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The Idealism of Berkeley as Embodied in Leibniz’ Monadology

Douglas Packard, 2010

The philosophy of Berkeley is perplexing at first, confounding our common sense by denying the materialist position entirely, though his arguments are seemingly irrefutable. There are however, uncertainties and inconsistencies within it, particularly with regards to what sort of mechanisms, so to speak, could clarify his ideas into something well defined. In other words, what are the metaphysics that describe the idealistic world envisioned by Berkeley? This paper will show how the use of Leibniz’ Monadology can fill in these gaps, provide alternate and consistent explanations, and generally make Berkeley’s views easier to digest.

Berkeley aims to prove that “there is no such thing as what philosophers call material substance” (Pojman, 646). Of this he is certain beyond doubt. He starts by first defining sensible things as that which can be perceived immediately by the senses, not yet specifying whether sensible things are material or not. He points out that we can only perceive what he calls sensible qualities (color, sounds, etc.), and thus sensible things (grass, thunder, etc.) are combinations of sensible qualities (green and pointy, loud and bright, etc.).

The crux of his position comes from the simple observation that all perceptions are made in the mind, meaning we do not immediately sense “the things,” only the qualities that our mind perceives of them. This is obvious in the case of perceptions relating to pleasure and pain (e.g. heat, loudness, sweetness, etc.) since these are so apparently relative to the one perceiving. Less obvious is it that qualities we think of as inherent, such as mass, bulk or distance, are relative, but Berkeley argues that since a man and an ant would surely disagree on what is “big” and “small” extension then all other physical qualities – which would become meaningless without extension – are relative as well. Therefore, despite our reluctance to admit it, all qualities we observe, primary and secondary as some philosophers distinguish them, are perceptions which must be in and relative to the mind, and cannot be said to be absolutely inherent in any external objects. In fact, as sensible things are truly just collections of sensible qualities, so too are what we call physical “objects” just apparent collections of perceptions. It cannot be that these objects we perceive exist any more in some external reality than the qualities which comprise them, but we only know these qualities within our own mind and have no direct perception of anything external.
Granting that the idea or perception of grass is nothing but a collection of ideas in the mind, this does not rule out the existence of something external giving us the impression of grass, which is either imperceptible or mediately perceivable. The character Hylas calls the sensation of grass “an act of the mind perceiving,” and says the object in which we perceive the grass is an unthinking substance possessing qualities that we can sense (Pojman, 657). However, if there is an object separate from the sensations, which the mind does not act in perceiving, i.e. to perceive it requires mere passivity, it can be perceptible in an unthinking substance. This is a contradiction, since perception is only made by the mind, and cannot make or an unthinking substance. Therefore there can be no perceptible object separate from the qualities of itself; an “object” is simply the collection of them.

With respect to the second character Philonous’ distinction between an active and passive part of perception, his assertion that there is no passive part implies all perception is in fact active. Humans have a notion, though, that we do not act when we sense things. We open our eyes and see the sun involuntarily. These two views can be reconciled by removing the assumption that what we perceive must come from without. Here is the first clarification to be made to Berkeley: if everything that we perceive is not only within our mind, but from within as well, then the mind is neither active nor passive, it simply is. What we call the “external world,” our perceptions, is actually the state of our mind at any given instant. This is exactly Leibniz’ philosophy. The monad perceives, though it is windowless. How can one perceive the outside world from inside without a window between the two? By realizing that there is no outside world, or a material one at least, only our internal state. All perceptions, “whether light and colours, tastes, sounds, etc., are [all] equally passions or sensations in the soul” (Pojman, 658). Since what we call objects are just groupings of perceptions, then objects are “in” the soul as well.

Monads are the most simple substance in nature according to Leibniz, and are without extension. They are simply points with no length, width, or breadth (the reason for which will be addressed later). As such there is simply no place for a window to go, no way for things external to the Monad to come into it. Yet even though they are immaterial (have no extension) to be a distinctive thing at all it must have some qualities. Leibniz asserts that these qualities are constantly changing, and labels the condition of the monad at any instant its “Perception,” while the principle by which the condition changes is its “Appetite.”

