no Blind agent & in truth a blind Agent is a Contradiction.<sup>6</sup>

An agent must, in some sense, “have” whatever ideas are necessary in order to know or understand what they are willing. Let’s put this by saying that in order to will that  $\phi$  the agent must have an idea of  $\phi$ , call it “ $I_\phi$ ”. Now, certainly, the *volition* in question is in the agent’s mind, in some sense of ‘in’, and so is something the agent “has.” Consequently,  $I_\phi$  must be in the agent’s mind; it must be something the agent has, as well. But, of course, the agent does not have either the volition or its idea,  $I_\phi$ , *by sense*. That would be to get the “direction of fit” wrong with respect to volitions. By willing that  $\phi$ , I am trying to bring it about that  $\phi$ . A volition aimed at bringing  $\phi$  about would be badly out of place if I were experiencing ideas of sense to the effect that  $\phi$  was currently realized.

Consequently, even when it comes to mere finitely active spirits, we must recognize a way distinct from sense for minds to have ideas. We must allow that spirits can know or understand ideas in the way necessary for volition. Thus, we can give a positive answer to (a); there is a perfectly meaningful distinction to be made between having ideas ‘by sense’ and ‘by understanding’.

### The Qualia Problem

This brings us to (b):

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<sup>6</sup> PC 812, vol. 1, p. 97.

(b) Can this explanation of what it means to ‘have an idea by understanding’ be used to resolve the IP?

But here, I’m afraid, the answer is, no. Hylas can grant Philonous his distinction but also can deny that it undercuts the real force of the IP. In order to help Philonous see this Hylas need only turn his attention back to an argument from early in their first dialogue.

HYLAS. Hold, Philonous, I fear I was out in yielding intense heat to be a pain. It should seem rather, that pain is something distinct from heat, and the consequence or effect of it.

PHILONOUS. Upon putting your hand near the fire, do you perceive one simple uniform sensation, or two distinct sensations?

HYLAS. But one simple sensation.

PHILONOUS. Is not the heat immediately perceived?

HYLAS. It is.

PHILONOUS. And the pain?

HYLAS. True.

PHILONOUS. Seeing therefore they are both immediately perceived at the same time, and the fire affects you only with one simple, or uncompounded idea, it follows that this same simple idea is both the intense heat immediately perceived, and the pain; and consequently, that the intense heat immediately perceived, is nothing distinct from a particular sort of pain.<sup>7</sup>

Call the idea of sense in question (the great heat), “ $I_h$ ”. According to Philonous,  $I_h$  is *identical* to a simple, uncompounded sensation of pain. To this point we need only add one premise in order to show that Philonous’ distinction between two ways of having ideas won’t block the inference from (iv) to (v). The premise we need is simply (iv\*),

iv\*) The painfulness of a pain is essential to it.

Given the truth of (iv\*) one cannot know  $I_h$  without *experiencing pain*. How then are we to make sense of the claim that God knows  $I_h$  without being able to suffer pain? In turn, how can God know what He is causing in us when He causes us to suffer pain? If God has not felt pain then, in causing pain in me, He does not know what He is causing because knowing pain requires that He has experienced pain. In such cases, God, in violation of premise (iii), would be acting as a blind agent. In light of (iv\*) Hylas’ inference from (iv) to (v) is legitimate and for exactly the reason he gives: “[t]he

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<sup>7</sup> *TD*, vol. 2, p. 176.

ideas...of pain and uneasiness are in God; *or in other words*, God suffers pain.” Hylas can deny that (b) has been adequately answered. He can justifiably insist that (v) is merely another way to say what (iv) says and therefore, that there is no relevant ambiguity.

### A Response to the Qualia Problem?

There is a curious remark in Berkeley’s notebooks that deserves some attention at this point. The content of the remark, while it doesn’t provide a solution, might at least be regarded as blunting the edge of the problem somewhat. At entry 675, Berkeley writes,

God May comprehend all Ideas even the Ideas w<sup>ch</sup> are painfull & unpleasant without being in any degree pained thereby. Thus we our selves can imagine the pain of a burn etc without any misery or uneasiness at all.<sup>8</sup>

Here we have an appeal to a brute empirical fact. We find that we can imagine pain without suffering pain. However puzzling this may be, it’s real and those impressed by the Qualia Problem can confirm it for themselves.<sup>9</sup> So, since we can do this, certainly God can as well. In which case, God will have the idea of pain in his mind without

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<sup>8</sup> Vol. 1, p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> In my informal, utterly unscientific surveys, I have come across people who deny that this is a fact. It could be that Berkeley eventually came to the same conclusion. He may have decided that the situation is much like the case of those pains (or pleasures) that are so mild that Hylas wishes to refer to them as “indolences” rather than identify them as either mild pains or mild pleasures. Perhaps. I certainly don’t know. Regardless, for present purposes, I want to grant the point.

suffering pain. Of course, this doesn't exactly "solve" the Qualia Problem, in one sense. It would be to say that we understand *that* God can know pain without suffering, without understanding *how* this is possible, but since we find we can do it too, that shouldn't really bother us too much.

### Three Problems

I'll mention just three difficulties facing 675 if we take it as a response to the IP. The first is an internal conflict. At *Principles* 33, Berkeley tells us,

The ideas imprinted on the senses by the Author of Nature are called real things: and those excited in the imagination being less regular, vivid and constant, are more properly termed ideas, or images of things, which they copy and represent. ...The ideas of sense are allowed to have more reality in them, that is, to be more strong, orderly, and coherent than the creatures of the mind[.]<sup>10</sup>

According to *Principles* 33, our ideas of imagination are "less vivid" than the ideas of sense which they "copy." But that would seem to suggest that when we imagine a pain it must still be painful, albeit to a lesser degree. How then is *Principles* 33 to be squared with entry 675?

But set that aside. More troubling is the second difficulty. Hylas can readily grant that you and I can recall or imagine pain without suffering, but in response he will remind Philonous that *it simply doesn't follow from the fact that we can do something that God*

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<sup>10</sup> Vol. 2, p. 54.

*can too*. The fact that you and I can do such a thing only shows that it is possible for beings *relevantly similar* to us. But it is in precisely the relevant respect that God is not similar to us. This argument is based on experience, and in our experience, our ability to *imagine* any idea of sense is dependent upon both our *ability to experience* that idea of sense and our having *actually experienced* it. But unlike you and I, God is capable of neither of these things and that's because these abilities are based on precisely that feature of our nature that God does not share: our susceptibility to *passivity*. In God there is no passivity nor any possibility of passivity. If, as 675 suggests, we can look to human experience to be our guide in this matter, then we should conclude that God cannot know pain any more than a man born blind can know colors. Hylas can remain justifiably unimpressed by entry 675.

