

BERKELEY'S GOD PERCEIVES

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A number of commentators believe that Berkeley's God perceives.¹ Recently, George H. Thomas has challenged this interpretation, arguing that Berkeley does not solve the problem of intermittency with a perceiving God because Berkeley's God does not perceive at all.² I intend to make a case for the standard interpretation in this paper. Although Berkeley says little about God's perception, and Thomas correctly maintains that Berkeley's God does not perceive passively, I think that Berkeley's God perceives in some non-passive way.

The first order of business is to discuss briefly a principle of interpretation. With respect to the problem of intermittency, Thomas writes "If Berkeley did use God's perceiving as a guarantee for the existence of otherwise unperceived bodies, we would expect him to state the doctrine explicitly and frequently in his writings."³ *It becomes clear that Thomas thinks the same is true of the doctrine that God perceives. Since Berkeley only infrequently asserts that God perceives, Thomas concludes that Berkeley does not think that God perceives.*⁴ Of course, philosophers say things in passing that should not be regarded as an official position. Thus, interpreting a philosopher's views is, in part, a matter of counting passages. But if a philosopher repeatedly asserts theses that imply another, one is entitled to say the implied thesis is the philosopher's official position. Such is the case with Berkeley's thesis that God perceives. The basic problem with Thomas' paper is that he ignores such implications. What is the justification for this criticism? It is a commonplace that, for Berkeley, God is a spirit or a mind. However, Berkeley defines the 'spirit' in terms of perception. "From what has been said it follows there is not any other substance than spirit, or that which perceives."⁵ It is noteworthy that in the immediately preceding section Berkeley refers to an eternal spirit.

Such I take this important one to be, to wit, that all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word, all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind—that their being is to be perceived or known, that consequently, so long as they are not actually perceived by me or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all or else subsist in the mind of some eternal spirit. . . .⁶

The eternal spirit to which Berkeley refers is contrasted with created spirits, ruling out the suggestion that angels are the eternal spirits.

There are a couple of other passages in which Berkeley tells us what 'spirit' means. "For by the word 'spirit' we mean only that which thinks, wills, and perceives; this, and this alone, constitutes the signification of that term."⁷ The context does not suggest that Berkeley is referring to only finite spirits. It is reasonable to presume, then, that Berkeley means any spirit whatsoever. In fact, Berkeley repeats himself without saying that the definition pertains to only finite perceivers.

But it will be objected that, if there is no idea signified by the term 'soul', 'spirit', 'substance' they are wholly insignificant or have no meaning in them. I answer, those words do mean or signify a real thing, which is neither an idea nor like an idea, but that which perceives ideas, and wills, and reasons about them.⁸

If god is a spirit and if 'spirit' means 'that which perceives, thinks and wills', then God perceives.

Thomas grants that Berkeley's God has ideas. "Furthermore, he says that God has ideas but not that he perceives them."⁹ Berkeley does assert that God has ideas in some passages.¹⁰ However, he also identifies having an idea with perceiving. "Now, for an idea to exist in an unperceiving thing is a manifest contradiction, for to have an idea is all one as to perceive."¹¹ 'God has ideas', then, is synonymous with 'God perceives' in Berkeley's philosophy.

There are other phrases Berkeley uses interchangeably. Such is the case with 'exists in a mind' and 'is perceived by mind.' Here is one passage that corroborates my interpretation: "By which words 'mind,' 'spirit,' 'soul,' I do not denote any one of my ideas, but a thing entirely distinct from them, wherein they exist or, which is the same thing, whereby they are perceived—for the existence of an idea consists in being perceived."¹² There are other passages that support the interpretation, particularly those in which Berkeley says that idea cannot exist in an unperceiving thing.¹³ Of course, Berkeley frequently says that ideas exist in God's mind, just as he often writes that God has ideas, both of which are interchangeable with 'God perceives.'

In fact, Berkeley infers 'All ideas exist in the Divine Intellect' from 'God knows all things' in at least one passage.¹⁴ Since I have already argued that Berkeley uses 'exists in a mind' interchangeably with 'is perceived by a mind,' there is reason to link God's knowledge with God's perception. Sections 2 and 6 of the Principles of Human Knowledge contain identifications of 'perceived' and 'known.' If Berkeley's God knows everything, then (in this sense) God perceives.

These interchangeable uses of 'perceives', 'knows', 'exists in a mind', and 'has an idea' militate against Thomas' argument that Berkeley's God does not perceive, in part, because "... Berkeley avoids saying 'God

perceives' in many passages where both context and continuity suggest its use."¹⁵ Thomas cites a few passages in which Berkeley says things that would imply that God perceives if Berkeley's arguments were valid. Instead, Berkeley writes that ideas exist in God's mind and are known by God or something similar. But since there are a variety of ways in which Berkeley says "is perceived," Thomas' argument is weak. Besides, it is paradoxical to defend the thesis that Berkeley's God does not perceive with passages in which Berkeley says things that he clearly regarded as implying that God perceives.

