

Matter, God, and Nonsense

Berkeley's Polemic Against the Freethinkers in the *Three Dialogues**

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In a notebook he kept while composing the *Principles*, Berkeley reminded himself “To use the utmost Caution not to give the least Handle of offence to the Church or Church-men” (N, §715). This remark is *prima facie* puzzling, for Berkeley certainly seems to be defending conservative religious conclusions of the sort the ‘Church-men’ ought to find quite amenable. Since it is difficult to understand how Berkeley could simultaneously defend traditional religion *and* be in danger of offending the Church-men, commentators discussing this entry have usually held that things are not as they seem: either Berkeley does not really fear offending the leaders of his own church (e.g., Roberts 2007, 8) or Berkeley does not actually regard his philosophy as a defense of religious orthodoxy (e.g., Turbayne 1970b, 154-156; Muehlmann 1992, 186-189).

Connected with this general puzzle about the place of religion in Berkeley's early works is a more specific puzzle about the *Three Dialogues*. The preface of that work promises that:

to an impartial reader ...it will be manifest that the sublime notion of a God, and the comfortable expectation of immortality, do naturally arise from a close and methodical application of thought: whatever may be the result of that loose, rambling way, not altogether improperly termed ‘free-thinking’ by certain libertines in thought, who can no more endure the restraints of logic than those of religion or government (DHP, 168).

This quotation suggests that the refutation of the freethinkers will be a major theme of the work. However, in the body of the *Dialogues*, we are treated to a conversation between two Christians. The freethinkers never appear again.

The solution of the second problem leads to the solution of the first. In the *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley adapts a freethinking argument against the existence

*Forthcoming in *Berkeley's Three Dialogues: New Essays*, ed. Stefan Storrie (Oxford University Press).

of God in order to show, by parity, that the freethinkers must reject the existence of matter. He then argues that, although this argument succeeds against matter, it actually fails when directed against God. In putting forward this argument, Berkeley employs the freethinkers' own premises, premises so strongly associated with religious non-conformity, and even atheism, as to be sure to offend the Church-men.¹

1 King and Collins on Analogy

The argument to which the *Three Dialogues* responds was attributed by Berkeley to the freethinker Anthony Collins. In order to appreciate this argument, and Berkeley's reasons for attributing it to Collins, some historical background is necessary.

In his 1697 *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, Pierre Bayle renewed ancient objections to the existence of God. Bayle argued that the existence of evil is inconsistent with our conception of God as good, wise, and powerful and, furthermore, that attempts to use a free will theodicy to escape these problems only made matters worse, since human freedom is inconsistent with God's foreknowledge and predestination (Bayle [1697] 1991, 148-150, 166-193). Bayle concludes:

The disputes that have arisen in the West among Christians since the Reformation have so clearly shown that a man does not know what course to take if he wants to resolve the difficulties about the origin of evil, that a Manichean would be much more formidable than previously; for he would refute each side by the others (183).

A 'Manichean' is a defender of the view that there are two equally powerful divine beings, one good and one evil. The various 'sides' the Manichean can refute, each by the other, are the various positions taken, among both Catholics and Protestants, on the question of the relationship of God's predestination and foreknowledge to human free will.

On May 15, 1709, Archbishop William King of Dublin delivered a famous sermon which aimed to respond to these arguments. The sermon was published in Dublin and London later in the same year (King 1709).

King's 'sermon,' like many 'sermons' in the Anglican Communion at this time, was really a lecture in philosophical theology with a Bible verse at the beginning. In it, King aims to show that, as the title of the sermon has it, "*Divine Predestination and Fore-knowledg [are] consistent with the Freedom of Man's Will.*"² This consistency question is especially pressing since, it is assumed, if we do not have free will then God is the 'author of sin' – that is, it is God, and not I, who is responsible for my misdeeds. King, however, does not

1. In Pearce 2014, I defend a similar conclusion regarding Berkeley's views on faith and reason.

2. This is the title that appears on the title page. The work is better known simply as the *Sermon on Predestination*.

have a *theory* of predestination, foreknowledge, and free will which renders the three consistent. Rather, his approach is entirely defensive, seeking to block the inference from predestination and foreknowledge to fatalism.

To block this inference, King puts a classical theological doctrine – the doctrine of analogy – to work in a new way. Thus King observes that “it is in effect agreed on all hands, that the Nature of God, as it is in itself, is incomprehensible by human Understanding” (King 1709, §3). Instead of speaking of God as he is in himself, we “ascribe . . . Attributes to God, by way of Resemblance and Analogy to such Qualities or Powers as we find most valuable and perfect in our selves” (§4).

King is correct that this “is in effect agreed on all hands” in the tradition of Western philosophical theology. It was generally agreed that ascriptions of properties to God could not be univocal with ascriptions of properties to creatures, so that, for instance, the word ‘wise’ does not have the same meaning in ‘God is wise’ as it does in ‘Socrates is wise’. The usual motivations for this view included the preservation of God’s absolute transcendence and absolute simplicity.³ King, however, makes a different use of the doctrine:

Foreknowledg and Decrees are only assign’d to God, to give us a Notion of the Steadiness and Certainty of the Divine Actions; and if so, for us to conclude, that what is represented by them is inconsistent with the Contingency of Events or Free-Will, because the things representing (I mean our Foreknowledg and Decrees) are so, is the same Absurdity, as it is to conclude, that China is no bigger than a Sheet of Paper, because the Map, that represents it, is contain’d in that Compass (§8).

