

Berkeley on Evil

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Synopsis: This essay consists of two parts. Part I offers an explanation of Berkeley's understanding of the relationship between materialism and evil. Berkeley regards materialism as the chief instrumental cause of evil in the world. It is the belief in matter that encourages us to believe that God is not immediately, intimately present in every aspect of our life. Immaterialism, by contrast, makes God's immediate presence vivid and thereby serves to undermine the motivation to vice. Part II locates Berkeley's view on matter and evil within the Christian Neoplatonic tradition. I compare Plotinus' minimalist approach to matter and his identification of matter with evil to Berkeley's eliminativism about matter and his corresponding identification of materialism as the chief source of evil.

Berkeley on Evil

I take [materialism] to have been the chief source of all that scepticism & folly all those contradictions & inextricable puzzling absurdities, that have in all ages been a reproach to Human Reason. as well as of that idolatry whether of Images or of Gold etc that blinds the Greatest part of the World. as well as of that shamefull immorality that turns us into Beasts.¹

Part I Materialism and Evil

George Berkeley closed his famous Principles of Human Knowledge with the following paragraph:

For after all, what deserves the first place in our studies, is the consideration of GOD, and our duty; which to promote, as it was the main drift and design of my labours, so shall I esteem them altogether useless and ineffectual, if by what I have said I cannot inspire my readers with a pious sense of the presence of God...the better dispose them to reverence and embrace the salutary truths of the Gospel, which to know and to practise is the highest perfection of human nature.²

This is not some perfunctory pious coda of a future Bishop of the Anglican Church. Berkeley was first and foremost a Christian philosopher and the animating force of his work was a desire to help locate and root out the sources of evil in this world. His most original contribution to this cause was also his most famous contribution to

¹ Berkeley, Notebook A, volume 1, page 53, entry 413. All references to Berkeley's works are from *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. 9 volumes. Edited by A. A. Luce and Douglas Jesseph. Nelson, 1948-57. Hereafter simply cited as, *Berkeley, Title*, volume #, and page. #. Where Berkeley has provided paragraph numbering, the number will follow the title.

² Berkeley, Principles 113, vol. 2, p. 156.

metaphysics, immaterialism. Berkeley saw belief in the existence of material substance as the chief source of myriad evils in this world and, therefore, the adoption of immaterialism as their cure.

Metaphysics and the World's Ills

One might rightly wonder what plausible bearing a person's views about recondite matters of metaphysics could have to do with the exacerbation or remediation of the world's ills. It's a sensible question. Berkeley's full answer is complex. But the root idea is simple enough and it will be helpful to lay this out first. It consists of just three steps. First, we must note that Berkeley sees the problem of evil as restricted to *moral* evils. Neither "natural evils,"—e.g., the occurrence of floods, volcanic eruptions, etc.—nor "evils of imperfection,"—e.g., the fact that I cannot stop speeding bullets, or jump over tall buildings in a single bound, etc.—are **not**, strictly speaking, evils. What evil there is in the world is the result of free human agency alone.

Second, Berkeley, reasonably enough, believes that,

[I]t is downright impossible, that a soul pierced and enlightened with a thorough sense of the omnipresence, holiness, and justice of that Almighty Spirit, should persist in a remorseless violation of his laws.³

Third, it is Berkeley's contention that one who embraces immaterialism is in an excellent position to be so pierced and enlightened. The materialist, on the other hand, is at a significant disadvantage. Why? Because a committed immaterialist regards God as immediately present in his life in a uniquely strong sense. To see this, we don't have to dive very deeply into Berkeley's metaphysics. We need only recall its most famous component, the *esse is percipi* principle, i.e., the claim that physical objects are mind-dependent. He introduces it at *Principles* 3.

[T]he various sensations or ideas imprinted on the sense, however blended or combined together (that is, whatever objects they compose) cannot exist

³ Ibid. 112, vol. 2, p.155.

otherwise than in a mind perceiving them. I think an intuitive knowledge may be obtained of this, by any one that shall attend to what is meant by the term exist when applied to sensible things. The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. There was an odour, that is, it was smelled; there was a sound, that is to say, it was heard; a colour or figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch. This is all that I can understand by these and the like expressions. For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their esse is percipi, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.⁴

