

Anna Ellis

Berkeley: On the Creation of Spiritual Substances and Tiny Minds

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Berkeley Depends on God as the Ultimate Perceiver

Berkeley asserts that there is no material substance, only *spiritual substance* – the substance of my mind, a [thinking] consciousness. He goes on to declare that all unthinking things exist only in being perceived by a mind; they exist only *because* they are perceived. He labels unthinking perceptible things *ideas*. According to Berkeley, the mind can *only* perceive ideas, so all perceptible things, such as the computer and the desk I am using, are *only* ideas, and not things made up of matter outside of my mind. Otherwise, I *would not* be able to perceive them.

It is important to note that, for Berkeley, for an object to *exist*, to be an idea, it does not necessarily have to be perceived by my mind at this moment, it merely has to be perceived by *some* mind.

In paragraph three of *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley states the following:

It seems to me equally obvious that the various sensations or ideas that are imprinted on our senses cannot exist except in a mind that perceives them ...

The table that I am writing on exists, that is, I see and feel it: and if I were out of my study I would still say that it existed, meaning that if I were in my study I would perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it.

Some may think Berkeley means here that, *in all instances*, an unthinking object exists whether or not *any* perceiver is there to perceive it, because if a perceiver were

there with the unthinking object, the perceiver would perceive it. This would mean that, *similar to Berkeley's example of the desk*, even if perceiving minds never came to be, an unthinking thing such as *the earth* would still exist because *if* perceiving minds came to be, then the world *would* be perceived. Those who believe that this is what Berkeley meant in that passage would then conclude that *this essentially means that a substance exterior to any perceiver's mind exists*.

However, it is evident that Berkeley does not think this is so. To him, an unthinking thing exists because it is perceived by him, or by another mind. Berkeley's entire argument for Immaterialism rests on the apparent existence of an *omnipresent, eternal Mind*. The omnipresent, eternal, infinite mind is necessary to explain the continuing existence of unthinking things that are not always in the presence of finite perceivers. In the *Third Dialogue*, Berkeley's Philonous tells Hylus:

When I say that sensible things can't exist out of the mind, I don't mean my mind in particular, but all minds. Now, they clearly have an existence exterior to *my* mind, since I find by experience that they are independent of it. There is therefore some *other* mind in which they exist during the intervals between the times when I perceive them; as likewise they did before my birth, and would do after my supposed annihilation. And as the same is true with regard to all other finite created minds, it necessarily follows that there is an *omnipresent, eternal Mind* which knows and comprehends all things, and lets us experience them in a certain manner according to rules that he himself has ordained and that we call the 'laws of nature'. (pg. 137)

Revisiting the scenario as to whether the world would exist without the existence of perceivers, it becomes plain that Berkeley would claim that if there are *no perceivers*

then the unthinking thing does not exist. In fact, Berkeley describes this omnipresent, eternal Mind as something that, in a way, *binds* and *facilitates* all finite perceivers and ideas together into a smooth running operation. If this omnipresent, eternal Mind were to be annihilated in some way the *operation/system* would become chaotic. It would mean that finite minds may not be able to interact with other finite minds; a tree could be there one moment, and an instant of not being perceived could mean nonexistence forever.

For Berkeley, *God* perceives all. If he did not exist, we would not exist. God created all finite, perceiving things, and the ideas perceived. He created the *laws of nature* as we see them (even though this may not be necessary to specify in his argument for Immaterialism). Berkeley's dependence on the existence of [the Christian] God is apparent here:

What is at issue between the materialists and me is not whether things have a real existence outside of the mind of this or that person, but whether they exist outside of all minds, *having an existence that does not involve being perceived by God.* (pg. 140)

In so, many would think that to successfully demolish Berkeley's argument for Immaterialism would be to show that one cannot prove the existence of God.

In review: according to Berkeley *nothing* exists without it perceived by *some perceiving thing*. If no perceiving things exist, including God, then *nothing* exists.

Perceiving Things with No God

Many may think that when Berkeley refers to *perceiving things* he only refers to humans and God. That he would fall in line, like Descartes, into not taking into consideration animals because of his religious background. However, this is not true as explained here on the creation of creatures before men in Genesis:

“created beings might begin to exist in the mind of other created intelligences besides men. To prove any contradiction between Moses’ account and my notions you must first show that there was no other order of finite created spirits in existence before men.” (pg. 153)

This seems to illustrate that Berkeley may have recognized that we have not yet proven whether or not certain things such as animals are indeed, perceivers, even if all he meant were such beings as *angels*.

In so, it could be possible, that every moment, *some unthinking thing* is being perceived because of the existence of such things as *bacteria*. At any given period of time, a desk or a tree is covered in millions, if not billions of tiny life forms that perceive it. Thus, *we could eliminate the need for an omnipresent, eternal perceiver to perceive unthinking things during those periods in which none of us human perceivers are there to perceive them.*

Yet now, we have to worry about how *the spiritual substances/substances of consciousness* – how perceivers came about. Berkeley would say that God created all finite perceivers and the ideas they perceived.

However, with the scenario that the Big Bang occurred, resulting clumps of *unthinking things* joining together to form the planets, and many billions of years of

reactions creating such things as the first forms of life would mean that *somehow unperceived things existed*, which would mean the existence of material substance and therefore Immaterialism is false. It would mean that unthinking things were created before thinking things. It goes without saying, that with Immaterialism, **the perceiver must exist BEFORE any unthinking thing is able to exist, since it is impossible for an unthinking thing to exist without being perceived.**

To remedy this problem, we can simply say that instead of something like *everything is made up of unthinking things such as atoms*, we can say that **everything is made up of thinking, perceiving things – everything is made up of tiny minds.** This eliminates *any worry* that there is no continuity of anything being perceived – since everything is made up of tiny perceivers. In essence, it becomes an illusion that there is such a thing as *unthinking things*.