We come now to the third difficulty. This one is, in a certain sense, merely an interpretive difficulty, but it deserves mention nonetheless. The placement of 'thus' in entry 675 indicates that my gloss on it gets the intended order of explanation exactly backwards. In order to make it appear relevant to the Qualia Problem, my gloss on 675 changed it from:

God May comprehend all Ideas even the Ideas w<sup>ch</sup> are painfull & unpleasant without being in any degree pained thereby. Thus we our selves can imagine the pain of a burn etc without any misery or uneasiness at all.

To the following:

[We our selves can imagine the pain of a burn etc without any misery or uneasiness at all. Thus God May comprehend all Ideas even the Ideas w<sup>ch</sup> are painfull & unpleasant without being in any degree pained thereby.]

In other words, 675 does not address the Qualia Problem. Instead, it seems that an unsupported belief in God's ability to conceive of pain without suffering is being appealed to in order to undercut any puzzlement we might harbor about *our* ability to do so. Clearly, that order of explanation won't help with the Qualia Problem. In fact, if anything, it implies that we not only face a problem understanding how God can know pain without ever suffering, but also a problem with making sense of our ability to imagine pain without suffering while doing so. Read strictly, 675 doesn't mitigate the Qualia Problem, it exacerbates it.

#### The Generalized Intractable Problem

It might seem that the way forward is for Berkeley to reject (iv\*). But can he? Again the answer is, no. Another philosopher might be in a position to attempt it, but not Berkeley. For instance, if Berkeley had a broadly rationalist take on the nature of sensation, if he took sensations to be say, "confused modes of thought," then it might seem more plausible to attribute to him a denial of (iv\*). The idea would be that, on such a view of sensation, my pain is simply a confused way of thinking a thought with the content to the effect that "my foot has been damaged in such-and-such a way," and perhaps, "it needs attention of such-and-such a sort," etc. Here 'such-and-such'es and 'etc.' cover for fantastically complicated states of affairs—indeed, if matter is conceived

of as infinitely divisible then they are running cover for infinitely complicated states of affairs. But what we, in our pathetic finitude, know only through a glass darkly, God, in His infinite perfection, knows clearly and distinctly. As an infinite intellect, He knows every minute detail about the past, present, and future state of every material (and immaterial) being, and he knows it all without any confusion and so without sensation.

If Berkeley had this sort of view of the nature of sensation it would be more plausible for him take the line that God knows, in a far more rich way, exactly what we know only confusedly, by way of pain. That would put him in a position to claim that God can know what we know when we are in pain but without ever suffering, thus providing a way of denying that the painfulness of pain is essential to it.<sup>11</sup>

But Berkeley cannot pursue such a line of defense because he explicitly rejects any such view of sensations. As he sees it, sensations are in no manner “modes of thought,” confused or otherwise. What are sensations? They are simply what we experience them to be. Their *esse* is *percipi*. Important, though too often not appreciated, is that this is true in *both* of those perennially entangled senses of ‘*esse*’. ‘*Esse is percipi*’ specifies what conditions are necessary for an idea of sense to exist, but it also specifies *what an idea is*. Considered in-itself, the *felt quality* is all there is to the entity which is that idea of sense. In a word, Berkeley’s ideas of sense are *qualia*. So, Berkeley cannot abandon (iv\*) without abandoning the *esse is percipi* principle.

It cannot be overemphasized how central this view of sensation is to Berkeley’s immaterialism. It is because Berkeley holds that the felt quality of an idea exhausts the

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<sup>11</sup> There are other ways to try and do this, but it will be clear from what follows that denial of (iv\*) is not an option for Berkeley.

being of an idea that he can claim such perfect knowledge of the immediate objects of perception. For instance, it is this feature of his metaphysics that allows him to discover so quickly and declare so confidently that the entirety of the sensible world is devoid of any causal powers.

All our ideas, sensations, or the things which we perceive, by whatsoever names they may be distinguished, are visibly inactive, there is nothing of power or agency included in them. ...To be satisfied of the truth of this, there is nothing else requisite but a bare observation of our ideas. For since they and *every part of them* exist only in the mind, it follows that there is nothing in them but what is perceived. But whoever shall attend to his ideas, whether of sense or reflexion, will not perceive in them any power or activity; there is therefore no such thing contained in them.<sup>12</sup>

It is also because the objects of the physical world are nothing more than collections of qualia that he can so decisively turn away those skeptics who would tell us that...

...we are under an invincible blindness as to the *true* and *real* nature of things... We are miserably bantered, they say, by our senses, and amused only with the outside and shew of things. The real essence, the internal qualities, and constitution of every the meanest object, is hid from our view; something there is

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<sup>12</sup> P 33, vol. 2, p. 54. Emphasis added.

in every drop of water, every grain of sand, which it is beyond the power of human understanding to fathom or comprehend.<sup>13</sup>

On the contrary, Berkeley can respond that,

...it is evident from what has been shewn, that all this complaint is groundless, and that we are influenced by false principles to that degree as to mistrust our senses, and think we know nothing of those things which we perfectly comprehend.<sup>14</sup>

These claims of extraordinary epistemic access to the objects of the physical world are made possible by the fact that the very being of an idea of sense is identical to its felt quality.

For our purposes, the most important point to make explicit is that this means that the IP generalizes in a most unfortunate way. No longer is our problem confined to understanding how God can have knowledge of that subset of ideas of sense which are identical to pains. The broader problem is that God cannot have knowledge of *any* ideas of sense.<sup>15</sup> Call this the “Generalized Intractable Problem” (GIP). Since the objects of the world are nothing more than collections of ideas of sense and since, there is nothing more

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 101, p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> As David McNaughton pointed out to me, John Mackie, almost in passing, makes a similar point in *The Miracle of Theism* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1982) p. 80.

to an idea of sense than its felt quality and since, “there is no sense nor sensory, nor anything like a sense or sensory, in God”—i.e., God does not *feel*—it follows that God is cut off from having any knowledge of His irreducibly sensible creation.

The upshot of these considerations is that we can give a positive answer to (a) but not to (b). For, while it is true that there is a legitimate distinction to be drawn within his metaphysics between ‘having ideas by sense’ and having them ‘by understanding’ and while others might appeal to such a distinction in attempting to deal with the problem of how God can know the sensible world without being capable of sensation, Berkeley cannot. The *esse is percipi* principle makes this impossible.

#### The GIP and the Revised Parity Objection

From this point forward I will treat (A) as established.