According to Berkeley, a physical object is nothing more than a bundle of its sensible qualities and the sensible qualities of physical objects are simply ideas, i.e., sensations. When it comes to the entirety of the physical realm, to be is to be perceived. Now, to this immaterialist reduction of the physical realm to the sensory realm, we need only add the fact that our sensations, according to Berkeley, are produced in us directly by God. God's immediate presence is manifest in *every single sensation I experience*. Contra materialism, in Berkeley's metaphysics there are no mind-independent material substances to produce sensations in me. After all, what possible use do such things serve in the classical theist's ontology? Any power these mind-independent, material substances could possibly possess to affect our senses or to bring about changes in anything is already possessed by the omnipotent Creator of the world. The theist can simply eliminate the materialist's middle-man, while leaving the physical world wholly intact. As Berkeley fully appreciates, doing so gives rather robust force to *Acts 17*, "[I]n Him we live and move and have our being."⁵ Berkeley's aim is to remove any kind of tertium quid between man and God.

⁴ Ibid. 3, vol. 2., p. 4.

⁵ Ibid. 66, vol. 2, p. 70. The passage is a favorite of Berkeley's and appears several times in his works.

The upshot is that if, as Berkeley contends, the evil in this world is the product of people failing to act in accordance with the divinely sanctioned moral laws, then it is reasonable to conclude that the sense of God's ubiquitous presence and direct, constant involvement in our life that immaterialism affords would serve as a powerful check against temptation. Or as Berkeley puts it:

We ought therefore earnestly to meditate and dwell on those important points; that so we may attain conviction without all scruple, that the eyes of the Lord are in every place beholding the evil and the good; that he is with us and keepeth us in all places whither we go, and giveth us bread to eat, and raiment to put on; that he is present and conscious to our innermost thoughts; and that we have a most absolute and immediate dependence on him. A clear view of which great truths cannot choose but fill our hearts with an awful circumspection and holy fear, which is the strongest incentive to virtue, and the best guard against vice.⁶

The spread of immaterialism would make vivid God's nearness and our thorough dependence upon Him. This would cause vice to recede and with it the world's evils. In short, metaphysics matters.

Materialism and the Image of God

Such is the basic connection between materialism and evil on the one hand, and immaterialism and virtue on the other. But the foregoing suggests merely that if we want to lessen the world's evils there is good reason to prefer immaterialism to materialism. But that alone does not go far enough to capture Berkeley's antipathy to materialism. It is clear that Berkeley regards materialism as inherently pernicious. As he sees it, there are two complementary aspects of materialism that make it so dangerous. The primary problem is the way that materialism degrades our view of human nature by undercutting the image of God doctrine. The corollary problem is the way materialism renders the nature of physical objects impenetrable to human intellects. Let's begin with the former as it will bring us to the latter in due course.

⁶ Ibid. pp. 113-14, 155.

The Image of God

The image of God doctrine (hereafter, "IGD") is an optimistic view of human nature. In brief, the IGD is the view that God, the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent ground of all being, made our nature in likeness to His own. Now we, of course, are merely finite beings and so, at best, our nature is a mere reflection of God's.⁷ Just the same, we possess goodness, knowledge, and power in finite measures and these qualities are essential, indeed, constitutive of our true nature. On this view, our faculties are designed and placed in us for a purpose: the imitation of God's perfections of goodness, knowledge and power, in so far as we are capable. Moreover, our pursuit of these three perfections is structured. Our proper, natural condition is one in which our exercise of the limited power we have is guided and constrained by our knowledge of the good. According to the IGD, wisdom and virtue is man's natural state. Ignorance and vice are a deviation from and a perversion of our true nature.

To see that the erosion of the IGD by the prevailing winds of contemporary thought is a principle concern of Berkeley's philosophy, we need look no farther than the first three paragraphs of the Principles of Human Knowledge.

In the opening paragraph, Berkeley paints a rather bleak picture of the contemporary state of philosophy and philosophers. It's worth quoting in full.

Philosophy being nothing else but the study of wisdom and truth, it may with reason be expected, that those who have spent most time and pains in it should enjoy a greater calm and serenity of mind, a greater clearness and evidence of knowledge, and be less disturbed with doubts and difficulties than other men. Yet so it is we see the illiterate bulk of mankind that walk the high-road of plain, common sense, and are governed by the dictates of Nature, for the most part easy and undisturbed. To them nothing that's familiar appears unaccountable or difficult to comprehend. They complain not of any want of evidence in their senses, and are out of all danger of becoming *sceptics*. But no sooner do we depart from sense and instinct to follow the light of a superior principle, to reason, meditate, and reflect on the nature of things, but a thousand scruples spring up in

⁷ Moreover, Christians believe that we have distorted the image of God in ourselves through vice.

