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Some Priorities of Berkeley

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1. Introduction

Bertrand Russell once remarked that 'it is a wholesome plan, in thinking about logic, to stock the mind with as many puzzles as possible, since these serve much the same purpose as is served by experiments in physical science' (Russell 1905: 47). A philosopher or logician who took Russell's words to heart could do no better than read the papers and books of Arthur Prior. Prior delighted in such puzzles, and his works are replete with them. Nor are his works mere catalogues of puzzles; the puzzles are always accompanied with Prior's shrewd analyses. And whether or not one agrees with these, one always learns from them. Prior's sharp mind, his ingenuity, logical acumen, and erudition make him the peer of any philosophical logician this century.

In this chapter I want to discuss one puzzle that exercised Prior (1955*h*):[1] Berkeley's 'Master Argument' for idealism from the first of the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous.* His discussion of the structure of this is easily the most acute in the literature. Despite this, I think he gets it wrong in certain respects, and I will explain how.

As we go along I will formalize the argument, as Prior does. In fact I shall stick closely to his symbolism—with one notable exception. Prior's greatest failing was that he insisted on writing his logic in Polish notion. This is an uncomfortable mode of communication for most English-speaking logicians, and doubly daunting for philosophers. (It may be the single most important reason why Prior's work is not more widely read by philosophers.) I shall therefore, without hesitation, translate Prior's notation into standard infix notation.

Earlier versions of this material were first read at the University of Queensland, the Arthur Prior Memorial Conference (Christchurch, 1989), and to various other incredulous audiences in the northern hemisphere. I am grateful to so many colleagues for comments that it is impossible to name them all.

Berkeley's Argument

Let us start with a statement of Berkeley's argument, which I enumerate for future reference.

[i] PHILONOUS. . . . I am content to put the whole upon this issue. If you can conceive it possible for any mixture or combination of qualities, or any sensible object whatever, to exist without the mind, then I will grant it actually to be so.

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

[iii] PHILONOUS. How say you, Hylas, can you see a thing that is at the same time unseen?

[iv] HYLAS. No, that were a contradiction.

[v] PHILONOUS. Is it not as great a contradiction to talk of *conceiving* a thing which is *unconceived*?

[vi] HYLAS. It is.

[vii] PHILONOUS. The tree or house therefore which you think of, is conceived by you.

[viii] HYLAS. How should it be otherwise?

[ix] PHILONOUS. And what is conceived is surely in the mind.

[x] HYLAS. Without question, that which is conceived is in the mind.

[xi] PHILONOUS. How then came you to say, you conceived a house or tree existing independent and out of all minds whatsoever?

[xii] HYLAS. That was, I own, an oversight . . .

Now, what exactly is this argument? and is it sound? Let us take the questions in that order, since once the first question is answered, the second more or less takes care of itself. The fact that the argument is spelled out informally, and in dialogue form at that, makes the matter highly non-trivial. However, we can start by making one simplification. Berkeley normally talks of conceiving, but sometimes talks of perceiving (ii). Although there is a world of difference between these notions, Berkeley, for reasons of his own that are not relevant here, runs them together. Nothing in the argument hangs on this. Hence we shall do no injustice if we ignore this distinction.

2. *What is the Argument an Argument For?*

More troublesome is the fact that Berkeley slides between a predicative use of 'conceives'—conceive y (v, ix, x), think of y (vii), y is in the mind (i, ix, x)—and a propositional use—conceive of y as being F (ii, xi), conceive it possible for y to be F (i). Now, whatever connection there is between these two uses, we certainly cannot start by assuming one. I shall write the predicate as τ and the propositional operator as T. These may be read canonically as 'is conceived' and 'It is conceived that', respectively. (I put both of these in the passive, since although it is Hylas who is doing the conceiving, the particular agent in question is irrelevant to the argument.)

Notice that in the propositional use Berkeley sometimes talks of conceiving y to be F (ii, xi), and sometimes of conceiving it *possible* for y to be F (i). I take it that the 'possible' is doing no real work here, as is witnessed by the fact that the modality occurs but once in the argument. Berkeley, like many people, thinks of 'conceive to be possible' as a simple equivalent of 'conceive'. (Clearly, conceiving a state of affairs to be possible entails conceiving that state of affairs. Berkeley thinks the converse also holds: note that Hylas tries to demonstrate that something can be conceived to be possible (i) by conceiving it (ii). Philonous does not complain.)