A) Berkeley’s metaphysics faces an intractable problem, the GIP.

To make it clear just how fundamental a threat the GIP is to Berkeley’s philosophy consider the way it leaves Philonous vulnerable to Hylas’ famous “parity objection” anew—or at least, to a revised version of it. The unrevised version occurs in the “Third Dialogue” as follows:

HYLAS. You say your own soul supplies you with some sort of an idea or image of God. But at the same time you acknowledge you have, properly speaking, no idea of your own soul. You even affirm that spirits are a sort of beings altogether

different from ideas. Consequently that no idea can be like a spirit. We have therefore no idea of any spirit. You admit nevertheless that there is spiritual substance, although you have no idea of it; while you deny there can be such a thing as material substance, because you have no notion or idea of it. Is this fair dealing? To act consistently, you must either admit matter or reject spirit. What say you to this?<sup>16</sup>

In response, Philonous offers three points, the last of which has garnered the most criticism:

I say lastly, that I have a notion of spirit, though I have not, strictly speaking, an idea of it. I do not perceive it as an idea or by means of an idea, but know it by reflexion.<sup>17</sup>

Most think this response inadequate because Berkeley's invocation of "notions" is unjustifiable. I disagree.<sup>18</sup> Regardless, we should bypass this debate because in the present context it's Philonous' first response that's in real trouble.

PHILONOUS. I say in the first place, that I do not deny the existence of material substance, merely because I have no notion of it, but because the notion of it is

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<sup>16</sup> Vol. 2, p. 233.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 234.

<sup>18</sup> My reasons can be found in Chapter II of *A Metaphysics for the Mob: The Philosophy of George Berkeley* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

inconsistent, or in other words, because it is repugnant that there should be a notion of it. Many things, for ought I know, may exist, whereof neither I nor any other man hath or can have any idea or notion whatsoever. But then those things must be possible, that is, nothing inconsistent must be included in their definition.<sup>19</sup>

It seems that according to Philonous, one cannot believe in the existence of matter because the notion of it is inconsistent. What is the inconsistency? It lies in the claim that matter is that which “has” qualities. At this point in the dialogue, Hylas has conceded that qualities are ideas, ideas of sense in particular. In order for matter to “have” ideas it must be a sort of being that is capable of sense perception, but the very notion of matter precludes this possibility.

Clearly, in light of the GIP, this way of refusing parity of treatment will not work when it comes to the consideration of one spirit in particular, God. God is no more capable of sense perception than matter is. So, we might suggest that Hylas make use of the GIP and revise the parity objection to read, “To act consistently, Philonous, you must either admit matter or reject [God].”

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<sup>19</sup> *TD*, vol. 2, pp. 233-34.

Part II  
Minding the Gap

Such would seem to be the consequence of accepting (A). This, of course, brings us to my odd-sounding claim, (B):

B) The truth of (A) need not be seen as threatening the viability of Berkeley's metaphysics. In fact, it may even be seen as speaking in its favor.

As I said at the outset, this, obviously, requires some explanation. In this section, I will lend a hand to Philonous by suggesting a line of response to the GIP on Berkeley's behalf. As we will see, the suggestion has three main things to recommend it. First, it is not merely consistent with Berkeley's metaphysics, but is drawn straight from his most fundamental commitments. Second, Berkeley's extant writings provide rich resources to both develop and defend it. Third, pursuing this suggestion is a productive way to explore the relationship between less-often studied aspects of Berkeley positive metaphysics, his "spiritual realism," and his better understood negative metaphysics, his "immaterialism."

The suggestion I have in mind is to establish (B) by first taking seriously (C):

C) Berkeley's metaphysics requires the truth not merely of theism, but of Christianity.

The idea behind this approach is actually quite simple. The perspective from which the truth of (A) not only fails to be a problem but rather an advantage is one to which Berkeley was both independently and deeply committed, a Christian perspective. A little reflection will make plain that what we have come to the edge of in the form of the GIP is just one manifestation of nothing less than that deep, dark hole which is the problem of the relation between God and His creation. Put in the least specific way possible, we are trying to sort out how the gap between the two is bridged. Regardless of metaphysical commitments, all theists have to deal with some version of the gap problem, but depending on which metaphysics one embraces, it may manifest in different difficulties.<sup>20</sup> The GIP is one manifestation of the gap problem, one peculiar to Berkeley's immaterialism.

Now, concurrent with this, we must remember that in Berkeley we are dealing with a deeply religious, Christian philosopher. If we have come to a point in his thought where what is at issue is the relation between God and His creation, then it may be worth our while to keep in mind the absolutely fundamental feature of his Faith: the mediatory role between these two played by Christ. And, as we will see, in our case, we will be especially interested in the mediatory role of Christ's *personhood*.

### The GIP and the Incarnation

Now of course, Berkeley's Christianity is not relevant to every issue in his metaphysics and taking it into consideration will not always be helpful. But in the present

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<sup>20</sup> A.O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* (Harvard University Press, 1936) provides a helpful introduction to the issue.

case such considerations suggest themselves because the GIP is conspicuously vulnerable to the doctrine of the Incarnation. If the doctrine of the Incarnation is true, then God has experienced the world from the perspective of a being capable of sense perception and has suffered. Christ thus bridges the gap between God and His creation as it manifests in the form of the GIP.

Now, against this approach to the GIP a flurry of objections immediately arise. Examining them will help to better specify how this Christian response to the GIP works.

For instance, it may be objected that even if we are willing to make such a move, appeal to the Incarnation will not do much to undercut the force of the GIP because the Incarnation was an event in time. So prior to Incarnation, God must have been acting as a blind agent. This means, among other things, that in the act of creation itself God acted as a blind agent.

In response, two things should be said. First, according to orthodoxy, Christ is not a creature i.e., not a created being but rather that through which and by which every created thing was made.<sup>21</sup> Secondly, the Incarnation was an event with a beginning in time *with respect to man* but not with respect to God. All things are eternally present to the mind of God.<sup>22</sup> Berkeley clearly endorses this view of the contrast between God's versus man's temporal relation to creation in a letter to Johnson, "By the {το νυν} I suppose to be implied that all things past and to come are actually present to the mind of God,"<sup>23</sup> and,

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<sup>21</sup> Berkeley was orthodox on this point; his rejection of the Arian position is made quite clear both in the letter 7 to Percival (vol. 9 p. 189) and in his Newport sermons (vol. 7).

<sup>22</sup> This represents yet another difficulty in putting *PC 675* to work against the Qualia Problem.