According to King, all of the difficulties about the divine attribute raised by Bayle stem from the mistake of taking the divine attributes literally, when in fact they are merely analogical. Taken analogically, foreknowledge and predestination do not entail that we lack free will or that God is the author of sin.

Very shortly after the publication of King’s sermon, an anonymous tract in response appeared under the title *A Vindication of the Divine Attributes*. The author was Anthony Collins (Berman 1976, 25; 1990, 73, 83-84). According to Collins, King has achieved a Pyrrhic victory: “this way of understanding the Attribute of Foreknowledg does without all question reach his Grace’s purpose; for no Inconsistency can be perceiv’d between two things, one of which we have no conception of” ([Collins] 1710, 16). By emptying the words ‘foreknowledge’ and ‘predestination’ (as applied to God) of all content, King blocks Bayle’s objections, but this is of no use to the theist, and that for two reasons. First, “his Grace cannot prove the Being of God, or which is all one, the Existence of any Being that is really conformable to our Conceptions of God” (17).⁴ King

3. The *locus classicus* for this view is Dionysius *Mystical Theology*. Berkeley was extremely critical of what he saw as the outsized influence of pseudo-Dionysius (whom he describes as “an apocryphal writer”) on the tradition (Alc, §4.19).

4. Based on his description of our knowledge of God in the opening pages of his tract (see

blocks Bayle's bad inferences *from* that concept, but he does so by emptying the concept of all content so as to render it inferentially inert. The result is that we also cannot, from any premises whatsoever, draw an inference *to* that concept. Furthermore, Collins asserts,

His Grace has given up the Cause intirely to Mr. *Bayle*. For Mr. *Bayle* says, There is no answering the *Manichean* Objections against some of the Attributes of God, without ... believing against Evidence ... And what says his Grace? Why he owns God is not good nor wise, and thereby yields to the force of Mr. *Bayle*'s Arguments. Only Mr. *Bayle* continues to believe God is good and wise, against the force of all Human Reasoning; and his Grace supposes God is neither wise nor good ([Collins] 1710, 22).

Berkeley endorses essentially all of the claims Collins makes in the *Vindication*. In a letter to Percival dated 1 March 1709/1710, Berkeley writes:

I met with some who supporting themselves on the authority of the Archbishop of Dublin's sermon concerning the prescience of God, denied there was any more wisdom, goodness, or understanding in God than there were feet or hands, but that all are to be taken in a figurative sense; whereupon I consulted the sermon and to my surprise found his Grace asserting that strange doctrine. It is true he holds there is something in the divine nature analogous or equivalent to those attributes. But upon such principles I must confess I do not see how it is possible to demonstrate the being of God: there being no argument that I know of for his existence, which does not prove him at the same time to be an understanding, wise, and benevolent Being, in the strict, literal, and proper meaning of those words (CGB, 36).⁵

It is unlikely that Collins' tract had appeared by the time Berkeley penned this letter,⁶ but by the time he wrote *Alciphron* (1732), Berkeley clearly associated the argument with Collins (Alc, §§4.17-19).

In fact, the argument Berkeley attributes to Collins goes farther than this. In the *Theory of Vision Vindicated* (1733), Berkeley asserts that "the author of a book entitled, *A Discourse of Free-thinking* [i.e., Collins] ... [has] insinuated his infidelity ... particularly from the opinion of our knowing God by analogy"

especially pp. 4-6), Collins may have in mind the extremely influential arguments of S. Clarke (1705) 1998 as those that are blocked by King's theory. In fact, around the same time Collins was writing the *Vindication* he was also engaged in a public debate with Clarke about these arguments (Berman 1990, 79-81).

5. Berkeley, like Collins (see previous note), may have in mind the arguments of S. Clarke (1705) 1998. For Berkeley's opinion of Clarke at this time, see CGB, 48-49.

6. The publication of the *Vindication* is not discussed in Collins' published correspondence (Dybikowski 2011), so I have been unable to determine when in the year it appeared. However, even if the 1710 on Collins' title page is a New Style date (in which case it might have been published before Berkeley wrote this letter), the work was published in London and would likely have taken longer than this to reach Berkeley in Dublin.

(TVV, §6). In *Alciphron*, it is asserted that ‘Diagoras’ (i.e., Collins) had found “a demonstration against the being of God; which it is conceived the public is not yet ripe for” (Alc, §1.12). However, the only argument attributed to Diagoras in Alciphron is the argument from the *Vindication* for the conclusion that King’s doctrine of analogy empties the divine attributes of content.⁷

If this is where Collins’ alleged argument for atheism is to be located, then it is not difficult to see what the argument must be.⁸ The theist is faced with a dilemma: the divine attributes must be given either a literal or an analogical interpretation. Bayle’s arguments show that, interpreted literally, the divine attributes are contradictory. The arguments of Collins’ *Vindication* show that, interpreted analogically, the attributes are meaningless. Since no being could possess contradictory or meaningless attributes, no being possesses the divine attributes, i.e., God does not exist.⁹

2 Philonous’s Parity Argument

One of the most discussed passages of the *Three Dialogues* has come to be known as ‘Hylas’ Parity Argument’ (DHP, 231-234).¹⁰ In this passage, Hylas argues that Philonous’s arguments against matter are equally applicable against God. Thus, by parity of reasoning, Philonous must reject God along with matter.

