28. BERKELEY AND THE ARGUMENT FROM CONCEIVING

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ABSTRACT. In both the *Principles* and the *Dialogues* Berkeley argues that physical objects cannot exist independently of minds. In this paper I suggest an interpretation of the argument in the *Dialogues* that shows that his argument either relies on an invalid inference or begs the question. I conclude that his attempt to defeat scepticism by making physical objects mind-dependent is unsuccessful.

Occasionally in philosophy one finds an argument that marks a parting of the philosophical ways. Some philosophers think it is obviously sound, others think it obviously unsound; and almost no one reserves judgment. Kant gave several such arguments, and so did Hume. One of them we owe to Berkeley. In the *Principles* and in the *Dialogues* he attempted to prove that we cannot conceive that ordinary physical objects exist independently of and unperceived by any mind, since such a conception involves a "downright contradiction". As H.B. Acton notes, Berkeley’s argument, which I call the argument from conceiving, is "accepted as fundamental by idealists of such different persuasions as Fichte and Bradley, who held that it shows that mind or experience is essential to the universe". Other philosophers describe it as "contemptible" or "entirely specious".

In this paper I try to make progress towards resolving this sometimes acrimonious dispute by examining the logical structure of the argument from conceiving. In both the *Principles* and the *Dialogues* it is in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*, but in neither book did Berkeley make the form explicit. I suggest two interpretations of the version of the argument in the *Dialogues* that do make the *reductio* explicit. In the first interpretation I divide the argument into two parts and show how contradictions are derived in each. I then argue that both parts of the *reductio* depend upon a fallacious inference and that without this inference no contradiction can be derived. The second interpretation yields a deductively valid argument. But it also begs the question. Thus, if my analysis is correct, the argument from conceiving is neither a fundamental contribution to western thought nor contemptible. It is merely mistaken.

I begin with Berkeley’s statement of the argument and then, using the first person for ease of exposition, attempt a reconstruction of its logic.
1. Philonous: I am content to put the whole upon this issue. If you can conceive it possible for any mixture or combination of qualities, or any sensible object whatever, to exist without the mind, then I will grant it actually to be so.

2. Hylas: If it comes to that, the point will soon be decided. What more easy than to conceive a tree or a house existing by itself, independent of, and unperceived by, any mind whatsoever? I do at this present time conceive them existing after that manner.

3. Philonous: How say you, Hylas, can you see a thing which is at the same time unseen?

4. Hylas: No, that were a contradiction.

5. Philonous: Is it not as great a contradiction to talk of conceiving a thing which is unconceived?

6. Hylas: It is.

7. Philonous: The tree or house, therefore, which you think of is conceived by you?

8. Hylas: How should it be otherwise?

9. Philonous: And what is conceived is surely in the mind?

10. Hylas: Without question, that which is conceived is in the mind.

11. Philonous: How then came you to say you conceived a house existing independent and out of all minds whatsoever?

12. Hylas: That was I own an oversight, but stay, let me consider what led me into it. It is a pleasant mistake enough. As I was thinking of a tree in a solitary place where no one was present to see it, methought that was to conceive a tree as existing unperceived or unthought of, not considering that I myself conceived it all the while. But now I plainly see that all I can do is to frame ideas in my own mind. I may indeed conceive in my own thoughts the idea of a tree, or a house, or a mountain, but that is all. And this is far from proving that I can conceive them existing out of the minds of all spirits.

13. Philonous: You acknowledge then that you cannot possibly conceive how any one corporeal sensible thing should exist otherwise than in a mind?

14. Hylas: I do. The first premise of our first interpretation of the argument from conceiving is based on Hylas' assertion in 2. that he can conceive a tree existing independent of and unperceived by any mind whatsoever.
15. I conceive a tree existing independent of and unperceived by any many whatsoever.