What does it mean for something immaterial to perceive? When we think of our own sight, we imagine the eye like a camera, receiving an image from the outside world which is projected onto our retina. In other words, we believe that our relation to the external world is being reflected within ourselves. In the extensionless monad, the external world is similarly reflected in the internal quality, but it cannot come through any window. The relation between monads (for there is nothing else, in fact, which can be
perceived) is a harmonious one, preestablished. They internally reflect each other monad via abstract rules, not material interactions. In this way they very much embody our modern particle physics that is based on abstract principles of symmetry in governing point-particle interactions, not on literal collisions between them.

Since everything is made of monads that have perceptions, this includes our minds, though Leibniz makes the addition of memory to the monad of the human mind or soul. Since perception is defined as reflecting the current state of the monad and all it perceives, an additional quality is necessary to account for our ability to have ideas of past states. It is this bare monad plus memory that Leibniz labels as a soul, so literally, in the Monadology, all perceptions are in the soul, and thus following Berkeley’s logic so are all objects.

Leibniz argues rationally for why the most simple substance cannot have extension or be material. To be simple is to not be divisible into smaller parts. Extension implies a compound substance, a multiplicity of things, because there is no limit on how small we can divide an extended object into pieces. Therefore the simple substance must have no parts and lack extension, i.e. be immaterial. Since everything is made of this simple substance, there is in actuality no material.

Berkeley on the hand argues against the existence of material substance without describing the ideal one, leaving the reader confused. If there are material external objects, we must then suppose the existence of material substratum that supports them all, i.e. a material substance. For what is a “material” tree if there is no material out of which to make a tree? But in no way do we actually perceive the material, since we have established that perceptions are in the mind, and there can be nothing material within the immaterial mind. If we are committed to an imperceptible materialism, we suppose that the substance or substratum supports material, meaning it is spread under all the qualities of material, such as extension, and is in some way separate from them. But how can something be spread without possessing extension? This logic implies two different kinds of extension, with one supporting the other. But what supports the second type of extension? We can continue on ad infinitum, and must conclude that it does not make sense to have a material substance at all. Then what is the immaterial substance? Leibniz’ monads.

In the first dialogue, Berkeley concludes that to be, is to be perceived, and there is no reality except for ideas in the mind. This conclusion raises a lot of questions in the reader: if unthinking things are only able to interact with each other when a “mind” is watching, how does a lightning bolt headed for the ground know if someone is watching? If one looks just in time to see the lightning strike a tree, did it exist en route to the tree before the perception was made? If not, how did it get to be only a couple feet from its point of strike?

Berkeley moves on in the second dialogue to claim that there exists a consistent, external reality that requires an infinite mind, God, to perceive all and ensure the regular interaction of
inanimate or unthinking objects. This syllogism presumes, although Berkeley claims he “sees,” existence independent of human minds, seemingly in contradiction to his previous insistence on admitting nothing he could not perceive (Pojman, 665). It also introduces theological considerations, about which even the most consistently logical philosopher can be swayed by personal beliefs. I endeavor to show that by using Leibniz’ monads this anthropocentric God-as-perceiver can be avoided, along with the poorly defined (and somewhat inconsistent) notion of an infinite mind, while maintaining an external, though immaterial, reality.

Let us first address the question of objects (by which I mean the vulgar term, fully aware that there are, in truth, no “objects”) having existence independent of minds. We assume Berkeley’s first dialogue has proven the sole existence of perceptions as ideas in the mind of the individual, i.e. before he introduces a concept of God. Suppose we stretch a cord of rope over a flame in a room, and leave so as to not see what happens. When we return the rope will surely be in two pieces with charred tips where the pieces once met. Unless the flame goes out or the two get separated, this result is unavoidable. In this way, the flame in some sense endows heat on this unthinking rope, for without the presence of the flame the rope would remain unchanged (based on what Leibniz would call the principle of sufficient reason for a contingent truth: that the rope was whole and is now burnt are existential truths, so there must be some reason for them). But how can we be sure of what happened in the room while we did not watch? Maybe an enemy of ours sneaked past us into the room and burnt the rope so as to mislead us. Let us further suppose that we can rule out such foul play: we are then faced with an interaction between two inanimate objects without our or anyone else’s having perceived it. This forces us to infer that there is an external reality to our perceptions which can only mean one of two things: either there are material objects external to us, or the flame and rope were in fact perceived by someone or thing. The first option has been clearly disproved by Berkeley, and he says an infinite mind that perceives all is the answer. However, the two philosophers agree that minds have no extension or size, so what does it mean to have an infinite mind? If an infinity in size is meant, we have reached a contradiction. Could there be another kind of infinity?