This is an accurate account of the dialectical situation inside the fiction of Berkeley’s *Dialogues*. Placing the *Dialogues* in historical context, however, we are brought to recognize that the so-called ‘parity argument’ is in fact *Collins’ argument for atheism*. Thus in fact it is Berkeley who (through Philonous) is arguing by parity.¹¹ Philonous poses a dilemma for the materialist: “let me know any sense, literal or not literal, that you understand [material substratum] in” (199). If taken literally, Philonous argues, material substratum is contradictory,

7. ‘Diagoras’ is consistently used as a pseudonym for Collins in *Alciphron* (O’Higgins 1976, 93; Berman 1990, 72-74; Taranto 2010). This may not be the only argument for atheism Berkeley attributes to Collins, for Berkeley also says in TVV that Collins “has insinuated his infidelity from men’s various pretences and opinions concerning revealed religion” (§6). On other possible ‘insinuations’ of atheism in Collins, and for an argument that Collins was really an atheist, see Berman 1990, ch. 3. Berkeley’s use of the word ‘particularly’ clearly indicates that he takes the argument about the divine attributes as primary. Berkeley cites Collins’ *Discourse*, p. 42 for the ‘insinuation of infidelity’ from disputes about the divine attributes. Berkeley does not specify the edition he is working from; in the first (1713) edition the discussion of the divine attributes appears on pp. 50-52. Here, however, Collins merely notes the difference on the divine attributes between Archbishop Tillotson and Archbishop King as a reason against blindly believing the clergy; the argument put forward in Alc, §§4.17-18 could only be drawn from the *Vindication*.

8. In what follows, I will often drop the qualification ‘alleged’ and simply speak of Collins’ argument for atheism. However, I do not mean to be taking a position on Collins’ actual intentions, but only on Berkeley’s interpretation of Collins.

9. For a similar reconstruction of the argument, see Berman 1976, 25-26; 1990, 87-88.

10. The name is due to Cummins 1982.

11. That there is a parallel between the anti-materialist dialectic in the *Dialogues* and the King-Collins dialectic about divine analogy, is suggested, but not developed, by Berman 1994, 141-143, 152.

but if taken analogically it is meaningless. Accordingly, material substratum must be rejected.¹²

According to Berkeley, “the doctrine of material substance ... [is the] foundation [on which] have been raised all the impious schemes of atheism and irreligion” (PHK, §92). Berkeley’s reason for thinking this is that, in his day, there were generally understood to be two forms of atheism, Epicurean and Spinozistic. According to Epicurean atheism, matter is eternal and arranged itself into the orderly cosmos we perceive by chance. According to Spinozistic atheism, matter is eternal and is arranged into this orderly cosmos by necessity.¹³ Thus in *Alciphron* the freethinker Lysicles says, “the question [between theists and atheists has] always been, not whether there was a Principle [responsible for producing the observed effects] ... but whether this Principle was a νοῦς, a thinking intelligent being” (Alc, §4.18). This account of the dispute between theists and atheists could have been drawn from any number of early modern sources, but it lines up remarkably well with Collins’ account in the *Vindication* ([Collins] 1710, 19-20).¹⁴ Atheism, as conceived by Berkeley (and Collins), involves the substitution of matter for God. Berkeley’s polemical strategy is to perform his own substitution of matter for God, substituting matter into Collins’ argument.¹⁵

2.1 Step One: Literal Materialism is Contradictory

Philonous presents a number of arguments whose stated conclusion is that materialism is or involves a contradiction. Here, I discuss three of the arguments in order to show, first, that each of them involves a literal interpretation of a materialist claim and, second, that Berkeley in each case shows awareness that the materialist might deny that the claim was intended literally.

The first two arguments are intertwined and so best discussed together. These are the pleasure/pain argument and the perceptual relativity argument. The materialist assertion targeted here is that *sensed qualities exist in unthink-*

12. An argument along these general lines does appear in the *Principles* (PHK, §§79-81), which was almost certainly written before Berkeley read Collins’ *Vindication*, but in the *Principles* Berkeley does not connect this line of thought with analogy as he does in the *Dialogues*. Furthermore, as the previously quoted letter to Percival shows, Berkeley had this sort of objection to King in mind at least as early as March 1710, but only later began to associate it with Collins. My claim is that it was between 1710 and 1713 that Berkeley came to associate the argument with Collins and, seeing that the argument had an influential advocate, became more preoccupied with it. The *Three Dialogues*, I am arguing, provides Berkeley’s response.

13. Sources for this interpretation of atheism which would have been familiar to Berkeley include Edwards 1695, 14-20; Shaftesbury (1699) 1714, 11; and S. Clarke (1705) 1998, 17-29, 38-39. On Berkeley’s probable familiarity with Edwards, see Pearce 2014, 426. Shaftesbury is discussed at length and frequently explicitly cited in the third dialog of *Alciphron*. For discussion of Berkeley’s response to Shaftesbury, see Jaffro 2007.

14. Another source, on which Collins is likely drawing, is S. Clarke (1705) 1998, 38: “The self-existent and original cause of all things must be an intelligent being. In this proposition lies the main question between us and the atheists.”