our minds, concerning those things which before we seemed fully to comprehend. Prejudices and errors of sense do from all parts discover themselves to our view; and endeavouring to correct these by reason we are insensibly drawn into uncouth paradoxes, difficulties, and inconsistencies, which multiply and grow upon us as we advance in speculation; till at length, having wander'd through many intricate mazes, we find our selves just where we were, or, which is worse, sit down in a forlorn scepticism.⁸

In this opening paragraph we find that wisdom and skepticism are being advanced as respective measures of philosophy's success and value, on the one hand, and of its failure and potential for harm, on the other. What is the connection between skepticism and the prevailing philosophy? The second paragraph tells us:

The cause of this is thought to be the obscurity of things, or the natural weakness and imperfection of our understandings. It is said the faculties we have are few, and those designed by Nature for the support and comfort of life, and not to penetrate into the inward essence and constitution of things.⁹

The contemporary philosophy is productive of skepticism and ultimately, of the failure of philosophy because it serves to erode the image of God doctrine and its implications for the nature of our faculties. Note that here man's faculties are seen as designed by "nature," not by God. Consequently, the ends of the design are merely naturalistic ends, i.e., "the support and comfort of life." The other cause is the "obscurity of things." He does not immediately follow up on this. However, what we learn as the *Principles* advance is that when the materialist's conception of physical objects is combined with the materialist's conception of our faculties, the former are rendered opaque to the latter. We'll return to this below.

The third paragraph quietly reasserts our divine origin.

⁸ Berkeley, "Introduction," Principles 1, vol. 2, p. 25.

⁹ Berkeley, Principles 2, vol. 2, p. 25.

But perhaps we may be too partial to our selves in placing the fault originally in our faculties, and not rather in the wrong use we make of them. It is a hard thing to suppose, that right deductions from true principles should ever end in consequences which cannot be maintained or made consistent. We should believe that God has dealt more bountifully with the sons of men, than to give them a strong desire for that knowledge, which he had placed quite out of their reach. This were not agreeable to the wonted, indulgent methods of Providence, which, whatever appetites it may have implanted in the creatures, doth usually furnish them with such means as, if rightly made use of, will not fail to satisfy them. Upon the whole, I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers, and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to our selves. That we have first raised a dust, and then complain, we cannot see.¹⁰

Not only is our divine origin reaffirmed here, Berkeley also offers an alternative explanation of our confusions and failures. The blame is placed not in our God-given faculties, but in our misuse of them. We raise a dust and then complain we cannot see. The worst bit of dust we have kicked up, we find, is material substance.¹¹

Monistic Materialism and the Image of God Doctrine

It is easy enough to see how monistic materialism is inherently hostile to the IGD.¹² A positive picture of our nature of the kind the IGD promotes is hard to square with a thoroughgoing monistic materialism for the simple reason that it is hard to see how a

¹⁰ Ibid. 3, pp. 25-6.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² How great a friend material substance hath been to atheists in all ages, were needless to relate. All their monstrous systems have so visible and necessary a dependence on it, that when this corner-stone is once removed, the whole fabrick cannot choose but fall to the ground; insomuch that it is no longer worth while, to bestow a particular consideration on the absurdities of every wretched sect of atheists.

Thus, Berkeley thinks the friends of religion should be well disposed toward immaterialism.

...when men of better principles observe the enemies of religion lay so great a stress on *unthinking matter*, and all of them use so much industry and artifice to reduce every thing to it; methinks they should rejoice to see them deprived of their grand support, and driven from that only fortress, without which your Epicureans, Hobbists, and the like, have not even the shadow of a pretence, but become the most cheap and easy triumph in the world. (Ibid. 91 p. 82.)

being with such a nature could arise from within such a metaphysics. The reasoning here is not complex and Berkeley does not labor it. Monistic materialism,

derid[es] immaterial substance, and suppose[es] the soul to be divisible and subject to corruption as the body; exclude[s] all freedom, intelligence, and design from the formation of things, and instead thereof make[s] a self-existent, stupid, unthinking substance the root and origin of all beings.

Moreover, it,

den[ies] a providence, or inspection of a superior mind over the affairs of the world, attribute[es] the whole series of events either to blind chance or fatal necessity, arising from the impulse of one body on another.¹³

With mere matter as our origin, it seems we should lower our expectations of ourselves. If we think of ourselves as the materialist would have us think of ourselves, then it will be hard for us to regard ignorance and vice as, strictly speaking, unnatural. On the contrary, the idea that the product of such a process will be inherently prone to ignorance and vice, will not be shocking. If anything, ignorance and vice, contra the IGD, may well seem to be simply part of the natural state of man. Moreover, monistic materialism joins this bleaker view of human nature to a view of the universe as lacking an immaterial, perfectly just Deity that rewards virtue and punishes vice, as well as the existence of immaterial and thereby naturally immortal souls to enjoy or suffer those rewards or punishments. The more widely such a view prevails, Berkeley believes, the more we can expect the world's evils to increase.