Now, what is this argument supposed to prove? What is at issue is, as stated by Philonous (i), whether one can conceive that there is something that is not conceived. Hylas claims that he does conceive such a thing (ii):

$$(1)\quad T\exists x \neg \tau x,$$

showing that one can $(\varphi \rightarrow \Diamond \varphi)$. Philonous applies a reductio to (1) to show that he does not, and so (by the modal principle of necessitation) cannot. It is worth pondering why reducing (1) to absurdity would be an argument for idealism. After all, it is certainly not a statement of realism, which would be more like:

$$(0)\quad \exists x \neg \tau x.$$

Actually, even this is not precisely a statement of realism. Realism would be the view that there are some things that are not *essentially* conceived.[2] However, if realism is true in any interesting way, there must be many sorts of thing that are not being conceived: stars, grains of sand, leaves. Hence, it does no harm to take (0) to be a statement of realism.

Thus, the conclusion of the reductio, $\neg T\exists x \neg \tau x$, states that realism is not conceived; and since this is shown to be a logical truth, cannot be conceived. This may not be idealism, but it is a substantial victory for idealists if they can show that their opponents cannot even conceive their own thesis (or conceive it to be possible if Berkeley is right about the identification).

3. An Initial Analysis

Let us now turn to an analysis of the argument. Philonous thinks that (1) is true since it follows from the fact that he can think of some object, c (a tree or house, but its nature is not important), existing unconceived (ii):

$$(2)\ T\neg\tau c.$$

Whether or not this is so, notice that the reductio that Hylas performs is on (2), not (1). Here is the first puzzle, then. Even if (2) implies (1), it is clear that (1) does not imply (2); how, then, is the reductio supposed to work?

Let us leave this for the time being and ask, instead, what the contradiction is, to which (2) is supposed to lead. It is 'conceiving a thing that is unconceived' (v). We may reasonably understand this as $\exists x(\tau x \wedge \neg\tau x)$, where this is clearly meant to follow from:

$$(3)\ \tau c \wedge \neg\tau c.$$

Now how is (3) supposed to follow from (2)? The first conjunct is supposed to follow from the fact that Hylas is doing the conceiving (vii–x). In particular, to conceive c as being something is, *ipso facto*, to conceive of c:

$$(4)\ T\varphi(c) \rightarrow \tau c.$$

Let us call this the Conception Schema. Prior, in fact, secures the Schema by definition: τx is defined as $\exists\varphi T\varphi(x)$. But this seems wrong. I can conceive of an object without conceiving *that* it is something. Try it. Conceive of Uluru, that famous Australian rock. All you do is bring it before the mind, maybe with a mental image. The object, so conceived, may have certain properties; for example, it may be red; but you are not conceiving *that* it is red. No mere calling up of a mental image can achieve this. None the less (4) seems unimpeachable in its own right.

How is the second conjunct of (3) supposed to follow? On this the text is silent. Hylas just assumes it, and there seems no reason why it should follow from (2). It would appear that if Hylas had had his wits about him he should just have said: look Phil, I know that I conceived that c was unconceived; but that doesn't imply that c *is* unconceived, any more than my conceiving the moon to be blue implies that it *is* blue. Here, then, we have the second puzzle: where does the second conjunct of (3) come from?

Let us take stock. The argument so far looks as follows, with ? indicating the lacunae. I put the argument in informal natural deduction form. (Overlining a premiss means that it is not a supposition.)

$$\dfrac{\dfrac{\dfrac{\begin{matrix}T\exists x\neg\tau x\\ ?\\ T\neg\tau c\end{matrix}\qquad\dfrac{}{T\neg\tau c\to\tau c}}{\tau c}\qquad\begin{matrix}?\\ \neg\tau c\end{matrix}}{\tau c\wedge\neg\tau c}}{\exists x(\tau x\wedge\neg\tau x)}$$

4. Prior's Analysis

Let us now turn to Prior's reconstruction of the argument. First, how does he get round the silent step that we have just noted, to obtain $\neg\tau c$? With typical Priorian ingenuity. Prior interprets T not as 'It is conceived that' but as 'It is conceived and true that' ('It is truly conceived that'). To keep our notation straight, let us define $T_t\varphi$ as $\varphi \wedge T\varphi$. Then Prior runs the argument for T_t. The second conjunct of (3) now clearly follows from (2) (with 'T_t' for 'T').

What about the other problem? According to Prior, the major premiss of the argument should not be (1) (or, rather, (1) with 'T_t' for 'T') but (1′):

$$(1') \quad \exists x T_t\neg\tau x.$$

(2) then follows simply by appropriate existential instantiation. Thus the overall argument now looks like this:

$$\dfrac{\dfrac{\dfrac{\dfrac{\exists x T_t\neg\tau x}{T_t\neg\tau c}\qquad\dfrac{}{T_t\neg\tau c\to\tau c}}{\tau c}\qquad\dfrac{\dfrac{\exists x T_t\neg\tau x}{T_t\neg\tau c}}{\neg\tau c}}{\tau c\wedge\neg\tau c}}{\exists x(\tau x\wedge\neg\tau x)}$$

The argument is now, at least, valid. The reconstruction has two main problems, however: it is not faithful to the text; it is not an argument for idealism. On the first point: Prior interprets 'is conceived' as 'is truly conceived'. But nowhere does Hylas or Philonous indicate that the conceiving in question must be veridical. Indeed, as we noted, Berkeley identifies conceiving with conceiving to be *possible*.