15. This dialectic continues also into Berkeley’s positive metaphysics where, as David Berman has observed, “God fills the vacuum left by the elimination of matter” (Berman 1994, 52).

ing, mind-independent, external objects. The more specific concession Philonous extracts from Hylas at the beginning of the pleasure/pain argument is that “Whatever degree of heat we perceive by sense, we may be sure the same exists in the object that occasions it” (DHP, 175). Some objects, however, are perceived as intensely hot and, Hylas is brought to admit, intense heat is pain and pain cannot exist in an unthinking thing (176). This result is then generalized.

Philonous believes that the result is absolutely general, at least with respect to heat and cold, but Hylas resists this conclusion, insisting that a moderate degree of heat or cold is “nothing more than a privation of pain and pleasure” and therefore may exist in “an unthinking substance” after all (178). In response to this, Philonous introduces the perceptual relativity argument:

Phil. Can any doctrine be true that necessarily leads a man into an absurdity?

Hyl. Without doubt it cannot.

Phil. Is it not an absurdity to think that the same thing should be at the same time both cold and warm?

Hyl. It is.

Phil. Suppose now one of your hands hot and the other cold, and that they are both at once put into the same vessel of water, in an intermediate state; will not the water seem cold to one hand and warm to the other?

Hyl. It will.

Phil. Ought we not therefore by your principles to conclude, it is really both cold and warm at the same time, that is, according to your own concession, to believe an absurdity? (178-179)

Perceptual relativity was a standard line of argument against the mind-independent existence of secondary qualities (see, e.g., Boyle [1666] 1991, 36; EHU, §2.8.21). Furthermore, Bayle had already noted that this line of argument was similarly applicable to primary qualities (Bayle [1697] 1991, 364-366).¹⁶ Some commentators have, however, been puzzled by Berkeley’s use of it here since, in the *Principles*, Berkeley says that the argument is defective (e.g., Lambert 1982; Stoneham 2002, 64-67; Dicker 2011, 102). “[T]his method of arguing,” he writes, “does not so much prove that there is no extension or colour in an outward object, as that we do not know by sense which is the true extension or colour of the object” (PHK, §15).

Berkeley has not forgotten this point here in the *Dialogues*. Rather, Hylas is at first made explicitly to assert, in each case, that the objects have the qualities we perceive them to have. Thus, for instance, he says that “Each visible object has the colour which we see in it” (DHP, 183). This assertion is shown to be inconsistent by the perceptual relativity argument (cf. Muehlmann 1991, 411-417; 1992, 149-156).¹⁷ What Berkeley notes in the *Principles* is that the materialist need not make this assertion. Accordingly, in the *Dialogues*, he

16. For discussion see Wilson 1982, 112-116.

17. Dicker 1982, 414-415 asserts that this ‘confusion of seeming with being’ vitiates Berkeley’s argument. What I am suggesting is that it is *Hylas* who confuses seeming with being. This is

allows Hylas to back off by drawing a distinction between real and apparent colors (DHP, 184-186). Ultimately, however, in light of further argument, Hylas is made to concede that colors “are all equally apparent” (186).

This concession on Hylas’s part leads him to draw the conclusion that “Light and colours, as immediately perceived by us, . . . cannot exist without the mind. But in themselves they are only the motions and configurations of certain insensible particles of matter” (187). This result is generalized into a distinction between the *sensations* that are in the mind and the real features of objects which cause, and are represented by, them (194). It is here that analogy enters the picture. In fact, King made explicit use of the doctrine of secondary qualities as a point of comparison to explain his doctrine of analogy:

I think it is agreed by most that write of Natural Philosophy, that Light and Colours are nothing but the Effects of certain Bodies and Motions on our Sense of Seeing, and that there are no such things at all in Nature, but only in our Minds: and of this at least we may be sure, that Light in the Sun or Air, are very different from what they are in our Sensations of them, yet we call both by the same Names, and term that which is only perhaps a Motion in the Air, Light, because it begets in us that Conception which is truly Light . . . it is certain, that which in the Sun causes the Conception of Light in us, is as truly different in nature from the Representation we have of it in our Mind, as our Foreknowledg is from what we call so in God (King 1709, §15).¹⁸

For King, ‘light’ and ‘color’ properly speaking signify certain sensible ideas which cannot exist outside the mind. The terms are used in an extended, analogical sense to signify the causes of those ideas, in something like the way our conception of human knowledge is analogically extended to apply to a totally different, unknowable attribute of God. This is precisely the position to which Hylas is driven, with respect to sensible qualities, by the pleasure/pain argument and the perceptual relativity argument. Thus, for instance, “sensible sound, or sound in the common acceptation of the word” must be distinguished from “sound in the real philosophic sense, which . . . is nothing but a certain motion of the air” (DHP, 182). Hylas is driven to this point by being shown that the supposition that perceived sound exists outside the mind is contradictory.