<sup>23</sup> Vol. 2, p. 293.

more famously, in the *Three Dialogues*, “When things are said to begin or end their existence, we do not mean this with regard to God, but His creatures.”<sup>24</sup> Consequently, God’s knowledge of the sensible world cannot be said to begin at the time of the Incarnation. It has always been with Him just as Christ has always been with Him.

However, it will be objected that, even granting this, an appeal to the Incarnation does not really solve our problem; it merely relocates it. For, while the Incarnation allows for a perceiving and suffering deity, and while Berkeley certainly accepted the doctrine of the Incarnation, he also shows no sign of having ever abandoned the view that God cannot suffer nor perceive anything by sense. Again, Berkeley clearly tells us, “Sense implies an impression from some other being, and denotes a dependence in the soul which hath it. Sense is a passion; and passions imply imperfection.”<sup>25</sup> So while *Christ* may be said to perceive and suffer, strictly speaking, we cannot say this of *God*.

#### The GIP and the Mystery of the Trinity

In response, however, any Christian worth his salt will reply that the objector is overlooking that other distinctively Christian doctrine and complement of the doctrine of the Incarnation, the doctrine of the Trinity. The truth of the Trinity would allow one to say that God knows or understands pain<sup>26</sup> through His Son, Christ, because while the two are distinct “persons,” they are still *identical*. There is only one God, but God *the Father* knows or understands pain, because God *the Son* has suffered pain. So, charity requires

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 251.

<sup>25</sup> S 289, vol. 5 p. 134.

<sup>26</sup> I’m using ‘pain’ here and often in what follows as a shorthand for any given sensory state.

that in such a passage, we must read Berkeley as speaking not of God in the person of Christ but rather of God in the person of the Father.

But now our objector will claim that an appeal to the distinction between God *the Father* and God *the Son*—even when italicized—doesn't really help. For instance, one might ask us to choose which heresy we wish to saddle Berkeley with, Patripassionism or Docetism? If God the Father is identical to God the Son, and God the Son suffered, then how can we avoid the conclusion that God the Father suffered (Patripassionism)? Should we chose to deny that God the Father suffered then, since God the Father is identical to God to the Son, and God the Father did not suffer, how can we avoid the conclusion the God the Son did not really suffer (Docetism)? Or to put the problem in a more familiar philosophical guise, since the Father and the Son are both identical to God, it would seem to follow that we must attribute contradictory properties to God; He both suffered and did not suffer.

But in response to such worries Berkeley appeals to the orthodox doctrine of the “two natures” of Christ. In Sermon 4, in response to “Objection 2<sup>nd</sup> from reason, i.e. from substance, personality, &c”, he writes,

Answered by acknowledging [Christ] to be man as well as God whence  
contradictorys are predicated of his different natures.<sup>27</sup>

Christ is *both* Divine and human. He did suffer, but only as a man, not as God. Inconsistency, as well as heresy, is avoided.

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<sup>27</sup> Sermon V.4, vol. 7, p. 62.

But does this really move the dialectic forward at all? The Incarnation of God as Christ is, somehow, supposed to have made possible the coming together of the Divine and the human in *one person*. In this way we “mind the gap.” But, our objector may well echo his last complaint: One and the same being cannot be the subject of conflicting property attributions. Consequently, doesn’t Berkeley’s “two natures” response mean we have to recognize *two beings* in the *single person* of Christ? In which case, our question now becomes, *How is such a union to be conceived?* Our objector may grant that Berkeley’s appeal to the two natures of Christ avoids the inconsistent properties problem, but only at the cost of the coherence of its use of the concept *person*. What are we to make of the *unity of the personhood of Christ?*

But here we have reached bedrock. Berkeley’s view is that we cannot hope to give an account of the personhood of Christ. In Him we have a union of two natures, Divine and human. This union is the central mystery of the Christian religion. Philosophy is silent on this point.<sup>28</sup> In this, Berkeley’s metaphysics is perfectly in harmony with orthodoxy.

### The Revised-Revised Parity Objection

That reply might satisfy orthodoxy, but given the reception relatively recent appeals to mystery on behalf of *materialism* have received I don’t think we can expect one on behalf of any form of *idealism* to be warmly met.<sup>29</sup> Reconsideration of the Revised Parity Objection neatly captures the challenge: Recall that Berkeley’s fundamental case against

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<sup>28</sup> There is no question that Berkeley was a Trinitarian and that he believed the Trinity to be a mystery. This will be made abundantly clear in what follows.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Flannagan *The Science of the Mind* (MIT, 1991) and McGinn, *The Mysterious Flame* (Basic Books, 1999).

matter comes down to this: When the materialist tells us what he means by ‘material substance’ we find that, upon examination, the notion of it is incoherent. This comes about in one or the other of two ways. The first line of attack argues that the proffered notion of matter is incoherent because it implies an inconsistency. The second line of attack argues that it is incoherent because, upon examination, one finds that the word ‘matter’ is empty i.e., devoid of any meaningful content. Consequently, its existence is not something anyone can believe in.

We have already seen how Berkeley can block the first line of attack if it were turned against his conception of God as Christ. Appeal to the two natures of Christ deflects the charge of inconsistent property attributions. But then the cost would seem to be that this leaves him open to the second line of attack. We are being told that in the person of Christ are united two distinct natures. But we are offered *no account of the nature of this union*. When we ask how the *unity of this person* is to be conceived, we are told that this is a mystery; no such account can be given.

But how much hope is there for this appeal to mystery? Isn’t claiming that the nature of this union is a mystery to admit that you simply have no notion of this union at all? And without a grasp of the nature of this union you can’t have a coherent conception of this person, Christ. In which case, your claim to believe in this entity is no more meaningful than the belief in material substance.

On the other hand, if you insist that taking the nature of this union to be a mystery somehow serves to make belief in Christ meaningful, then why can’t the materialist simply invoke his own mystery on behalf of matter? Why can’t Hylas save materialism from Philonous’ attacks by just refashioning himself as a kind of “New Mysterian?”

Thus, we have the even more stinging Revised-Revised Parity Objection: “To act consistently, Philonous, you must either admit matter or reject [Christ].”

### Clarifying the Challenge

As bad as this situation sounds for the Christian immaterialist, we should be clear about the burden that the advocate of the Revised-Revised Parity Objection bears. Take the first horn of the challenge. Since so many seemingly rational and honest people have for thousands of years claimed to believe in *the mystery of the union of human and the Divine by the person of Christ* (henceforth, simply the “person of Christ” or “POC”) we will need an argument for the claim that upon examination there really is no coherent content to the belief in this union.