Thomas does admit that there are two passages in which Berkeley says that God perceives. But he regards such passages as problematic. "However, I shall demonstrate that he affirms it in only two problematic passages and that in as many passages he clearly denies it, for reasons central to his system."¹⁶ Why does Thomas regard the passages as problematic? The reason, quite simply, is that in those passages Berkeley is trying to defend himself against charges that his position is skeptical and un-Christian. Because Berkeley is trying to show that his position is Christian and unskeptical, Thomas regards the passages as problematic.¹⁷ The apologetic context of the passages would render them problematic only if being Christian and unskeptical were incidental concerns for Berkeley. But they are anything but incidental. In fact, I think that the desire for a Christian and unskeptical philosophy is Berkeley's central aim. Let us see why. Both of the passages that Thomas discusses are in the Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous. Thomas defends his interpretation by pointing out that Berkeley says that he wrote that work in order "... to answer such charges [of skepticism and being un-Christian] that had been raised against the Principles and to present his doctrine in a more palatable form."¹⁸ This strongly suggests that Berkeley became concerned with being Christian and unskeptical only after writing the Principles. The insinuation is that the concerns were not central to Berkeley and were addressed only to avoid further attacks from his readers. But Berkeley makes it quite clear that he is vitally interested in defending the Christian faith and refuting skepticism in the Principles. Consider the opening sentence of the "Preface" to the Principles:

What I here make public has, after a long and scrupulous inquiry, seemed to me evidently true and not useless to be known — particularly to those who are tainted with skepticism or want a demonstration of the existence and immateriality of God or the natural immortality of the soul.¹⁹

To be sure, the "Preface" was omitted from the second edition of the Principles. The "Preface" is nonetheless representative of Berkeley's attitudes.

If Berkeley were only incidentally concerned with defending Christianity, then he would not have argued for God's existence, addressed religious objections in order to show that his doctrine is not un-Christian, linked atheism to the existence of matter, or referred to atheism as "monstrous" and "wretched." Every one of these themes appears in the Principles.²⁰ Berkeley was, after all, a bishop. And if here were only incidentally concerned with refuting skepticism, Berkeley would not have argued against it and written about it in disparaging terms so frequently.²¹ These concerns pervade the Principles. That, I submit, is the explanation for Berkeley's expressed concern with the same themes in the "Preface" to the Dialogues. Berkeley was concerned with them all along. Therefore, if the passages are problematic, they are certainly not problematic for the reasons that Thomas provides. Given the preceding arguments and the fact that Thomas provides no good reason for saying that the passages are problematic, we are entitled to presume that they are unproblematic. I think that this presumption will be confirmed by further evidence.

Thomas quotes the following passage from the Principles which, according to him, has erroneously been taken to refer to God's perception.

For though we hold indeed the objects of sense to be nothing else but ideas which cannot exist unperceived yet we may not hence conclude that they have no existence except only while they are perceived by us since there may be some other spirit that perceives them, though we do not. Wherever bodies are said to have no existence without the mind, I would not be understood to mean this or that particular mind, but all minds whatsoever. It does not therefore follow from the foregoing principles, that bodies are annihilated and created every moment, or exist not at all during the intervals between our perception of them.²²

Thomas notes, correctly, that Berkeley does not mention God in the passage. But he proceeds to give an implausible reading of the passage. He takes the word 'we' to refer to himself and his readers, while 'some other spirit' refers only to another human being. "Thus, his saying that 'bodies have no existence without the mind' does not mean all minds, for there 'may be' some other mind (human) perceiving them when we do not."²³ If Berkeley did not mean all minds, then why did he say "all minds whatsoever?" Thomas does not address this question explicitly, but does point out that Berkeley would not say "may" in speaking of God's perception, but would say "necessarily." Berkeley is not categorically asserting that God perceives. Rather, he is pointing out that the intermittent existence of things does not follow from his theses. He accomplishes this by pointing out what may be the case, given his principles. Thus, 'may' does not modify anyone's perception either human or divine. Since Thomas has misinterpreted

the use of 'may' in the passage, we should take Berkeley at his word when he says "all minds whatsoever." The passage is one of several in which Berkeley merely makes the logical point that intermittency does not follow from his principles.²⁴ Later, of course, Berkeley argues that intermittency is false, since an "omnipresent eternal mind" guarantees their continuous existence.²⁵ We should not interpret the passage in isolation from Berkeley's philosophy as whole. Although Berkeley does not categorically assert that God perceives in the quoted passage, he is content to make the weaker claim that intermittency does not follow before satisfying common sense with the "continuity argument," as Bennett has called it.²⁶ Given Berkeley's later theses on intermittency, the passage should, I think, be taken as weak evidence for my interpretation.