Now consider the second point. The problem here is that the negation of (1′), whatever it is, is not a statement of anything that could be embarrassing to the realist. Recalling the definition of T_t, this is just:

$$\neg\exists x(T\neg\tau x \wedge \neg\tau x),$$

i.e. $\forall x(T\neg\tau x \to \tau x)$, which is jut an instance of the (quantified) Conception Schema. Prior is aware of this. He therefore has to charge

Berkeley's argument with equivocation between (1′) and (1) (or rather (1) with 'T_t' for 'T'). Now this is just not faithful to the text. Hylas' statement in (i) is quite unequivocal. Maybe Berkeley was just confused, or using sophistry, but a different analysis that does not have this consequence, if there is one, is obviously preferable.[3]

5. An Alternative Analysis

To this I now turn. The key is to go back and consider the object, c, which the reasoning is supposed to show to be inconsistent. As we noted, the exact nature of this is unimportant; all that is important is that it is some particular object which is not being conceived. Now reasoning about an arbitrarily chosen object of a certain kind is, of course, very familiar to logicians. Its cleanest formalization uses Hilbert's ϵ-operator (or some near cousin; see e.g. Priest 1979). Thus, '$\epsilon x\varphi(x)$' refers to an arbitrarily chosen object satisfying $\varphi(x)$ if there is one. This suggests that in understanding the argument, we should take c to be $\epsilon x \neg\tau x$. What then happens to the two lacunae we noted?

One is easily filled. The conjunct $\neg\tau c$ is now just $\neg\tau\epsilon x\neg\tau x$: an arbitrarily chosen thing that is not conceived is not conceived. And this looks so much like a logical truth that it is natural that Berkeley would not have felt constrained to comment further on the matter; which explains the silence in the text.

What of the other? Note that the following is a logical truth (in fact, an axiom) in Hilbert's ϵ-calculus:

$$\exists x\neg\tau x \rightarrow \neg\tau c.$$

Assume that T 'prefixes' to logical consequences:

$$\text{If} \vdash \varphi \rightarrow \psi \text{ then} \vdash T\varphi \rightarrow T\psi$$

(if φ entails ψ then conceiving that φ entails conceiving that ψ) and we have filled the gap between (1) and (2). This prefixing principle is a standard one in logics for epistemic operators similar to T (such as 'It is believed that' and 'It is known that'). It must be admitted that it involves a clear idealization of the agent doing the conceiving (believing etc.). In particular, they must be thought of as 'following through' all the logical consequences of their conceptions (beliefs etc.). But this seems quite harmless in the present context precisely because Philonous is clearly taking Hylas through these consequences—or the relevant ones anyway. (Alternatively, one might simply reinterpret τ as 'is conceiv*able*', and similarly for T. The prefixing principle is then perfectly acceptable.[4]) Hence this gap is filled too. Thus, we have the argument as follows:

$$\dfrac{\dfrac{\dfrac{T\exists x\neg\tau x \qquad \dfrac{\overline{\exists x\neg\tau x \rightarrow \neg\tau c}}{T\exists x\neg\tau x \rightarrow T\neg\tau c}}{T\neg\tau c} \qquad T\neg\tau c \rightarrow \tau c}{\tau c} \qquad \neg\tau c}{\tau c \wedge \neg\tau c}$$

(The last, existentially quantified, line of the original schematic formalization, is now redundant, and so may be dropped.) It seems clear to me that, on textual grounds, this is a much better formal version of Berkeley's argument than is Prior's.

6. *The Evaluation*

We can now come to the question of the soundness of the argument. The only aspect of the argument I have not endorsed is the truth of the premiss $\neg\tau c$ $(\neg\tau\epsilon x\neg\tau x)$. This is an instance of the more general $\varphi(\epsilon x\varphi(x))$, which certainly appears to be a logical truth. Let us call this the Characterization Principle (CP) (after Routley 1980). Historically, it was certainly close enough to pass for a logical truth, until it was questioned, notably, by Kant. Descartes's ontological argument goes essentially as follows. Let $P_1 \ldots P_n$ be a list of the perfections. In fact, they could be any old list; the only important thing is that one of them, say P_1, is the predicate of existence, E. (Note that there is no problem at all about having a syntactic predicate of existence. In classical logic the formula $\exists y(y = x)$ is an existence predicate.) Let b be the indefinite description $\epsilon x(P_1x \wedge \ldots \wedge P_nx)$. (It could be a definite description here, but that doesn't matter.) Then, by the CP, $P_1b \wedge \ldots \wedge P_nb$. Hence P_1b, i.e. Eb, an object with all the perfections exists.