Here, some background is helpful. The legitimacy of appeals to belief in mysteries, particularly the Trinity, was a hot-button issue among Berkeley’s immediate predecessors and contemporaries. There’s an immense tangle of forces at work making this an apt focal point for debate in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Brittan. Only two, in particular, however, require mention for our present purposes. On the one hand, orthodox Anglican philosophers were under pressure from Catholics, Deists, Arians, Unitarians, etc., to justify belief in the POC while dismissing Transubstantiation as incoherent.<sup>30</sup> On the other, there was the increasing centrality of accounts of cognitive content to philosophy. The consensus was that judgment requires ideas and that sound judgments are only

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<sup>30</sup> It should be clear enough why Berkelian immaterialism will not allow for Transubstantiation. Bread and water and are no more than collections of sensible qualities. In the Berkelian metaphysics, if it looks like bread, tastes like bread, smells like bread, feels like bread, etc.,...it’s bread.

possible where one possesses “clear and distinct ideas.” Famously, accounts of the nature of ideas as well as criteria of just what constitutes clarity and distinctness were contentious issues. To paint in broad strokes, the two main contenders were the intellectually crystalline, though unpicturable ideas of the “pure understanding” championed by the Cartesians and the familiar sensory ideas of Lockean empiricism. On either view, there can only be belief in  $\alpha$  where there is an idea of  $\alpha$ .

Berkeley had a keen interest in the controversy over religious mystery and, beginning with his stay in America, it takes on a more prominent place in his work. Mystery is the primary focus of his Newport sermons, and plays a vital role in *Alciphron*. The issue is also central to his attack on the method of fluxions in *The Analyst* and *A Defense of Free-Thinking in Mathematics*. Finally, the mystery of the Trinity is the capstone of his last major work, *Siris*.

To deal with our present concerns we can largely confine our discussion to the “Seventh Dialogue” of *Alciphron*. The title character, Alciphron, launches an attack on the possibility of belief in any mystery and his argument explicitly relies upon the theory of content that requires an idea of  $\alpha$  as a necessary condition on belief in  $\alpha$ .<sup>31</sup>

Alciphron lays the groundwork for his attack by offering a theory of *meaning*:

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<sup>31</sup> It is often suggested that Alciphron’s argument is modeled on John Toland’s argument from *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696). That can only be partially true. Toland’s argument is advanced on the basis of the Lockean view of the nature of content. Importantly, Alciphron’s attack is neutral between the rationalist and empiricist views.

ALCIPHON. Words are signs: they do or should stand for ideas, which so far as they suggest they are significant. But words that suggest no ideas are insignificant. He who annexeth a clear idea to every word he makes use of speaks sense; but where such ideas are wanting, the speaker utters nonsense.<sup>32</sup>

From this he then derives a theory of *understanding*:

ALCIPHON. ...whoever can be supposed to understand what he reads or hears must have a train of ideas raised in his mind, correspondent to the train of words read or heard.<sup>33</sup>

And from this view of the nature of understanding he derives his theory of *belief*:

ALCIPHON. Though it is evident that, as knowledge is the perception of the connexion or disagreement between ideas, he who doth not distinctly perceive the ideas marked by the terms, so as to form a mental proposition answering to the verbal, cannot possibly have knowledge. No more can he be said to have opinion or faith, which imply a weaker assent; but still it must be to a proposition, the terms of which are understood as clearly, although the agreement or disagreement of the ideas may not be so evident, as in the case of knowledge. I say, all degrees

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<sup>32</sup> *A*, vol. 3, p. 287.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p. 288.

of assent, whether founded on reason or authority, more or less cogent, are internal acts of the mind, which alike terminate in ideas as their proper object; without which there can be really no such thing as knowledge, faith, or opinion.<sup>34</sup>

In short, Alciphron contends that “there can be no assent where there are no ideas: and where there is no assent there can be no Faith.”<sup>35</sup> He first turns his sights against the doctrine of Grace, claiming that ‘Grace’, in the relevant sense, is “but an empty name.”<sup>36</sup>

ALCIPHRON. Grace taken in the vulgar sense, either for beauty, or favor, I can easily understand. But when it denotes an active, vital, ruling principle, influencing and operating on the mind of man, distinct from every natural power or motive, I profess myself altogether unable to understand it, or frame any distinct idea of it; ...At the request of a philosophical friend, I did cast an eye on the writings he shewed me of some divines, and talked with others on this subject, but after all I had read or heard could make nothing of it, having always found, whenever I laid aside the word *Grace*, and looked into my own mind, a perfect vacuity or privation of all ideas.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 291.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 289.

Then by simply plugging this into his theory of belief, he concludes, “I cannot assent to any proposition concerning it, nor, consequently have any faith about it.”<sup>38</sup>

Thus, we have from Alciphron, the theory of content and belief we needed to set the Revised-Revised Parity Objection to work. Presently, it may be applied to yield the challenge that Berkeley must either admit matter or reject Grace. But its force is general, extending to belief in all mysteries. So he confidently asserts that, “by all the rules of right reason, it is absolutely impossible that any mystery, and least of all the Trinity, should really be the object of man's faith.”<sup>39</sup>

Granting that Alciphron’s argument is valid, the challenge for Berkeley is to show that Alciphron’s account of content and belief is wrong and, we might add, to present, at least in outline, an alternative view; in particular, one which allows him to defend the possibility of belief in mystery without, at the same time, undercutting his case against matter.

This is exactly what Berkeley supplies. Against Alciphron’s ideational approach to semantics and belief, Berkeley, through the character of Euphranor, opposes his own use-oriented approach.

EUPHRANOR. Be the use of words or names what it will, I can never think it is to do things impossible. Let us then inquire what it is, and see if we can make

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 290.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p. 296.

sense of our daily practice. Words, it is agreed, are signs: it may not therefore be amiss to examine the use of other signs, in order to know that of words.<sup>40</sup>

He draws Alciphron's attention to counters (poker chips) and to the way their significance is tied to their function.