The third contradiction Philonous identifies stems from Hylas’s claim that “when I look at sensible things . . . considering them as so many modes and qualities, I find it necessary to suppose a material *substratum*, without which they cannot be conceived to exist” (197). Here, we pass from naive forms of materialism to the philosophical form endorsed, for instance, by the Cartesians and by Locke (see, e.g., CSM, 2:20-22; EHU, §§2.23.1-4). However, the literal interpretation of Hylas’s claim here is easily disposed of since “the word ‘*substratum*’

part of the assumption for *reductio* at this point in the *Dialogues*. Berkeley will address more sophisticated versions of materialism, which permit a distinction between seeming and being among sensible qualities, later in the *Dialogues*.

18. For further discussion see Berman 1976, §2.

should [if taken literally] import that it is spread under the sensible qualities or accidents” but “the idea of extension [is] necessarily included in ‘spreading’,” generating a regress (DHP, 198).

Hylas responds, “I do not mean that matter is ‘spread’ in a gross literal sense under extension. The word ‘*substratum*’ is used only to express in general the same thing with ‘substance’” (198). Here the suggestion is that the use of ‘substratum’ is not to be taken literally, but (unlike divine analogy on King’s view) can ultimately be cashed out in literal terms. However, as Philonous immediately notes, the literal, etymological sense of ‘substance’ is ‘standing under,’ which similarly implies that substance is itself extended.¹⁹

Hylas understandably complains, “You still take things in a strict literal sense: that is not fair, Philonous” (199). Having acknowledged that, on the literal reading, the claim that matter is a substratum of sensible qualities is absurd, he must retreat to an analogical reading.

2.2 Step Two: Analogical Materialism is Meaningless

Philonous argues that the materialist claim that qualities such as light, heat, and extension exist in a mind-independent, unperceiving, material substratum is, when interpreted literally, contradictory. In response to these arguments, Hylas denies that that claim ought to be interpreted literally. If this strategy is to succeed, however, Hylas must give some account of how the claim is to be understood. Thus Philonous demands: “let me know any sense, literal or not literal, that you understand [‘substratum’] in” (199). According to Berkeley, no such interpretation can be given.

In distinguishing between qualities as sensed and qualities as inhering in objects, Hylas, like King, admits that the names of qualities in their ‘common acceptation’ refer to the qualities as sensed. He denies that these are in the objects. It is repeatedly emphasized in the dialogue, by both Hylas and Philonous, that this is a way of denying that the objects possess the features attributed to them by ‘the vulgar.’ Thus Hylas is ultimately forced to concede that “there is no heat in the fire” (179), “that sugar is not sweet” (180), and that “real sounds are never heard” (183). This parallels Collins’ charge that, by putting forward his doctrine of analogy, King “supposes God is neither wise nor good” ([Collins] 1710, 22).

As Philonous points out, within the context of the *Dialogues*, this ought to be enough reason to reject the analogical reading, since the disputants had agreed “to admit that opinion for true, which upon examination shall appear most agreeable to common sense and remote from scepticism” (DHP, 172), and they further agreed that whoever “denies the reality of sensible things or professes the greatest ignorance of them . . . is the greatest sceptic” (173). In putting forward his analogical reading Hylas “make[s] . . . light of departing from common phrases

19. Cf. Locke: “were the Latin words *Inhærentia* and *Substantia*, put into the plain English ones that answer them, and were called *Sticking on*, and *Under-propping*, they would better discover to us the very great clearness there is in the Doctrine of *Substance and Accidents*” (EHU, §2.13.20).

and opinions” (DHP, 182), which, according to the agreed-upon rules of the debate, amounts to ceding ground to Philonous.

Nevertheless, Philonous does not rest his case here. He goes on to argue that Hylas’s analogical position is not merely uncommonsensical but ultimately *nonsensical*. This argument proceeds in several stages as Hylas gives more and more vague and general analyses of matter.

On Hylas’s first attempt to develop an analogical interpretation of ‘material substratum,’ he simply admits defeat, remarking that he cannot after all conceive such a substratum. However, in the second dialogue, Hylas makes a second attempt at an analogical interpretation. He says, “[my ideas] have therefore some cause distinct from me and them, of which I pretend to know no more than that it is ‘the cause of my ideas’. And this thing, whatever it be, I call matter” (216).

Here Hylas is again very close to King: “because we do not know what [God’s] Faculties are in themselves, we give them the Names of those Powers, that we find would be necessary to us in order to produce such effects, and call them Wisdom, Understanding, and Fore-knowledge” (King 1709, §4). God’s (so-called) ‘wisdom,’ in other words, is only the unknown cause of the orderliness of nature. Collins had argued that, given this theory, King

can have no other Notion of God, than of a Being that is *a general Cause of Effects* ... But if that be all that is meant by that term, I see not why Atheists should not come into the Belief of such a Deity: for they, equally with Theists, allow some general Cause of all Effects to have eternally existed ([Collins] 1710, 18).

This is also precisely the reasoning Berkeley puts into the mouth of the free-thinker Lysicles in *Alciphron* (Alc, §4.18).

Philonous’s response to Hylas parallels Collins’ response to King:

Tell me, Hylas, has everyone a liberty to change the current proper signification annexed to a common name in any language? ... And does not ‘matter’, in the common current acceptation of the word, signify an extended, solid, moveable unthinking, inactive substance? ... And has it not been made evident that no such substance can possibly exist? You may indeed, if you please, annex to the word ‘matter’ a contrary meaning to what is vulgarly received, and tell me you understand by it an unextended, thinking, active being, which is the cause of our ideas. But what else is this than to play with words ...? (DHP, 216)

Just as King “has given up the Cause” of theism ([Collins] 1710, 22), Hylas has given up the cause of materialism.