The remainder of Berkeley’s argument is an attempt to show that Hylas’ assertion—and hence 15.—leads to a contradiction. In order to show this more easily I propose to split 15. into

16. I conceive a tree existing unperceived by any mind whatsoever.

and

17. I conceive a tree existing independent of any mind whatsoever.

The next step of the argument is derived from the claim Philonous makes in 7., namely, that the tree thought of (i.e., the tree unperceived by any mind whatsoever) is conceived by Hylas. This suggests that from 16. we should infer

18. A tree existing unperceived by any mind whatsoever is conceived by me.

There is still no straightforward contradiction. But if we add the premise

19. Whatever is conceived by me is perceived by me,

we can then conclude:

20. A tree existing unperceived by any mind whatsoever is perceived by me.

And if we suppose that to be perceived by me is to be perceived by my mind, then, assuming the inferences are valid, we have the first contradiction.

I am fairly sure that Berkeley would accept 19., since it is in line with his general thesis that what we conceive are ideas, and “the existence of an idea consists in its being perceived”. Moreover, it seems reasonable to suppose that in 2. Berkeley either meant for Hylas to say ‘unconceived’ rather than ‘unperceived’ or that he would not object to substituting one for the other. If so, then we can rewrite 16. as

21. I conceive a tree existing unconceived by any mind whatsoever

and, following the same line of reasoning, we can infer

22. A tree existing unconceived by any mind whatsoever is conceived by me

which is again a contradiction. Consequently, supposing the arguments contain no invalid inference, 16. and 21. are false.

The argument against 17. follows the same pattern. From 17. we infer
23. A tree existing independent of any mind whatsoever is conceived by me.

The next premise, derived from 9., is

24. Whatever is conceived by me is in my mind.

Now we can conclude:

25. A tree existing independent of any mind whatsoever is in my mind.

And this, if we take 'existing independent of any mind whatsoever' to mean something like 'existing outside of any mind whatsoever', and once again assume no invalid inferences, is a contradiction. Thus 17. is false.

So far we have shown that, by using additional premises which Berkeley accepts and a form of inference apparently sanctioned by 7., 15. and 17. lead to contradictions. But we still do not quite have what Berkeley wants. As he makes plain in 13., it is not merely that Hylas does not have such a conception, but that he cannot. I assume his reasoning is something like this: We can have a conception of a certain state of affairs only if no contradiction follows from the supposition that in fact we do have such a conception. But in the case in question a contradiction does follow. Hence we cannot have such a conception.

If we grant Berkeley, in addition, that if we cannot conceive of a certain state of affairs then that state of affairs cannot obtain, then it follows that physical objects cannot exist, as he puts it, "without the mind".

In the above arguments contradictions were derived—"assuming no invalid inferences". But both arguments do contain invalid inferences. Note that in the first premise of each argument the object of conception is an idea of a tree. As Hylas says in 12., what he does when he has a conception of a tree is to "frame ideas in my own mind" and "conceive in my own thoughts the idea of a tree". In order to make this clear we can rewrite 16. as

26. I conceive an idea of a tree existing unperceived by any mind whatsoever

and 17. as

27. I conceive an idea of a tree existing independent of any mind whatsoever.

From these premises 7. seems to instruct us to infer, not that an idea of an unconceived tree is conceived by me, but that the content of the idea, what the idea is of, is conceived by me. And this is an invalid inference, logically analogous, I suggest, to the inference from belief de dicto to belief de re in the argument:

28. I believe that the present president has a name that twice contains the letter r.
Therefore,

29. The present president is believed by me to have a name that twice contains the letter r.

Suppose I believe that Jimmy Carter is the present president and that I have never heard of Ronald Reagan. Then I do not attribute any properties to the present president, Reagan, since I have never heard of him. Thus the inference from 28. to 29. is fallacious.