EUPHRANOR. Counters, for instance, at a card-table are used, not for their own sake, but only as signs substituted for money, as words are for ideas. Say now, *Alciphron*, is it necessary every time these counters are used throughout the whole progress of a game, to frame an idea of the distinct sum or value that each represents?...And in casting up a sum, where the figures stand for pounds, shillings, and pence, do you think it necessary, throughout the whole progress of the operation, in each step to form ideas of pounds, shillings, and pence?<sup>41</sup>

This is an entering wedge. It affords Euphranor the concession that “words may not be insignificant, although they should not, *every time* they are used excite the ideas they signify in our minds.”<sup>42</sup> But he then turns to words which can *never* excite ideas and yet are undeniably significant.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p. 291.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

EUPHRANOR. Pray tell me, *Alciphron*, is not an idea altogether inactive? ...An agent therefore, an active mind or spirit, cannot be an idea, or like an idea. Whence it should seem to follow that those words which denote an active principle, soul, or spirit do not, in a strict and proper sense, stand for ideas. And yet they are not insignificant neither; since I understand what is signified by the term *I*, or *myself*, or know what it means, although it be no idea, nor like an idea, but that which thinks, and wills, and apprehends ideas, and operates about them. Certainly it must be allowed that we have some notion that we understand, or know what is meant by, the terms *myself*, *will*, *memory*, *love*, *hate*, and so forth; although, to speak exactly, these words do not suggest so many distinct ideas.<sup>43</sup>

With this Euphranor rejects Alciphron's theory of meaning, concluding that "*words may be significant, although they do not stand for ideas.*"<sup>44</sup>

In fact the preceding suggest an alternative view of both meaning and understanding, one that anticipates what we would now recognize as a pragmatic approach.<sup>45</sup>

EUPHRANOR. It seems also to follow that there may be another use of words besides that of marking and suggesting distinct ideas, to wit, *the influencing our conduct and actions*, which may be done either by *forming rules for us to act by*, or by *raising certain passions, dispositions, and emotions* in our minds. A

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p. 292.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> See fn. 18.

discourse, therefore, that *directs how to act or excites to the doing or forbearance of an action* may, it seems, be useful and significant, although the words whereof it is composed should not bring each a distinct idea into our minds.<sup>46</sup>

This in turn leads Euphranor to an alternate view of *belief*. Where the ideational theory lead Alciphron to hold that all degrees of belief “terminate in ideas as their proper object,” Euphranor’s approach leads him to see belief as more tightly tied to *action*.<sup>47</sup>

EUPHRANOR. ...having granted that those signs may be significant, though they should not suggest ideas represented by them, provided they serve to regulate and influence our wills, passions, or conduct, you have consequently granted that *the mind of man may assent to propositions containing such terms, when it is so directed or affected by them*, notwithstanding it should not perceive distinct ideas marked by those terms.<sup>48</sup>

To illustrate his case, Euphranor runs his own parity objection against Alciphron using concepts from mathematics and physics. The aim being to show that there are many notions in the sciences that we would have to do without if were to apply Alciphron’s view of content and belief. Force, receives the most extended treatment. Euphranor first

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<sup>46</sup> *A*, vol. 3, p. 292. Emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 288.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p. 297.

argues that “excluding body, time, space, motion, and all its sensible measures and effects, we shall find it as difficult to form an idea of force as of grace.”<sup>49</sup> And secondly, despite the presence of so many controversies surrounding the nature of force, it still has to be admitted that “there are very evident propositions or theorems relating to force, which contain useful *truths*.”<sup>50</sup> In light of which, he calls for parity of treatment between force and Grace, between things corporeal and things spiritual.

EUPHRANOR. Shall we not admit the same method of arguing, the same rules of logic, reason, and good sense, to obtain in things spiritual and things corporeal, in faith and science? and shall we not use the same candour, and make the same allowances, in examining the revelations of God and the inventions of men? For aught I see, that philosopher cannot be free from bias and prejudice, or be said to weigh things in an equal balance, who shall maintain the doctrine of force and reject that of grace... [H]owever partial or prejudiced other minute philosophers might be, you have laid it down for a maxim, that the same logic which obtains in other matters must be admitted in religion.<sup>51</sup>

What then becomes of the Revised-Revised Parity Objection i.e., must Berkeley either admit matter or reject Christ? At this point, we have an answer to one half of that challenge. Given his rejection of the ideational theory, he can admit that words like

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 294.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p. 295. The added emphasis on ‘truths’ is to discourage those who see his linguistic pragmatism as not extending to truth-evaluable claims.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p. 296.

‘Trinity’ and ‘Christ’ (POC) suggest no idea to the mind without denying that they are meaningful, understood, and a proper object of belief. As he tells us, there can be no objection to the meaningfulness of a belief in the mystery of the Trinity so long as it is part of “a discourse, that *directs how to act or excites to the doing or forbearance of an action.*”<sup>52</sup> And so,

...it seems to follow that a man may believe the doctrine of the Trinity, if he finds it revealed in Holy Scripture that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, are God, and that there is but one God. Although he doth not frame in his mind any abstract or distinct ideas of Trinity, substance, or personality; provided that this doctrine of a Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier makes proper impressions on his mind, *producing therein love, hope, gratitude, and obedience, and thereby becomes a lively operative principle, influencing his life and actions, agreeably to that notion of saving faith which is required in a Christian.*<sup>53</sup>

Since sincere belief in the Trinity has implications for conduct and affect of nearly global scope for an individual and since assent has *action* rather than *ideas* as its proper object, there can be little hope of arguing against the possibility of belief in the mysteries of Christianity.

The same can then be said of belief in the mystery of the POC.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p. 297.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

EUPHRANOR. [One may] believe the divinity of our Saviour, or that *in him God and man make one Person*, and be verily persuaded thereof, so far as for such faith or belief to become a real principle of life and conduct inasmuch as, by virtue of such persuasion, they submit to his government, believe his doctrine, and practise his precepts, although they frame no abstract idea<sup>54</sup> of *the union between the divine and human nature*.<sup>55</sup>

And this what we sought: a defense of the possibility of belief in the mystery of the *union of two natures*—one divine, one human—in a single *person*.

Alciphron is not done, however. In fact, against this last, and for our purposes, all-important point, he pushes back in just the right way.

ALCIPHRON. What are we to think then of the disputes and decisions of the famous Council of Nice, and so many subsequent Councils? What was the intention of those venerable Fathers, the Homoousians and the Homoiousians? Why did they disturb themselves and the world with hard words, and subtle controversies?<sup>56</sup>

Here Alciphron is presenting a compact objection that deserves unpacking because otherwise its force might be overlooked. He is referring to the famous dispute over the

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<sup>54</sup> Berkeley here says no “abstract idea,” but the context makes clear that his point is not limited to abstract ideas.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added. The same point is made in Sermon V.4.vi. (vol. 7, p. 63).

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. p. 300.

Trinity that brought forth the Nicene Creed. Roughly, the “Homoousians” held that the Father and the Son were of the *same substance* (homoousia). The “Homoiousians” held that the Father and the Son were merely of *similar substance* (homoiousia). The Council decided in favor of the Homoousians. Alciphron’s objection neatly poses a problem for Euphranor. The mere fact that there was such a debate and that it was decided in favor of the Homoousians supports the view each of the parties to the dispute took themselves to have a distinct positive conception of the nature of the POC and, moreover, that the orthodox position advocates one particular positive conception over the other.