Hylas goes on to suggest two more analogical interpretations of matter, as unknown instrument and as unknown occasion of God’s causing our ideas. Both of these are rejected on theological grounds (DHP, 218-220). (Since these are explicitly theistic proposals they are, of course, no help to the materialistic

atheist, but Hylas is no atheist.) Finally Hylas retreats entirely from the attempt to give any sense to ‘matter’: “I at present understand by ‘matter’ neither substance nor accident, thinking nor extended being, neither cause, instrument, nor occasion, but something entirely unknown, distinct from all these” (DHP, 221). He goes on to concede that, when he speaks of matter, he has no notion in mind at all (222). Philonous summarizes the debate as follows:

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 (222-223).

To speak of ‘matter’ in this analogical sense is to “mean nothing at all, . . . [and to] employ words to no manner of purpose, without any design or signification whatsoever” (223). Analogical materialism is, in other words, meaningless.

2.3 Conclusion: Materialism Must be Rejected

A few pages after conceding that he has no notion of matter, Hylas relapses: “I am not so thoroughly satisfied that you have proved the impossibility of matter in the last most obscure, abstracted, and indefinite sense” In response, Philonous secures from Hylas the concession that a thing is shown to be impossible “When a repugnancy is demonstrated between the ideas comprehended in its definition.” However, “where there are no ideas, there no repugnancy can be demonstrated between ideas” (225). Thus, Philonous concludes, “in all your various senses [of ‘matter’] you have been shown either to mean nothing at all or, if anything, an absurdity. And if this be not sufficient to prove the impossibility of a thing, I desire you will let me know what is” (226). It is the analogical interpretations that ‘mean nothing at all’ and the literal interpretations that are ‘absurdities’.

This line of thought again runs directly parallel to Collins’ objections to King: “by understanding *Foreknowledge* in a different sense from what is supposed in the Objection, and not assigning any determinate sense to the word, all Objections whatever are prevented; for no Man can object to he knows not what” ([Collins] 1710, 16). Just as no one can object to a meaningless thesis, no one can believe a meaningless thesis. Thus materialism, whether literal or analogical, must be rejected.

3 Saving God

Berkeley’s strategy in the negative portion of the *Three Dialogues* is to substitute matter for God in Collins’ argument for atheism. This is meant to show that the freethinkers, on their own principles, must be immaterialists. However, adopting this strategy requires Berkeley to endorse many of the freethinkers’ premises including, most notably, the failure of the analogical theory of the

divine attributes. If the structure of Collins' argument against God is correct, and most of its premises are true, then how can Berkeley escape atheism? This is the challenge posed by Hylas' Parity Argument.

3.1 Theism is Meaningful

In a way, Berkeley's response is quite simple and direct: he aims to defend a univocal interpretation of the divine attributes, so that God is after all wise in the same sense of 'wise' as Socrates (Daniel 2011; Curtin 2014, 611-615). However, at a deeper level, Berkeley's answer is not quite so simple as this, since Berkeley does *not* dispute King's claim "that the Descriptions which we frame to our selves of God, or of the Divine Attributes, are not taken from any direct or immediate Perceptions that we have of him or them" (King 1709, §4). In Berkeley's (and Philonous's) view, everything that is perceived is an idea, and all ideas are passive. But nothing passive could in any way resemble God who is 'pure act.' It follows that, just as King said, there is no idea (or 'direct or immediate perception') of God or any of his attributes (DHP, 231).

This is the dialectical situation: Philonous has argued, among other things, that 'matter' cannot be rendered meaningful by making it stand for an idea, since there is (and can be) no idea corresponding to what matter is supposed to be. Analogical strategies for the indirect conception of matter without an idea of it also fail to secure the meaningfulness of the term. But now Philonous must concede that there is similarly no idea of God.²⁰ He cannot employ analogy as a strategy for securing the meaningfulness of the word 'God', for he has argued that analogy fails to secure meaningfulness. He must therefore deploy an alternative strategy for securing the meaningfulness of 'God,' and he must ensure that this strategy cannot be adapted to the case of 'matter.' The strategy Philonous (speaking, of course, for Berkeley) adopts depends *essentially* on the existence of genuine resemblance between myself and God and so *requires* a univocal interpretation of the divine attributes, contrary to the tradition of Western philosophical theology.

In response to the objection that there can be no idea of God, and that the word 'God' is therefore meaningless, Philonous employs a pattern of argument Berkeley employs throughout his works: he argues that there are paradigmatically meaningful bits of language whose meaningfulness simply cannot be accounted for on an idea-based semantics (see, e.g., PHK, Intro §§18-20; Alc, §§7.5-18).²¹ Philonous says:

20. The concession that we have no idea of God might also be shocking to some Church-men, especially because of its association with Hobbes. See CSM, 2:126-133; Arnauld and Nicole (1662) 1996, 27-30.

21. On Berkeley's use of this pattern of argument, see Pearce, *manuscript*, chs. 1 and 3.

This interpretation of Philonous's response to the parity argument explains a fact that might otherwise be rather mysterious: it is *Philonous*, not Hylas, who first generalizes the argument to apply, not only to God, but to any spirit whatsoever. Cummins 1982, for instance, interprets the argument as being fundamentally a claim of parity between matter and spirit, not matter and God, and gives no explanation of the fact that Hylas formulates the argument in terms of God and Philonous generalizes.