Berkeley writes of conceiving ideas instead of believing propositions, but the logic of his argument is similar. Just as an inference is made from believing a certain proposition in 28. to attributing a property to a non-propositional object in 29., so in both halves of the argument from conceiving an inference is made from conceiving an idea to attributing a property to a thing that is not an idea. Moreover, had Berkeley attributed the property to the idea instead of what the idea is of, then he would not have been able to derive a contradiction. For example, if from 26. we infer

30. An idea of a tree existing unconceived by any mind whatsoever is conceived by me,

then there is no contradiction. An unconceived tree cannot be conceived by me, but an idea of an unconceived tree can be. Similarly, if from 27. we infer

31. An idea of a tree existing independent of any mind is conceived by me

and continue as before,

32. Whatever is conceived by me is in my mind,

therefore,

33. An idea of a tree existing independent of any mind is in my mind,

then once again there is no contradiction. It is a certain idea that is in my mind, not, as 25. implies, a tree.

Over the years there have been a number of excellent critical discussions of the arguments from conceiving. Several of these seem to imply a different interpretation of the argument from the one I have suggested, an interpretation that attributes to Berkeley a certain confusion rather than an error in logic. For example, George Pitcher argues that "in thus confusing an idea and what an ideas is of" Berkeley mistakenly believes that, since the former cannot exist without the mind, neither can the latter. And I.C. Tipton writes, "In Berkeley's case the supposed demonstration fails, and it fails because he confuses the state of affairs envisaged with the mental image I may frame in making the supposition." As I understand Pitcher and Tipton, Berkeley's confusion is that he takes the idea of a physical object x to be identical with the physical object x. If this is correct, then we can construct a version of the argument from conceiving that apparently is deductively valid.
34. I conceive an idea of a tree existing unconceived by any mind whatsoever.

Therefore,

35. An idea of a tree existing unconceived by any mind whatsoever is conceived by me.

36. Things that are identical have all their properties in common.

37. An idea of a tree existing unconceived by any mind whatever is identical with a tree existing unconceived by any mind whatsoever.

Since 35. states that my idea of a tree existing unconceived by any mind has the property of being conceived by me, from 36. and 37. we can conclude

38. A tree existing unconceived by any mind whatever is conceived by me.

Once again we have a contradiction, and, if the inference from 34. and 35. is acceptable, the argument is valid.

The problem with this version of the argument from conceiving is that it begs the question. Berkeley cannot legitimately appeal to 37. until he first shows that physical objects cannot exist without the mind. Otherwise physical objects have a property, i.e., existing without the mind, that ideas do not have. Hence they cannot be identical. As Hylas says, "To exist is one thing, and to be perceived is another." Berkeley's goal is to show that Hylas is mistaken. But he cannot do it by assuming the very point at issue.

It is not difficult to appreciate Berkeley's problem. He wanted to eradicate scepticism, a worthy endeavor. But the philosophical theories available to him were of no help. Representative realism commits us to scepticism, since we can never be sure that our ideas resemble physical objects. Direct realism requires that we attribute incompatible properties to physical objects. But Berkeley saw a solution. What was needed was a new kind of direct realism, a direct realism not of external physical objects, but of mental objects, ideas in our mind. At one stroke this would defeat scepticism and save the common sense view that we are in direct contact with reality. Of course, reality turns out to be somewhat different from what the vulgar take it to be. It is, so to speak, internal and mental rather than external and physical, but that is a small enough price to pay. Clearly, then, an essential step towards this new kind of direct realism is to show that physical objects cannot exist without the mind. If I am right, however, it is a step Berkeley did not succeed in making, since his argument either depends on an invalid inference or begs the question. Berkeley's vision was clear. He saw what needed to be done, but he was unable to devise a way to do it.
ENDNOTES


5. Although his approach is very different from the one used in this paper, A.N. Prior seems to draw a similar conclusion. See Prior's paper, "Berkeley in Logical Form", in Papers in Logic and Ethics. Eds. P.T. Geach and A.J.P. Kenny (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 37-38.


7. Tipton, 173.


9. Berkeley, Dialogues, 94.


11. I wish to thank Richard Garrett, James Van Cleve, and Wayne Wasserman for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.