There are two passages, each of which contains two assertions of the thesis that God perceives. We have already seen the implausibility of Thomas' contention that the passages are problematic because Berkeley is trying to show that his philosophy is Christian and unskeptical. But there is more. Thomas omits some relevant lines within the context of the second passage:

But however oddly the proposition may sound in words yet it includes nothing so very strange or shocking in its sense, which in effect amounts to no more than this, to wit, that there are only things perceiving and things perceived, or that every unthinking being is necessarily, and from the very nature of its existence perceived by some mind, if not by any finite created mind, yet certainly by the infinite mind of God. . . .²⁷

The passage is relevant, since therein Berkeley maintains that

(1) Everything that exists either perceives or is perceived.

Of course, Berkeley believes that

(2) God exists.

But he also thinks that

(3) God cannot be perceived.

Proposition (3) is a consequence of Berkeley's thesis that no spirit, being active, can be perceived.²⁸ But (1), (2) and (3) imply

(4) God perceives.

It is equally noteworthy how Berkeley shifts from (1) to the statement that every unthinking being is necessarily perceived. That transition suggests that 'to perceive' means, in part, 'to think.' Thomas cites two passages in which Berkeley explicitly denies that God perceives by sense.²⁹ I suggest that Berkeley's God perceives in some other, non-passive way, to which Thomas replies,

What such a non-sensible sort of perception would be must remain be-

yond our human imagination. At least it seems to have been beyond Berkeley's powers, for he introduces no such idea, we are not justified in ascribing it to him.³⁰

This claim does not at first glance seem to square with one of Thomas' earlier statements: "Berkeley on occasion did broaden the meaning of 'perception' to include such things as memory, imagination, and thought."³¹ However, Thomas adds that the broader senses of 'perception' depend on ideas received through perception in the narrower sense, thus reconciling the paradox.

Thomas cites sections 1 and 5 of the Principles as justification for the claim that Berkeley thinks thought, will, etc. depend on passive perception. But Berkeley is discussing human perception in both of those passages. Section 1 begins as follows: "It is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge. . . ."³² The remark about dependence on passive perception is in the same sentence. Berkeley does not mention God in section 5, either. "But my conceiving or imagining power does not extend beyond the possibility of real existence or perception."³³ Berkeley refers only to his own perception in that passage. Thomas has provided no reason, then, for believing that if Berkeley's God perceives, God would perceive passively.

Since Berkeley's God has special abilities, and since Berkeley frequently uses 'perceives' interchangeably with thinking, willing and knowing, I suggest that Berkeley's God perceives in that sense, without having had to perceive in the passive way. True, Berkeley had no developed theory of divine perception. Thomas' article succeeds in calling that to our attention. The justification for ascribing this position to Berkeley is, quite simply, that he frequently says things that imply (or he regards as implying) that God perceives, uses 'perceives' in two distinct senses, and yet denies that God passively receives ideas. That conception of God's perception was not beyond Berkeley's imagination at all.

Thomas takes Berkeley's failure to respond to Samuel Johnson's query about God's perception as confirming evidence. But if Berkeley's reply to Johnson confirmed his interpretation, Berkeley would have denied that God perceives in that letter. There is no such assertion in Berkeley's reply.³⁴ Thus, why Berkeley refrained from responding on that point is a matter of speculation. I think I have a more plausible hypothesis. Berkeley wrote his response hurriedly, as he explains in the first paragraph of his letter.³⁵ Since Berkeley had no thoroughly developed theory of divine perception, he neglected that issue. The hypothesis is more plausible because it squares with my former arguments and commits us to less. Indeed, Berkeley may have neglected to write on God's perception because it was the last topic he planned to address, and there simply was not time. At any rate, interpreting Berkeley's silence as confirming the view that Berkeley's God does not

perceive takes too many liberties with the text. It is noteworthy that in the letter Berkeley says that ideas exist in God's mind; I have already pointed "ideas exist in God's mind" means the same thing as "God perceives."