Materialism and Skepticism

It is important to remember, however, that at the time Berkeley is writing, atheistic, monistic materialism, though waxing, is not yet ascendant. Although his philosophy poses a direct challenge to the confirmed atheistic materialist and was certainly directed

¹³ Ibid. 93, pp. 81-2.

to them, they are not necessarily his target audience. Theistic dualism, whether of the Cartesian, Lockean, or even Morean stripe represented the mainstream among the intelligentsia of Berkeley's time. Berkeley presses immaterialism on those who fall into this line of thought because he believes that once you admit matter into your system it will inevitably work its pernicious effects regardless of your other commitments. How so? If your ontology is liberal enough to include both God and created immaterial spirits alongside material substances, how exactly can the latter threaten the former? Berkeley's answer is that it will do this via skepticism about the physical world. As Berkeley sees it, materialism leads to physical world skepticism because the materialist supposes that when it comes to physical objects there is a "difference between *things* and *ideas* and that the former have a subsistence without the mind." Berkeley thinks it is clear—or, at least, can be made clear—that strictly speaking, all that we immediately perceive by our senses are our own sensations. Physical objects conceived of as mind-independent things must be something distinct from these sensations. They must be something that lies behind the veil of ideas. But how then can we know if what we do perceive, our sensations, gives us any knowledge of the nature of that which we don't, the material substances? It's not as though I can peek behind the curtain to compare my ideas with the properties of these substances. No matter where I look all I'll get is more sensations. The objects and their true natures remain inaccessible. What's worse, confined as we are to our sensations, we can't know that these mind-independent beings even exist, let alone what their true nature is. Berkeley sums up the problem at *Principles* 87.

Colour, figure, motion, extension and the like, considered only as so many *sensations* in the mind, are perfectly known, there being nothing in them which is not perceived. But if they are looked on as notes or images, referred to *things* or *archetypes* existing without the mind, then are we involved all in skepticism. We see only the appearances, and not the real qualities of things. What may be the extension, figure, or motion of any thing really and absolutely, or in it self, it is impossible for us to know, but only the proportion or the relation they bear to our senses. Things remaining the same, our ideas vary, and which of them, or even whether any of them at all represent the true quality really existing in the thing, it

is out of our reach to determine. So that, for aught we know, all we see, hear, and feel, may be only phantom and vain chimera, and not at all agree with the real things, existing in rerum natura. All this scepticism follows, from our supposing a difference between *things* and *ideas*, and that the former have a subsistence without the mind, or unperceived. It were easy to dilate on this subject, and shew how the arguments urged by sceptics in all ages, depend on the supposition of external objects.¹⁴

In contrast to the materialist, the immaterialist denies any difference between physical things and ideas because they identify physical objects with collections of ideas. This removes the barrier between ourselves and the natural world. We enjoy immediate perceptual contact with the objects of nature just as they are in themselves. Consequently, there is no place for skepticism about the existence of the physical world. So, Berkeley concludes:

Away then with all that skepticism, all those ridiculous philosophical doubts. What a jest is it for a philosopher to question the existence of sensible things...or to pretend our knowledge in this point falls short of intuition or demonstration. I might as well doubt of my own being, as of the being of those things I actually see and feel.¹⁵

Just as immaterialism leaves no place for skepticism about the existence of the physical realm, it leaves no place for skepticism about the nature of physical objects either. Again, the objects of the physical world are nothing more than their qualities. And their qualities are simply sensations. In a word, they are just collections of qualia. As such, their nature is entirely transparent to experience. As Berkeley says, "For since they and every part of them exist only in the mind, it follows that there is nothing in them but what is perceived." Qualia have no hidden parts or even any aspects to them that are not immediately perceived and so, nothing that is not perfectly known.

¹⁴ Ibid. 87, p. 78.

¹⁵ Berkeley, Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, p. 230. Hereafter, simply Dialogues, page #.

With this consideration in mind, a companion detrimental doctrine falls as well. At *Principles* 102, Berkeley identifies another source of skepticism, a belief that physical objects have "inward essences."

