

## **Two Interpretations of George Berkeley's Idealism**

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In this paper I examine two of George Berkeley's accounts regarding the existence of unperceived objects. Foremost, I provide a brief introduction to Berkeley's metaphysical position. Following from that I present Berkeley's two accounts: the counterfactual account, which states that an unperceived object exists if it were to be perceived in some possible circumstance, and the divine account, which states that God perceives all objects, accounting for those left unperceived by finite minds. After an examination of the two tenets I will conclude that the counterfactual account is the more compelling one in light of Berkeley's overall metaphysical position.

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Berkeley's metaphysical theses consist of idealism and immaterialism. As an idealist Berkeley posited minds and mind-dependent states (such as ideas) as the most fundamental entities to existence, and as an immaterialist he held the view that matter understood as a mind-independent substance to be a contradiction. Material objects according to Berkeley are merely collections of ideas: "...a certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name apple" (Principles, I §1). Fundamental to Berkeley's ontological stance is his *Esse est Percipi* thesis: 'To be is to be perceived'. Since objects merely amount to collections of ideas, it follows that for an object to exist, it must be perceived by some mind. However this claim seems to challenge our common sense beliefs regarding unperceived objects — we assume that objects can go on existing unperceived, and it seems to be the case that they remain in the same place after a period of not perceiving them, for instance. In the following sections I will present Berkeley's accounts of unperceived objects.

In *Principles of Human Knowledge* Berkeley provides a counterfactual account concerning the existence of unperceived objects: "The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it..." (Principles, I §3). Berkeley's claim here is that unperceived objects exist if they are perceived in certain circumstances; for Berkeley to state that the table exists in his unoccupied study is to say that he would perceive it were he to enter his study. To consider another example, we may conceive of a case in which I have placed a pair of shoes inside my unoccupied closet and shut the closet door. For one to state that these unperceived shoes exist is to say that he would perceive them were he to enter my closet.

However, this counterfactual account of unperceived objects in conjunction with Berkeley's *Esse est Percipi* thesis, 'to be is to be perceived', seems to imply that objects pop in and out of existence, or that they are constantly created and annihilated. If it is true for an object that *Esse est Percipi*, and also that an unperceived object exists as long as it is perceived in some possible circumstance, then it simply is the case that objects cannot exist unperceived. Thus accordingly, while the shoes in my closet exist if there is a mind perceiving them, they also fail to exist at the moment when there is not any mind perceiving them.

While the counterfactual account is left with the bizarre consequence of objects constantly popping in and out of existence, this absurdity may be mitigated to an extent when compared to a similar implication of indirect materialism: "It is thought strangely absurd that upon closing my eyelids, all the visible objects round me should be reduced to nothing; and yet is not this what philosophers commonly acknowledge, when they agree on all hands, that light and colours, which alone are the proper and immediate objects of sight, are mere sensations that exist no longer than they are perceived?" (*Principles*, I §46). Akin to the counterfactual account of unperceived objects, the indirect materialists also posit that the existence of the immediate objects of perception, such as light and colours, depend upon a mind's perception of them. Berkeley also draws a comparison between his account and Malebranche's occasionalism: "For the schoolmen, though they acknowledge the existence of matter, and that the while mundane fabrick is framed out of it, are nevertheless of opinion that it cannot subsist with the divine conservation, which by them is expounded to be a continual creation" (*Principles*, I §46). Analogous to Berkeley's counterfactual account, Malebranche's occasionalism also posits that matter is constantly being created and annihilated. Thus it seems that Berkeley's counterfactual account shares a similar theme with other competing doctrines in their explanations regarding the existence of unperceived objects. However, the counterfactual account is still arguably more incredible than the others, either by the sheer amount of objects that are subject to mind-dependence — all objects are mind-dependent on Berkeley's account whereas the only objects that are subject to this on the indirect materialist's account consist of the immediate objects of perception — or because it is simply more plausible to attribute the process of the constant creation and annihilation of objects to an omnipotent mind, God's, rather than to finite minds. Berkeley's divine account of unperceived objects, however, seems to directly address this issue.