Berkeley does not address this point, but Leibniz refers to perception as “representing a multiplicity in the unit or in the simple substance,” by which he means that perception is not singular, for one can see a blue sky and green grass at the same time and have separate ideas of each (Pojman, 602). On the other hand, that is not to say the monad contains these two ideas, for the monad has no extension by which to contain things. Instead, all the ideas or perceptions of the monad are embodied in its unique character. The immaterial idea of each monad includes its perceptions and thoughts. Therefore, an infinite mind could mean a mind which perceives all and does not require the contradictory quality of infinite extension.
However, to say something is an infinite mind that perceives all is the same as saying it is an idea that includes all other ideas; what, then, is the distinction between God, the infinite mind, and Nature, the sum of all that is? Spinoza saw no difference, and Berkeley admits his philosophy “looks very like a notion entertained by some eminent moderns, of seeing all things in God” (Pojman, 665). The theist would say that God has a will, whereas Nature is uncaring, but Berkeley “proved” God by saying there needs to be an infinite mind, which was required to do nothing but perceive all, and here Nature fills that role nicely, with divine providence being but another anthropocentric artifice.

Leibniz’ God is the necessary substance, the transitive and immanent cause of all that there is. Though all contingent truths need sufficient reason to be so, the existence of monads included, eventually there must be some necessary truth to start everything. For instance, it is a contingent truth that a car has hit a tree and been totaled, it is rationally possible that the collision be avoided. We can say that the crash happened because the road was icy, because there was a snow storm, because it is winter, because the earth is at a part of its orbit where it does not get as much light from the sun, because the sun is a particular mass, etc. This chain of contingent truths can continue ad infinitum, but there can never be a lack of sufficient reason for an event. What is the sufficient reason for existence at all? This cannot be part of an infinite regression of contingent truths, but is a necessary and final truth, outside any chain of reasons: God.

In the Monadology, God too is a monad, but there can be nothing without Him, for then that outside monad would need its own final cause (transitively caused), which is still God by definition. To contain everything, to internally reflect in the most complete and clear way possible all reality, is to be perfect. Though all finite monads are distinct, they are all “fulgurations” of the infinite divine monad (immanently caused), which possesses Knowledge, or the complete, perfect form of all ideas and perception, and Will, or the perfect form of appetition that moves towards what is actually best, not what is thought best (there is also Power, “the source of all,” but that is unrelated to this discussion). In this case it seems more difficult to remove the theological baggage, as perfection in its varying forms is truly part and parcel of Leibniz’s definition of God. Is there a more simple way to realize Berkeley’s infinite perceiver than a God?

What Berkeley overlooked but Leibniz made explicit was that if minds are immaterial perceivers, how do we know what is and is not perciipient? Certainly we cannot see minds, or touch them. We know other humans have minds because we can communicate, but is it to much to assume that things we cannot communicate with have no perceptions?

Yes it is too much, according to Leibniz, since monads are the “atoms of nature” then everything is perceiving (Pojman, 602). What does this imply for Berkeley’s philosophy? There is an external reality to the human mind because it is impossible for something

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to not be perceived unless it is alone in the universe. We are accustomed to recognizing that perception results in a relativity between observers: with regards to color and motion and sound it is apparent. To briefly allow some twentieth century knowledge to influence our discussion, the theory of special relativity by Einstein predicts that even “unthinking” elementary particles travelling from the sun to the earth experience relativistic time effects and will be live for longer without decaying will travelling than while sitting “still” in a lab, i.e. it is without extension and yet perceiving. This is exactly what Leibniz predicted in 1714! On the other hand, quantum mechanics has no precise materialist interpretation, but instead involves “particles acting like waves” and vice versa. How we measure or observe a system is integral to the result we will get. It is formulated on assumed mathematical axioms, not hard physical observations. What is mathematics itself but a system for relating abstract ideas? Has science literally reduced the world to abstract ideas?

Berkeley himself said, “the principles and theorems of science... are universal intellectual notions, and consequently independent of matter” (Pojman, 647). It seems both Leibniz and Berkeley had correct ideas about the true nature of the universe. They envisioned an immaterial world consisting of perceivers and the ideas within them. Leibniz provides a metaphysical system almost entirely consistent with Berkeley’s well-reasoned argument against materialism, and when taken together the conclusion seems almost inescapable: we understand much less about reality than we like to think, and great mysteries still await our discovery, perhaps forever.