One great inducement to our pronouncing our selves ignorant of the nature of things, is the current opinion that every thing includes within it self the cause of its properties: or that there is in each object an inward essence which is the source whence its discernible qualities flow, and whereon they depend.¹⁶

We, of course, lack perceptual access to these inward essences, because they are not themselves perceptible but, rather, are the cause of any given object's sensible qualities. Materialism gives aid and comfort to this view by providing a place for these quiddities to hide from us: in the mind-independent, unperceivable material substances. But, again, on the immaterialist account there are no ultimately hidden parts to physical objects and so nowhere for these essences to hide.

In sum, Berkeley holds that the presence of matter in your system will inevitably lead to skepticism. This skepticism will not, however, remain constrained to the physical world, as the theistic dualist might hope. If our faculties are incapable of yielding knowledge of the physical world, then the image of God doctrine is badly undercut. The claim that we are made in the image of God, that knowledge is natural to us, and that our faculties are designed by God to yield knowledge, will seem implausible. Moreover, if knowledge of God's *creation* is out of our pitiable intellectual reach, how plausible is it that we can know anything of the nature or even of the existence of the *Creator*? Skepticism about the physical realm inevitably spreads to the spiritual.

But why is Berkeley so concerned about the skeptical effects of materialism? Isn't all this damage restricted to a very small subset of people, i.e., philosophers? While the philosopher will find himself, "sit[ting] down in a forelorn skepticism," won't the rest of the population continue to "walk the high-road of plain, common sense" and remain "for the most part easy and undisturbed" by such doubts and their deleterious effects?

¹⁶ Berkeley, *Principles* 102, vol. 2, p. 85.

Berkeley clearly thinks not. Just as physical world skepticism will infect the rest of one's philosophy, so will the intellectual's skepticism infect the rest of the population. Berkeley begins his Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous with precisely this worry.

Hylas: I was considering the odd fate of those men who have in all ages, through an affectation of being distinguished from the vulgar, or some unaccountable turn of thought, pretended either to believe nothing at all, or to believe the most extravagant things in the world. This however might be borne, if their paradoxes and scepticism did not draw after them some consequences of general disadvantage to mankind.¹⁷

But they do draw such consequences. Hylas continues:

[T]he mischief lieth here; that when men of less leisure see them who are supposed to have spent their whole time in the pursuits of knowledge, professing an entire ignorance of all things, or advancing such notions as are repugnant to plain and commonly received principles, they will be tempted to entertain suspicions concerning the most important truths, which they had hitherto held sacred and unquestionable.¹⁸

Berkeley thinks the danger in skepticism lies in a kind of trickle-down effect that ultimately erodes religious belief among the populace at large. And to the extent that that occurs, we can expect vice and thus the evils of this world to increase. Again, as Berkeley sees it, metaphysics matters.

¹⁷ Berkeley, Dialogues, vol. 2, p. 171.

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 171-172. Although these concerns are put in the mouth of Hylas, the dialogue's advocate for materialism, Philonous, the dialogue's defender of immaterialism, readily seconds them. The point of the whole of the dialogues is to show that it is Hylas' philosophical view that leads to these sorry consequences, while Philonous' view leads away from them.

Part II

Berkeley and the History of Evil

Berkeley and Neoplatonism

Berkeley's identification of materialism as the chief source of evil is unique. But he was not the first philosopher to see a connection between matter and evil. The tradition closest to Berkeley on this point is the Neoplatonic tradition, the very tradition Berkeley aligns his own metaphysics with in his last major work, *Siris*. Plotinus is commonly considered the founding figure of Neoplatonism and it is Plotinus' views about matter that most closely resemble Berkeley's. Plotinus identified matter with evil, whereas Berkeley's target was materialism, the belief in the existence of matter.¹⁹ Berkeley was an eliminativist about matter; as far as he is concerned, there simply is no such thing. Plotinus' view of matter is more difficult to characterize. He is, perhaps, best described as a "minimalist" about matter. He does not eliminate matter from his ontology, but he pushes it right up to the very edge of nothingness. As we will see, he does this by identifying matter with privation and this, as we will see, lets him, in turn, identify matter with the next closest thing to absolute nothingness that his metaphysics allows of, non-being.

So, while their views are different, their shared ontological hostility toward matter is conspicuous. This, I believe, is not a coincidence. To understand how Berkeley's views about the relationship between materialism and evil fit into the broader history of thought about evil, I believe it is helpful to view Berkeley's metaphysics against the Neoplatonic tradition regarding evil and matter, as set by Plotinus. Specifically, I believe, it can be usefully approached as an attempt to reconcile the spirit of the Plotinian identification of matter and evil within a fundamentally Christian perspective. Berkeley's immaterialism, in other words, can be seen as a development within the long tradition of Christian Neoplatonism.²⁰

¹⁹ For Plotinus on matter as "evil itself" see *Enneads*, I.8.8.37-44 and I.8.13.7-14.