According to the divine account of unperceived objects, whatever is left unperceived by finite minds is accounted for by God's all-encompassing perception: "[Objects] have an existence exterior to the mind, since I find them by experience to be independent of it. There is therefore some other mind wherein they exist...there is an omnipresent eternal Mind, which knows and comprehends all things, and exhibits them to our view in such a manner..." (*Three Dialogues*, p.173). Thus there is no object that is actually unperceived. The divine account of unperceived objects, unlike the

counterfactual account, is consistent with the *Esse est Percipi* thesis: objects do not constantly pop in and out of existence based upon their being perceived or unperceived by finite perceivers since all objects are continually perceived by God. Through the divine account Berkeley's idealist picture of the world is now made consistent with our common sense intuitions regarding the existence of objects left unperceived. Thus if *Esse est Percipi*, then the shoes that I have placed in my unoccupied closet exist because God is perceiving them.

While the divine account of unperceived objects can deal with the unfavourable consequence of the counterfactual account, it is not without its own set of complications. But before I establish one particular objection, it should foremost be considered that if the continued existence of finitely unperceived objects are accounted for by God, then it seems that the ideas that God perceives must be either identical to or resemble the ideas that we perceive. For example, consider a case in which I perceive a particular pair of shoes — God can be said to be doing the same as well. If I were to place these shoes in my unoccupied closet and close the closet doors it would be the case that God would still be perceiving them. Later on I can open the closet and perceive the shoes: if *Esse est Percipi* then they have remained in continuous existence through God's perception of them. At this point it is tentative as to whether God and I are are perceiving the same, numerically identical shoe-idea, as ideas are typically understood to be subjective in their content, but it seems plausible that the relation between my shoe-idea and God's is at least one of resemblance.

Now an objection can be raised to the divine account, of which I shall call the pain objection, by way of textual evidence that seems to indicate that God's ideas can neither be identical to nor resemble certain ideas that we perceive. In the *Three Dialogues* Philonous, Berkeley's fictional mouthpiece, states that God cannot perceive the idea of pain: "God, though He knows and sometimes causes painful sensations in us, can Himself suffer pain, I positively deny...such a being as this can suffer nothing, nor be affected with any painful sensation, or indeed any sensation at all" (*Three Dialogues*, p. 184). Additionally, Philonous states that when a hand is brought before a fire only one simple sensation will be experienced: "Seeing therefore that [intense heat and pain] are both immediately perceived at the same time, and the fire affects you only with one simple, or uncompounded idea, it follows that this same simple idea is both the intense heat immediately perceived, and the pain; and consequently, that the intense heat immediately perceived, is nothing distinct from a particular sort of pain" (*Three Dialogues*, p.113). Therefore, an intense heat is numerically identical to a particular sort of pain. And if it is the case that an intense heat is numerically identical to a particular sort of pain, and it is also a fact of the matter that God cannot perceive pain, then it seems to follow that God cannot perceive intense heat. Yet it seems that God does perceive intense-heat: if objects are to be understood as collections of ideas, and if *Esse est Percipi*, then it must be the case that God perceives finitely unperceived celestial bodies,

volcanoes, and furnaces, which all contain within them the intense heat-idea — but in doing so God perceives pain, which is a manifest contradiction within Berkeley's system.