If that’s right, then the consequences for Berkeley are serious. Since the creed reads ‘homoousia’, same substance, Berkeley’s “two natures” approach to the problem of inconsistent property attributions to the POC won’t work. For, as Alciphron intimates, this implies that we are to elucidate the concept *person* in the ‘person of Christ’ via the concept of *substance*.<sup>57</sup> So, while there may be two natures to Christ these two natures, according to orthodoxy, are natures of one and the same substance. In which case one and the same substance has contradictory properties attributed to it. But that invites the objection that it is a universally received doctrine that one and the same substance cannot be the subject of contradictory property ascriptions.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the notion of the POC

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<sup>57</sup> One of the foundational aspects of Berkeley’s metaphysics is the rejection of this order of explanation. The proper order of explanation is from *self* to *substance*. See chapter I of Roberts (2007).

<sup>58</sup> It is likely that this consideration helped lead Clarke to the Arian, homoiousian oriented, position. As the late Maurice Wiles noted in his *Archetypal Heresy* (Oxford, 1996, p. 119), the charge was made by Clarke’s contemporary, Thomas Emlyn (*Works of Thomas Emlyn*, vol. 2, p. 479). For an excellent overview of the revival of Arianism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century see chapter 4 of Wiles.

appears to imply an inconsistency. On examination, the notion of Christ is incoherent and belief in Him, therefore irrational.

Can Berkeley's look to his more sophisticated approach to content and belief to help him out here? It would seem not. Throughout, Berkeley has been calling for parity of treatment between things spiritual and things corporeal and claiming that a proper view of content and belief allows us to see that the belief in the central Christian mysteries does not fall afoul of "the received method of arguing, on the common principles of logic" nor does it imply anything "which is repugnant to human reason, which implies a contradiction."<sup>59</sup>

Instead, Berkeley goes after Alciphron's interpretation of the Nicene Creed and the disputes that surrounded it. His response comes via his other advocate in the dialogue Crito:

CRITO. To me it seems that, whatever was the source of those controversies, and howsoever they were managed, wherein human infirmity must be supposed to have had its share, the main end was not, on either side, to convey precise positive ideas to the minds of men by the use of those contested terms, but rather a negative sense, tending to exclude Polytheism on the one hand, and Sabellianism<sup>60</sup> on the other.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> *A*, vol. 3, p. 309.

<sup>60</sup> Sabellianism is a form of modalism about the persons of the Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one substance acting in three different modes. Thus polytheism and Sabellianism here are intended to represent two extremes to be avoided.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 300.

Alciphron was attempting to read the doctrine “positively” that is, he was taking it to present a position on the nature of Christ and appealing to a notion from philosophy, ‘substance’ to specify the proper way to conceive it. But if that were the case, it would be tantamount to denying that the nature of the unity of the Divine and the human in Christ is a mystery. Berkeley’s view is that the meaning of the doctrine is not to convey a positive account of the nature of the POC, but to positively exclude erroneous ones. Instead of interpreting the use of the term ‘substance’ (ousia) and the affirmation of the ‘same substance’ (homoousia) wording of the Nicene Creed as seeking to explicate the concept *person* via the concept *substance*<sup>62</sup> and thereby advocating an account of the nature of the relation between the Father and the Son—thus, implying an account of the nature of the unity of the POC—he reads it as it has been traditionally interpreted, as intending only to exclude certain views.<sup>63</sup>

Alciphron’s next objection deserves mention mainly because of its likely rhetorical force. Again, some background is helpful. In this era, the homoousia/homooiousia controversy had made something of a comeback. A form of Arianism, a view that takes Christ to be a created being—thus tending to favor the homooiousian reading of the relation between Father and the Son and, in turn, denying Divinity proper to Christ—was well alive among the Anglican intelligensia.<sup>64</sup> Privately, it had been the favored view of

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. fn. 57.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Luce’s fn. 1 on p. 301 of vol. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Actually, one of the leading advocates, William Whiston, thought we could say that Christ was divine—a point Berkeley acknowledges in his letter to Percival (see fn. 21), but one we can let slide for present purposes.

the most revered intellect of the age, Newton. But it was being defended publicly by Samuel Clarke and William Whiston—the former being both the most respected philosopher of the age as well as the neighbor and close friend of Newton and the latter, Newton’s hand-picked successor to his chair at Cambridge. With such undeniably intelligent, pious persons actively engaged in the debate, and with no shortage of prior luminaries on its side, one might well wonder with Alciphron,

ALCIPHRON. ...what shall we say of so many learned and ingenious divines, who from time to time have obliged the world with new explications of mysteries, who, having themselves professedly laboured to acquire accurate ideas, would recommend their discoveries and speculations to others for articles of faith?<sup>65</sup>

But Berkeley isn’t impressed. Through Crito, he tells us,

CRITO. To all such innovators in religion I would say with Jerome, "Why after so many centuries do you pretend to teach us what was untaught before? Why explain what neither Peter nor Paul thought necessary to be explained? And it must be owned that the explication of mysteries in divinity, allowing the attempt as fruitless as the pursuit of the philosopher's stone in chemistry or the perpetual motion in mechanics, is no more than they chargeable on the profession itself, but only on the wrongheaded professors of it."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *A*, vol. 3, p. 300.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* 301.

That Berkeley would not be impressed by this objection should not surprise us, and not merely because he has orthodoxy on his side. After all, thousands of years of sincere debate by venerable minds regarding the nature of material substance did not stop him from arguing that the notion of matter is incoherent and the debate, ultimately, little more than noise.

Parity for Matter?

This, finally, brings us to the second half of the challenge posed by the Revised-Parity Objection. I have argued that the belief that the POC is a mystery is not grounds for rejecting belief in Christ as incoherent due to meaningless. But doesn't this appeal to mystery ultimately serve to undermine the cause of immaterialism? Doesn't parity demand that Hylas is now free to appeal to mystery on behalf of matter? Isn't he now free to try to fashion himself as some sort of Mysterian?

Well, he can try. But it doesn't look promising. To see this we can, once again, just return to Philonous' reply to the original parity objection. Recall that the first prong of Philonous' reply to the charge that he must either admit matter or reject spirit was that he rejected matter because it, unlike spirit, implies an inconsistency.