²⁰ There are other reasons to regard Berkeley's metaphysics as part of the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, but this is not the place to pursue them. See Chapter 1 of *A Metaphysics for the Mob: The Philosophy of George Berkeley*, OUP (2007), and "A Puzzle in the *Three Dialogues* and its Platonic Resolution," in *Berkeley's Three Dialogues: New Essays*, Edited by Stefan Storrie, OUP (forthcoming).

Matter, Privation, and Non-Being

Plotinus' three-fold identification of matter with non-being, privation, and evil is his solution to the problem of evil. It is a complex solution, but an outline of it will suffice to render the relationship to Berkeley's view clear.

Plotinus presents a hierarchical metaphysics. At its head is what he calls the One or the Good. It is so-called because it is the source of unity-itself and the source of goodness-itself. However, these are not regarded as distinct aspects of it. If they were really distinct that would, of course, destroy the One's absolute unity, its perfect simplicity. But due to our limitations, the best that we can do is to conceive of it under both of these aspects. The One/Good is both causa sui and the cause of being of everything that exists. Its creatively productive character is best revealed under the aspect of the Good. The Good-itself is perfect in its goodness, complete in its goodness, and so can harbor no jealousy. It is perfectly generous; its goodness overflows, as it were, and serves as the source of being for everything else. But since it is the One's goodness that is the fundamental creative principle of being, this immediately raises the question, if matter is simply evil, how did it ever come to be? How can evil-itself be a product of goodness-itself?

Plotinus exploits the hierarchical character of his metaphysics to find a place for matter and thereby explain the presence of evil. His ontology consists of a cascading series of beings that represent further and further derivations from the One/Good. This cascade ends with the sensible world. The immediate derivation from the One/Good, is the next most perfect possible being, what Plotinus calls "Intellect." Intellect is much like the realm of the Platonic forms but it is conceived of as active. Its very being is said to be the activity of thinking all the forms, all the intelligibles. Strictly speaking, it is Intellect that is goodness itself, and being/unity itself. That's because the One/Good is the source of all being and goodness and Intellect is its immediate product. Intellect then serves as the instrumental cause for the efficacy of the One/Good. Everything else that exists is caused to exist via Intellect. Thus, all of reality is intelligible.

Intellect's immediate product is the second derivation from the One/Good, Soul. Soul is the instrument by means of which Intellect (and therefore the One/Good) creates

the sensible world. Soul functions somewhat as the Demiurge does in Plato's Timeaus.²¹ It "looks" to the Intellect, to the realm of the Forms, as its model and endeavors to create the sensible world in its mold, in so far as that is possible.

With the creation of the sensible world, the creative reach of the One/Good has hit its limit. But even though it is at the bottom of the hierarchy of being and thus the furthest being from the Good, Plotinus consistently, even vigorously, defended the inherent goodness of the sensible world. Just the same, Soul cannot fashion the sensible world so as to match the perfection of the Intelligible realm of the Forms (Intellect). But the reason that it can't do this is not because it must execute its work in and flawed medium of a pre-existing matter. Rather, it cannot recreate the perfection of Intellect because that creative work is already done. If the creative force of the Good is to reach as far as possible, it will have to create something less than perfect, yet still good. That leaves Soul to create the next best thing it can, a being patterned on the realm of the forms, the sensible world. This is then as far as the creative power of the Good can reach. Here it hits the limit. That limit is matter. Matter is then conceived of as privation because it is privation that is needed to explain the lesser presence of the forms in the sensible world. The forms give the objects of the world all their qualities, everything that renders them intelligible. But no sensible thing possesses any of the forms as they are in-themselves. So to the extent that they participate in the forms, they enjoy being. To the extent that they do not, the "participate" in matter, i.e., they are in privation with respect to the Forms.

The identification of matter with privation explains, in turn, why matter is identified with evil. The One/Good's first derivation, Intellect, is the Good itself. Matter is that element of sensible objects that separates them from the Good itself through privation of goodness. It also follows that, as privation, matter is not one of the beings in Plotinus' hierarchical ontology. Rather, this cascading movement away from the One/Good comes to an end when it, as it were, runs up against matter. Matter is not a being but rather the outmost limit of being. It marks the point at which the creative efficacy of the Good can reach no further. As a limit, matter is not absolute nothingness. After all, we can say something about it. But we can only do so negatively. Because it is privation, we can only so that matter is not this, and not this, and not this, etc. So while it

²¹ 28 a6.

is not absolute nothingness, neither does it enjoy being, properly speaking. Thus, we also get the identification of matter with non-being.