However, there might be a way to escape the pain objection: God may perceive ideas in a manner that is fundamentally different from how we perceive them. In *Principles of Human Knowledge* I §1 Berkeley categorizes ideas as belonging to the three classes of either sensations, reflections, or those of memory and imagination. Sensations are felt through the sense-perceptions of our relevant sense-organs, reflections consist of internal, self-originating emotions, and ideas belonging to memory and imagination involve "...either compounding, dividing, or barely representing [ideas] originally perceived in the aforesaid ways" (*Principles*, I §1). Thus the ideas we perceive when we are said to perceive objects belong to the category of sensations, and the same can be said of the pains and pleasures that we experience: we visually observe objects and feel bodily pains and pleasures via our sense-perceptions. However, as Philonous states, "[God] can suffer nothing, nor be affected with any painful sensation, or indeed any sensation at all" (*Three Dialogues*, p.184). According to the text, God utterly lacks the ability to perceive ideas as sensations. But as noted earlier, God perceives all objects, some of which contain within them ideas such as the intense heat-idea, which is numerically identical to a particular sort of pain. And if the ideas such as the intense heat-idea cannot be perceived by God because God cannot be said to be affected with any sensation, but yet these intense heat-idea bearing objects still exist finitely unperceived, then it seems plausible that God may perceive the ideas that we perceive as sensations in another manner: as ideas of the imagination. To illustrate the efficacy of this claim we can consider imagining an intense heat — we may picture ourselves trapped within a burning furnace, for instance. And through this process of imagining all the agony of the situation it is the case that we do not feel any relevant sensation at all; it seems that the same can be said of God when he imagines intense heat-idea bearing objects. Thus while we perceive pains, pleasures, or intense heats as sensations, God perceives all these ideas through his imagination, avoiding any sensation entirely. Therefore through positing that God perceives the ideas that we perceive as sensations as ideas belonging to the imagination the divine account of unperceived objects avoids the pain objection.

So far I have established Berkeley's two accounts of unperceived objects, which consist of the counterfactual account and the divine account. I will argue in the next section that the counterfactual account is the more plausible of the two.

Berkeley's counterfactual account of unperceived objects seems more viable of the two for a variety of reasons. Foremost, this account does not depend upon the metaphysical existence of a supernatural being, or God. The counterfactual account succeeds in establishing an analysis of unperceived objects without resorting to such a divine entity: to say that some object exists unperceived is to make a statement about what would be perceived were certain circumstances fulfilled. Furthermore, in light of the counterfactual account the divine account seems ad hoc; disregarding Berkeley's own

theological commitments, it seems that regarding his metaphysical position God was not an entity that was needed to be posited until the counterfactual account was challenged with its consequence of having objects be subject to a constant process of creation and annihilation when it was paired with his *Esse est Percipi* thesis. Additionally, the unintuitive result of the counterfactual account does not condemn it to being a false theory; our intuitions, while they may be used as general guidelines, are imperfect and have been proven wrong in many cases. Finally, even though the divine account solved the problem of the counterfactual account, the positing of God naturally leads to more questions and complications. For instance, how can Berkeley explain our idea of God? To this Berkeley explicitly states that we cannot have ideas of minds or spirits, thus nor of God: “Hence there can be no idea formed of a soul or spirit: for all ideas whatever, being passive and inert, they cannot represent unto us, by way of image or likeness, that which acts” (Principles, I §27). So according to Berkeley, we do not have ideas of minds or spirits because ideas are passive and minds are active. However, Berkeley introduces a new term, ‘notion’ — instead of having ideas of spirits, we have notions of them: “We may be said to have some knowledge or notion of our own minds, of spirits and active beings, whereof in a strict sense we have not ideas” (Principles, I §89). Thus notions are a kind of mental state distinct from ideas, in which we come to know of minds and spirits. However this concept of notions seems mysterious and almost irrelevant in the face of the rest of Berkeley’s idealism. Therefore after weighing Berkeley’s two accounts of unperceived objects I endorse that the counterfactual account is more compelling in light of Berkeley’s overall metaphysical position.

In conclusion I have examined two of Berkeley’s tenets regarding the existence of unperceived objects which consist of the counterfactual account and the divine account. In consideration of his idealism and immaterialism, I advocate that Berkeley’s counterfactual account is the more credible of the two.

**Works Cited**

Berkeley, George (1999). Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues. Oxford University Press.