I own I have properly no idea, either of God or any other spirit . . . I do nevertheless know that I, who am a spirit or thinking substance, exist as certainly as I know my ideas exist. Farther, I know what I mean by the terms ‘I’ and ‘myself’; and I know this immediately, or intuitively, though I do not perceive it as I perceive a triangle, a colour, or a sound (DHP, 231).

There is not space here to examine the nature of Philonous’s knowledge of himself.²² What is important for present purposes is that this is a kind of immediate knowledge (the sort we do *not* have of God), and this knowledge allows the labels ‘I’ and ‘myself’ to be applied. In other words, it is the sort of knowledge that renders singular direct reference possible.

In Berkeley’s view, it is this kind of immediate knowledge and singular direct reference that makes generality possible for both speech and thought. As Berkeley says in the *New Theory of Vision*:

When upon perception of an idea I range it under this or that sort, it is because it is perceived after the same manner, or because it has likeness or conformity with, or affects me in the same way as, the ideas of the sort I rank it under. In short, it must not be entirely new, but have something in it old and already perceived by me (NTV, §128).

In Berkeley’s view, general ideas, like general words, are general only by conventional signification (PHK, Intro §12). These conventions are based on our capacity to recognize similarities. In his response to Hylas’ Parity Argument (i.e., Collins’ argument for atheism), Philonous argues explicitly that our ability to think and speak of God depends on generalization from immediate knowledge of the self which proceeds in the same way as the process of generalization that allows us to sort ideas:

taking the word ‘idea’ in a large sense, my soul may be said to furnish me with an idea, that is, an image or likeness of God, though indeed extremely inadequate. For all the notion I have of God is obtained by reflecting on my own soul, heightening its powers, and removing its imperfections. I have therefore, though not an inactive idea, yet in myself some sort of an active thinking image of the Deity (DHP, 231-232).

My acquaintance with ideas allows me to construct sorts into which ideas, including those not perceived by me, can fall. This process depends on resemblances between ideas. In the same way, my acquaintance with myself allows me to construct sorts into which spirits may fall, and this provides the cognitive basis for genuinely referential talk (and thought) about God (cf. Winkler

22. The nature of this knowledge has been much-discussed in the literature. See, e.g., Cornman 1970; Adams 1973; Tipton 1974, ch. 7; Woozley 1976; Winkler 1989, ch. 9; Bettcher 2007; Roberts 2007, ch. 3; Cummins 2007; Winkler 2011.

1989, 282-284; Stoneham 2002, 208-209; Glezakos 2009, 406). But this route to reference depends on genuine resemblance, and hence on univocity.²³

As for matter,

you neither perceive matter objectively, as you do an inactive being or idea, nor know it, as you do yourself, by a reflex act. Neither do you mediately apprehend it by similitude of the one or the other, nor yet collect it by reasoning from that which you know immediately (DHP, 232).²⁴

As Philonous is at pains to point out in the expanded 1734 edition, the objection to matter was never based on the claim that I have no idea of matter (232). The fundamental point of disanalogy between matter and God is this: matter does not resemble anything of which we have immediate knowledge *but God does*.

3.2 Theism is not Contradictory

In the 1734 edition, Philonous insists, “I do not deny the existence of material substance, merely because I have no notion of it, but because the notion of it is inconsistent” (232). This must, of course, be understood of interpretations of ‘material substance’ on which it is meaningful. (It is, after all, just as impossible to deny the existence of blichtri as it is to affirm it.) In arguing that the notion of God is not similarly contradictory, Philonous emphasizes the coherence of the notion of spirit *in general* (233). Later, however, Hylas raises more specific objections to God. In response to these, Philonous argues that his view still preserves enough divine incomprehensibility to prevent objections “drawn from the inadequateness of our conceptions of the Divine Nature” from having force (254). Thus, for instance, “we cannot conceive [divine actions, such as creation] otherwise than as performed in time and having a beginning.” However, “God is a being of transcendent and unlimited perfections; his nature therefore is incomprehensible to finite spirits. It is not therefore to be expected that any man, whether materialist or immaterialist, should have exactly just notions of the Deity, his attributes, and ways of operation” (254).

Philonous goes on to argue that, in general, “the order, regularity, and usefulness of [phenomena] can never be sufficiently admired ” and this is well-explained by positing God, an “infinitely wise and provident” being, as their cause, but poorly explained by positing matter, which is “destitute of all contrivance and design” (257-258). As for the problem of evil (the source of Bayle’s objections), Philonous asks rhetorically,

23. For a detailed analysis of Berkeley’s understanding of linguistic reference and its metaphysical consequences, see Pearce, [manuscript](#), chs. 5-7.