Now, suppose we are feeling generous and willing to say, on Hylas' behalf, that while he can admit that the notion of matter appears to involve him in contradiction, this need not necessarily render belief in matter incoherent. After all, it was Euphranor who told us that the term 'force' was meaningful even though,

...Strange paradoxes have been framed about its nature, properties, and proportions: for instance, that contrary forces may at once subsist in the same quiescent body; that the force of percussion in a small particle is infinite...<sup>67</sup>

By Euphranor's own admission, it seems that 'force' may still be meaningful despite the presence of paradoxes. (Perhaps, these are only apparent paradoxes.) So why can't matter still be meaningful?

In response, we must, once again, remember that Philonous follows his first reason for rejecting parity with this second one:

PHILONOUS. ...we may not believe that any particular thing exists, without some reason for such belief: but I have no reason for believing the existence of matter. I have no immediate intuition thereof: neither can I mediate from my sensations, ideas, notions, actions or passions, infer an unthinking, unperceiving, inactive substance, either by probable deduction, or necessary consequence.<sup>68</sup>

In his reply to the parity objection, Philonous is reminding Hylas of what has already passed between them in their two prior dialogues. His first reply reflects what the first dialogue was primarily focused on establishing i.e., that the notion of matter involves us in inconsistencies. The second reply recalls the conclusion of Philonous' "matter comes

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 294.

<sup>68</sup> *TD*, vol. 2, p. 233.

to nothing” argument of the second dialogue.<sup>69</sup> That argument was designed to show that matter fails to earn its keep in any of the explanatory roles that are laid out for it.

Philonous sums up Hylas’ second dialogue efforts with the following:

PHILONOUS. Pray tell me if the case stands not thus: at first, from a belief of material substance you would have it that the immediate objects existed without the mind; then that their archetypes; then causes; next instruments; then occasions: lastly, something in general, which being interpreted proves nothing. So matter comes to nothing. What think you, Hylas, is not this a fair summary of your whole proceeding?<sup>70</sup>

In response, Hylas concedes the point, but claims that this doesn’t prove that matter does not exist.

HYLAS. Be that as it will, yet I still insist upon it, that our not being able to conceive a thing, is no argument against its existence.<sup>71</sup>

Philonous agrees. But he insists that in the case of matter this is a pyrrhic victory.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p. 225.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

PHILONOUS. That from a cause, effect, operation, sign, or other circumstance, there may reasonably be inferred the existence of a thing not immediately perceived, and that it were absurd for any man to argue against the existence of that thing, from his having no direct and positive notion of it, I freely own. But where there is nothing of all this; where *neither reason nor revelation* induce us to believe the existence of a thing; where we have not even a relative notion of it; where an abstraction is made from perceiving and being perceived, from spirit and idea: lastly, where there is not so much as the most inadequate or faint idea pretended to: I will not indeed thence conclude against the reality of any notion or existence of any thing: but my inference shall be, that you mean nothing at all: that you imploy words to no manner of purpose, without any design or signification whatsoever. And I leave it to you to consider how mere jargon should be treated.<sup>72</sup>

If Hylas wishes to defend matter by way of an appeal to mystery then he must tell us about the mystery we are to believe. He must give content to the mystery so that it might have some connection with action. But Philonous has just expended enormous effort trying to get Hylas to give him some content, any content, however thin, to the notion of matter only to end up with empty jargon—exactly what Alciphron had claimed ‘Grace’ was.

In addition, this last point should remind us that even successfully associating some content with the term ‘matter’ will not be sufficient to save belief in matter. For, far from

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. Emphasis added.

finding that matter has any positive role to play, Berkeley has argued that those accounts that do provide some content only make possible a belief that is positively pernicious to both science and morality. This is primarily, although not exclusively, because of the way the belief in matter helps lead one to skepticism.

‘Matter’ must earn its keep. It must at least have some role to play in a “discourse...that directs how to act or excites to the doing or forbearance of an action” if it is to be meaningful.<sup>73</sup> And while this will make that to which the term refers a possible object of belief, it will not settle the question of whether we *should* believe in it. Berkeley has argued both that ‘matter’, when properly analyzed, is contentless because belief in it fails do any positive explanatory work and also that, unanalyzed, belief in it incurs unacceptable intellectual and moral costs.

Should one attempt to turn such an attack onto the belief in the mystery of the POC, Berkeley is positioned with a powerful response: Belief in Him is not only meaningful, but of infinite value because it produces in the believer “love, hope, gratitude, and obedience, and thereby becomes a lively operative principle, influencing his life and actions, agreeably to that notion of saving faith which is required in a Christian.”<sup>74</sup>

So Berkeley can answer the Revised-Revised parity objection. He can accept Christ, without accepting matter.

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<sup>73</sup> *A*, vol. 3, p. 297.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

## Conclusion

The fundamental role that the active/passive distinction and the *esse is percipi* principle play in Berkeley's metaphysics means that coming up against the GIP is inevitable. However, from an orthodox Christian perspective—a perspective which Berkeley shared in all the relevant respects—this is not a defect, but rather an advantage. For, while we can say that, in one sense, Berkeley has no solution to the GIP, *neither should he*. A solution to the GIP would imply *an account of the nature of the union of the Divine and the human in the person of Christ*. This would be to deny that the central, sacred mystery of the Christian religion is genuinely a mystery. In other words, from the point of view of orthodoxy, it actually speaks in Berkeley's favor that his metaphysics can pretend to no solution to the GIP; the resolution of the GIP *should* terminate with an appeal to the mystery of the POC. And since calls for parity fail, Berkeley's arguments for immaterialism retain their full force. To reject matter one need not reject Christ and to accept Christ one need not accept matter.

Notice also that one need not *accept* Christ in order to reject matter. Rather, the situation is this: once material realism has been abandoned and the dust clears, we find that Berkeley's alternative, positive view of the nature of reality, spiritual realism, is still a live option. True: upon examination, we discover that, ultimately, his positive metaphysics requires belief in a mystery and nothing in his metaphysics pretends to resolve that mystery. But then it need not and—at least from one viable perspective—it should not. Rather, it is enough to show that one can believe in the mystery and be

justified in that belief. The rest is not the province of philosophy. Philosophy merely clears the path. The truth of (A) therefore, is something Berkeley can embrace.<sup>75</sup>

### Abbreviations

- LJ     *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, Edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessup. 9 volumes, (Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1948-57).
- A     *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher in Seven Dialogues*
- P     *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*
- PC    *Philosophical Commentaries*
- S     *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries*
- TD    *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*

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<sup>75</sup> An earlier incarnation of this essay was presented at the International Berkeley Conference held in June of 2008 at Newport, RI and I am much indebted to the participants for their many helpful comments and the changes that resulted. I have also benefited from the comments of an anonymous referee for *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* and from the comments of Laura Guidry-Grimes.