Matter, Evil, and the Bundle Theory

This is the basic shape of Plotinus' strategy for dealing with the problem of evil. But in order for this strategy to work, Plotinus had to reject the substantiality of sensible objects, just as Berkeley would later do. In Plotinus' case this is necessary in order to make matter a part of his account of sensible objects without making it into a principle of being for sensible objects. Plotinus developed his identification of matter with privation in response to Aristotle's criticism that Plato failed to distinguish matter and privation. Aristotle's complaint was that Plato failed to see that more than just form and matter were needed to explain change in the sensible world. Privation is also needed and privation must be distinguished from matter. To see Aristotle point, consider the change that happens when a duck acquires its adult feathers. The duck begins in a state of privation with respect to being feathered. That privation is then lost when the duck grows its adult feathers. But throughout the duck persists. The duck is then the matter in the sense of being the substrate of this change from not being unfeathered to being feathered. As Aristotle conceives of it, the matter in any change stands as potentiality, ready to be actualized by some form. Prior to growing its adult feathers, the duck has the potential, the power to be feathered. When the duck grows its adult feathers that potentiality is actualized. That is to say, when the matter is so informed, the privation of the form, feathered-ness disappears.

Plotinus, by identifying matter with privation, is denying that matter provides a genuine substrate. Aristotle conceives of matter as persisting due to its inherent potentiality, its ability to be informed, in contrast to privation. From the Aristotelian perspective, matter might be helpfully compared to wax. Wax's potentiality gives it the ability to take on an indefinite number of shapes, one after another. It is this ability to receive new forms that accounts for the wax's persistence. When a piece of wax is shaped into a candle, the form candle-shapedness, comes to be present in the wax. It informs it, making the wax itself into a candle. Plotinus, on the other hand, sees matter as persisting because of its inability to receive form due to its lack of potentiality, its utter powerlessness. Instead of wax, Plotinus recommends seeing matter as a mirror. In-itself

the mirror is bereft of images, that is, of forms. The sensible images on the mirror are the mere reflections of the forms. These images are the sensible objects of the world. But the forms are simply reflected off the mirror's surface. They don't inform the mirror. Unlike the wax, the mirror doesn't take on the shapes of the objects it reflects. It has no potentiality to be anything. It remains what it is, privation itself. Soul, as the instrument of the creative causal force of the One/Good, is forever maintaining the sensible world by, as it were, attempting to cover matter with form. Where the wax analogy suggests that once informed with a shape, the wax will maintain its shape on its own without that which informed it continuing to act on it, the mirror needs to have its images constantly projected on it. For Plotinus, matter always remains what it is, privation, eternally bereft of the unity, goodness, and beauty that only form can provide. Plotinus famously describes matter as a "corpse adorned."²² It remains, in-itself, ugly, that is, in a state of complete privation with respect to beauty; it remains impotent, that is, in a state of complete privation with respect to power. The strange nature of its being is to be the privation of everything the creative force of the One/Good can bestow; it is evil itself; it is non-being.

Because matter is privation and not substrate, sensible objects do not, strictly speaking, persist through change. The whole of the sensible world is just the parade of sensible images on the mirror of matter. Much like Berkeley's, Plotinus' sensible objects are little more than bundles of qualities. These bundles are the beings of the sensible world. What positive being they have is supplied top-down, from the One/Good. The identification of matter and evil with privation lets Plotinus push evil to very edge of nothingness. It's an attempt to keep matter from being a positive principle of being for sensible objects, as it was for Aristotle. For Plotinus being, power, and goodness are one. As privation, matter has no power, not even as potentiality. It thus has no goodness and so cannot be a principle of being.