24. Cf. King: “[God] is the Object of none of our Senses, by which we receive all our direct and immediate perception of things; and therefore if we know any thing of him at all, it must be by Deductions of Reason, by Analogy and Comparison, by resembling him to something that we do know and are acquainted with” (King 1709, §8). However, King goes on to say (in contrast to Berkeley) that “the likeness lies not in the Nature of them, but in some particular Effect or Circumstance that is in some measure common to both” (§8).

do you in other cases, when a point is once evidently proved, withhold your assent on account of objections or difficulties it may be liable to? ... will you disbelieve the providence of God, because there may be some particular things which you know not how to reconcile with it? (DHP, 259)

This response rests on the assumption that the existence of God has been ‘evidently proved.’ But just where has this been done? Although an explicit argument for the existence of God is briefly discussed in the *Dialogues* (212, 230–231),²⁵ Berkeley’s primary reason for supposing that atheism is refuted is his belief, shared with other philosophers of his day, that the viability of atheism depends on the eternal existence of matter. If, as Philonous has argued at length, matter cannot exist *at all*, then it certainly cannot exist eternally and so atheism is no longer a live option. Thus Berkeley writes in the *Principles*, “when this corner-stone [i.e., matter] is once removed, the whole fabric cannot choose but fall to the ground; insomuch that *it is no longer worth while, to bestow a particular consideration on every wretched sect of atheists*” (PHK, §92, emphasis added).

In this way, Philonous’s prolonged argument against matter is after all relevant to Berkeley’s apologetic purpose. On the other hand, some degree of epistemic modesty is still required for Berkeley’s response to the problem of evil to succeed, since the reasons against the existence of God provided by evils must be regarded as unsolved puzzles, rather than firm disproofs of theism. Thus Berkeley *does* need a strong enough view of divine transcendence to ensure that “It is not ... to be expected that any man ... should have exactly just notions of the Deity” (DHP, 254). What Berkeley aims to do is to secure enough similarity for the univocal application of mental predicates to God and human beings, and thus to secure the meaningfulness of ‘God,’ while at the same time retaining the infinite gulf between God and creatures.²⁶ In this way, he hopes to maintain enough mystery to avoid easy disproofs of theism.

4 Refuting the Freethinkers, Offending the Churchmen

Berkeley’s general strategy is to use the freethinkers’ own arguments against them. In the *Three Dialogues* he deploys Anthony Collins’ alleged argument against the existence of God as an argument against the existence of matter. This is especially significant since the eternal existence of matter was regarded as crucial to the tenability of atheism. However, Berkeley’s claim that the pattern of argument (allegedly) employed by Collins does away with matter while leaving

25. For an overview of this argument and the scholarly literature on it, see Pearce, [forthcoming](#), §1.2. Also see Rickless, this volume.

26. The nature of this infinite gulf is discussed at some length in *Alciphron*. Berkeley also there argues that he can still preserve important elements of what the tradition called ‘analogy’ (*Alc*, §§4.19–21). On the sort of analogy Berkeley accepts, see O’Higgins [1976](#), 94–99, 105–108; Daniel [2011](#); Curtin [2014](#), 611–615.

God untouched depends essentially on the rejection of divine analogy, a doctrine deeply entrenched in the tradition of philosophical theology.

The question this raises is, what sort of religion does Berkeley aim to defend from the freethinkers? Crucial here is Berkeley's religious populism, his view that

the Christian religion is ...an institution fitted to ordinary minds, rather than to the nicer talents ...of speculative men ...[so that] our notions about faith ...[must be] taken from the commerce of the world, and practice of mankind, rather than from the peculiar systems of refiners ([Alc](#), §7.13).

Berkeley, in other words, is interested in defending the ordinary faith of ordinary folks ("the bulk of Christians, husbandmen, for instance, artisans or servants;" §7.12), not some particular traditional version of philosophical theology.²⁷ In fact, Berkeley is arguing in the *Three Dialogues* that this ordinary faith can be defended from the attacks of the freethinkers if, but only if, crucial parts of traditional philosophical theology are jettisoned. It is in this way that Berkeley manages, in a work with relatively little overt religious content, simultaneously to attack the freethinkers and offend the Church-men.²⁸

Abbreviations

- [Alc](#) Berkeley, George. (1732) 2010. *Alciphron: or, the Minute Philosopher*. In Jaffro, Brykman, and Schwartz [2010](#), 17–274.
- [CGB](#) Hight, Marc A., ed. 2013. *The Correspondence of George Berkeley*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [CSM](#) Cottingham, John, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, trans. 1984–1991. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. 3 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [DHP](#) Berkeley, George. (1713) 2008. *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*. Cited by marginal numbers from D. M. Clarke [2008](#), 151–242.
- [EHU](#) Locke, John. (1690) 1975. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Edited by Peter H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [N](#) Berkeley, George. 1989. *Philosophical Commentaries*. Edited by George Hasson Thomas. The Philosophy of George Berkeley. Ohio: Garland.
- [NTV](#) Berkeley, George. (1709) 2008. *An Essay Toward a New Theory of Vision*. In D. M. Clarke [2008](#), 1–66.
- [PHK](#) Berkeley, George. (1710) 2008. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. In D. M. Clarke [2008](#), 67–149.

27. For further discussion of Berkeley's religious populism, see Pearce, [forthcoming](#), §4.

28. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2014 Dublin Berkeley conference, where I had many helpful conversations with participants.

- TVV Berkeley, George. (1733) 1998. *The Theory of Vision, or Visual Language, Shewing The Immediate Presence and Providence of a Deity, Vindicated and Explained*. In *Philosophical Works Including the Works on Vision*, edited by Michael Ayers, 277–304. London: J. M. Dent.

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