The above argument would prove the existence of an object with any set of characteristics at all (including non-existence). Since it depends only on the CP, it shows that the CP cannot be assumed in general. (Kant's remarks that existence is not a predicate may plausibly be interpreted in this way: it is not a characterizing predicate, i.e. not a predicate that can occur in the CP.) The plausibility of the CP derives, I think, from the fact that one can read the ambiguous 'A thing which is φ is φ' either as $\varphi(\epsilon x\varphi(x))$ or as $\forall x(\varphi(x) \rightarrow \varphi(x))$, the latter being indeed a logical truth. Thus, Descartes's ontological argument can be seen as a fallacy of equivocation, as can Berkeley's argument if I am right in its reconstruction. At any rate, since one is not entitled to assume the CP, and hence $\neg\tau c$, the reconstructed argument fails.

7. The Argument Repaired

This raises the question of the conditions under which the CP does hold. There is an interesting historical story to be told here involving Leibniz, Kant, Meinong, Russell, and others, but this is not the place to tell it. It is at least common ground amongst modern logicians that the CP is true if there is something satisfying φ:

$$\exists x\varphi(x) \rightarrow \varphi(\epsilon x\varphi(x))$$

(which is, of course, Hilbert's first ϵ-axiom). Thus, $\neg\tau c$ $(\neg\tau\epsilon x\neg\tau x)$ can be validly inferred from $\exists x\neg\tau x$; and hence the following modification of Berkeley's argument is a valid deduction of a contradiction.

$$\dfrac{\dfrac{\dfrac{T\exists x\neg\tau x \quad \dfrac{\overline{\exists x\neg\tau x \rightarrow \neg\tau c}}{T\exists x\neg\tau x \rightarrow T\neg\tau c}}{T\neg\tau c} \qquad \overline{T\neg\tau c \rightarrow \tau c}}{\tau c} \qquad \dfrac{\exists x\neg\tau x \quad \overline{\exists x\neg\tau x \rightarrow \neg\tau c}}{\neg\tau c}}{\tau c \wedge \neg\tau c}$$

Moreover, this extra premiss, $\exists x\neg\tau x$, is exactly a statement of realism. The reconstructed argument therefore works.[5] The assumption that realism is both true and conceived to be true reduces to a contradiction. If Hylas does conceive there to be things existing unconceived, realism appears to be false.[6]

Notes to Chapter 21

1. Since Prior's paper is short, I will not give page references in what follows.
2. Mackie (1964: 201–2) makes the point.
3. Prior also objects to the argument that it 'shows too much', since if it proved anything it would prove that *all* objects exist only inasmuch as they are perceived, minds as well as material objects. I fail to see why this is an objection since Berkeley would presumably have held that minds are always self-conscious.
4. It might be suggested that, if one did this, the conclusion of the argument would no longer worry the realist, since $\neg\exists x\neg\tau x$ merely expresses the fact that everything is conceivable. However, again, if realism is true in any interesting sense there will be many things that are inconceivable (at any given time) since reality is liable to be richer than can be captured by any set of concepts that we actually have.

5. It might be objected that the predicate τ is not extensional, and hence that quantification into it, in particular by the ϵ operator, is illegitimate. Whilst I concede that there may be notions of conception that are not extensional, I would point out that there are notions of conception which do satisfy $x = y \rightarrow (\tau x \leftrightarrow \tau y)$. (One can conceive an object without realizing that that was the object one was conceiving.) And it is these for which the argument works.

   A similar objection concerns T. Things appear to go wrong if one quantifies into the scope of T, especially in the context of Hilbert's ϵ operator. As we have seen, $T\exists x\varphi(x) \rightarrow T\varphi(\epsilon x\varphi(x))$. Hence, by quantifier moves, it follows that $T\exists x\varphi(x) \rightarrow \exists xT\varphi(x)$, which seems to be false. I can be thinking that something is φ without thinking of some particular thing that it is φ. (Though some might deny this. See Routley *et al.* 1974, esp. pp. 307 ff.) Observe, however, that the reconstructed argument makes no use of quantification into T-contexts. T may be understood purely *de dicto*; and with such a reading its use is completely unproblematic.
6. See further Priest (1995) and also (1991).

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