One last point. Many commentators believe that Berkeley tries to solve the problem of intermittency with a perceiving God.³⁶ If Berkeley did, of course, too much continuity would be yielded thereby, since Berkeley's God would perceive (i.e., will and know) things eternally. Accordingly, one would expect Berkeley to be struggling with the problem of how to account for the fact that things begin and cease to exist if Berkeley's God perceives. Sure enough, one discovers that Berkeley wrestles with precisely that problem in the third dialogue.³⁷ I.C. Tipton has discussed the problem of (too much) continuity quite ably.³⁸ Now there is no perceiver but God that would create the problem of continuity for Berkeley. Although angels could perceive things for longer than they in fact exist, angelic perception would not imply the problem of continuity. Besides, the text shows clearly that God's ideas create the problem.³⁹ Nothing short of God's perception would create the problem of continuity for Berkeley, since he repeatedly says that ideas cannot exist unless they are perceived.

Since Berkeley was aware of the problem of continuity, and experienced difficulty in answering the problem in the third dialogue, I submit that he was uncomfortable with the position that God perceives. Nevertheless, such is Berkeley's position. It is not just a question of whether Berkeley uses the word 'perceives'. Since Berkeley argues against representationalism and the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, what God perceives must have all the qualities that we perceive. Accordingly, the content of God's perception would have to be described in perceptual terms, although the perception must be active. As I said, Thomas has shown that Berkeley does not have a fully developed theory of divine perception. But that is a far cry from showing that Berkeley's God does not perceive.

NOTES

1. The commentators include Jonathan Bennett, I.C. Tipton, E.J. Furlong and A.A. Luce, among others.
2. George H. Thomas, "Berkeley's God Does Not Perceive," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14 (April, 1976), pp. 163-168. Hereafter: "Berkeley's God."
3. "Berkeley's God." p. 163.
4. "Berkeley's God." pp. 166-167.
5. George Berkeley, *The works of George Berkeley*, II, ed. A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1949), p. 43, lines 33-34. Hereafter, I shall refer to the works in this volume as PHK and DHP.
6. PHK, p. 43, lines 20-28
7. PHK, p. 104, lines 25-28

8. PHK, p. 104, lines 31-35
9. "Berkeley's God," pp. 163-164
10. Berkeley says things (through Philonous) that imply that God has ideas, too. In DHP, p. 239, lines 37-40 Berkeley says that a spirit would have to have ideas in order to cause them. That, in conjunction with Berkeley's thesis that God causes our ideas of sense, implies that God has ideas. Thus, it is no surprise to find Berkeley saying "God knows or hath ideas; But his ideas are not convey'd to Him by sense, as outs are" two pages later (lines 22-23). The interchangeable use of 'knows' and 'hath ideas' is noteworthy, as will be shown below.
11. PHK, p. 44, lines 2-4, emphasis mine.
12. PHK, p. 42, lines 1-4, emphasis mine. cf. PHK, p. 54, lines 33-36.
13. See, e.g., PHK, pp. 42-43, 50.
14. DHP, p. 253, lines 14-18.
15. "Berkeley's God," p. 167.
16. "Berkeley's God," p. 163.
17. "Berkeley's God," p. 166.
18. "Berkeley's God," p. 166.
19. PHK, p. 23. Thomas cited the "Preface" to the Dialogues in order to defend his extraordinary interpretation. But in that same preface Berkeley writes that his purposes were to demonstrate God's existence and the immortality of the soul in the Principles. DHP, p. 167.
20. PHK, pp. 53, 76-77, 81-83.
21. PHK, pp. 25-26, 78-81, 85. I cite only passages from the Principles.
22. PHK, p. 61, lines 13-22, emphasis mine.
23. "Berkeley's God," p. 164.
24. PHK, pp. 61, 80.
25. DHP, pp. 230-231.
26. Jonathan Bennett, "Berkeley and God," in *Locke and Berkeley: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. D.M. Armstrong and c.b. Martin (Notre Dame, 1968), pp. 380-399. The reader should see E.J. Furlong's reply (in the same volume) to Bennett's claim that Berkeley is not concerned with intermittency. This is not to suggest that Berkeley was happy with the continuity argument. I think that I.C. Tipton (see note 38) has dealt with that question well.
27. DHP, p. 236, lines 3-9, emphasis mine.
28. PHK, p. 52, lines 26-28/
29. "Berkeley's God," p. 166.
30. "Berkeley's God," p. 166.
31. "Berkeley's God," p. 163n.
32. PHK, p. 41, lines 1-2, last emphasis mine.
33. PHK, p. 43, lines 12-14, emphasis mine.
34. *The Works of George Berkeley*, II, pp. 292-294.
35. *The Works of George Berkeley*, II, p. 292.
36. These commentators include Bennett, Furlong, and Tipton.
37. DHP, pp. 253f.
38. I. C. Tipton, *Berkeley: The Philosophy of Immaterialism* (London: Methuen, 1974), pp. 346-350. Tipton has provided a plausible account of Berkeley's uneasiness with the use of God as a solution to the problem of intermittency.
39. DHP, p. 253, lines 8-11.