It hard to say how effective this strategy is. One might object that when all is said and done, it looks as if the activity of Soul ends up creating matter. Since matter is not nothing it has being in, at least, some attenuated sense of "being." And if that is right, then it seems we must say that in some sense, the Soul's activity creates evil. But since

²² *Ennead* II.4.5.18.

the creative force of the Soul is, ultimately, merely the instrument of the creative force of the Good, this means that the Good, in creating matter, also creates evil. But how can Good create evil?²³

Berkeley on Passivity

Berkeley, like Plotinus, denies that sensible objects are substances. But he believes he can account for what being they do have without appeal to matter, even where matter qua privation is being conceived of as thinly as possible. Berkeley believes he can push matter out of the account all together. His famous *esse is percipi* principle for sensible objects is, naturally, a key component of this strategy, but to understand how his approach can be seen as a Christian development of Plotinus', we have to understand how Berkeley uses passivity in the place of privation in his account of sensible objects. For that we need to look at the fundamentals of his metaphysics.

According to Berkeley, reality at its most fundamental level consists only of simple, immaterial substances. Berkeley's preferred term for these substances is 'spirits,' but he regards 'spirit' as interchangeable with 'mind,' 'soul,' and 'will,' as well as both 'person' and 'self.' Thus, one does not *have* a spirit, (a soul, a mind, etc.), rather each of us is *identical* to a spirit. There are two kinds of spirits, finite and infinite. There are many finite spirits, the likes of which you and I are instances. But there is only one infinite spirit, God.²⁴ The difference between finite and infinite spirits is drawn in terms of Berkeley's cardinal metaphysical distinction, the active/passive distinction. Fundamental to our likeness to God is that we are both *active* substances. Activity is our essence. But God alone is pure act(ivity). So nothing can act on Him; He is subject to no passivity. We, on the other hand, are not purely active beings. We are subject to passivity and so, of course, can be acted on by God. And God is always acting on us.

It is this finiteness of activity and, hence, passivity that yields the secondary item of Berkeley's ontology, ideas (sensations). Ideas, unlike spirits, are not active substances in that they are neither active nor substances. They are utterly inactive, impotent, and fleeting. Ideas, of course, constitute the entirety of the physical realm for Berkeley.

²³ Proclus made much of the point in *On the Existence of Evils*; see sections 31-33.

²⁴ Angels would be another example of finite spirits. Whether Berkeley's metaphysics can allow for non-human animal spirits is a difficult question that I am happy to set aside here.

Importantly, however, the "mind-dependence" of the physical realm on the spiritual is two-fold in a sense that is not well-captured by the famous "esse is percipi" principle alone. Again, we can look to the active/passive distinction for help. Berkeley conceives of ideas in opposition to spirits.²⁵ Unlike spirits, whose essence is activity, ideas are wholly passive. There are two aspects to the passivity of ideas. First, the ideas themselves are passive. They lack all active causal power and all potentiality.

All our ideas, sensations, or the things which we perceive, by whatsoever names they may be distinguished, are visibly inactive, there is nothing of power or agency included in them. So that one idea or object of thought cannot produce, or make any alteration in another.²⁶

Second, we are passive in relation to them in that it is simply not up to us what sensations we have. Activity, Berkeley tells us, is *volition*. I can close my eyes, turn my head to the left, and then open my eyes. That much is up to me; here I am active. But it simply is not up to me what sensations I will experience when I open my eyes. Here, I am wholly passive.²⁷ This point is of paramount importance to Berkeley's realism about the physical world because, even though the physical realm consists of nothing more than sensations and is therefore "mind-dependent," the physical world is not mind-dependent in the sense of being the *creation* of my mind. As much as on any materialist account, the physical world is a place I simply find myself in. And as in any theistic metaphysics, God creates the physical world and we are left to find our way in it the best that we can. We can wish what we like; we can imagine what we wish, but that will not change how things are in fact. So, in this sense, the sensible world depends primarily not our minds but on God's.

What does this have to do with Plotinus and the Neoplatonic tradition. To see the connection, we have to turn to Berkeley's last major work, *Siris*. In *Siris*, Berkeley draws

²⁵ See, for instance, *Siris* 290 vol. 5, p. 135, where Berkeley writes: "Body is oppose to spirit or mind. We have a notion of spirit from thought and action. We have a notion of body from resistance. So far forth as there is real power, there is spirit. So far forth as there is resistance, there is inability or want of power; that is, there is a negation of spirit."

²⁶ Berkeley, *Principles* 25, vol. 1, p. 51.

²⁷ See, for instance, "First Dialogue," vol. 1, p. 195.

heavily on Plotinus and the Neoplatonists throughout. Most interestingly, he concludes the work with an approving comparison of the Platonic trinity of Good, Intellect, and Soul, with the Christian Trinity.

Certain it is that the notion of a Trinity is to be found in the writings of many old heathen philosophers--that is to say, a notion of three divine Hypostases. ...[T]hese were conceived to be necessary universal principles, co-existing and co-operating in such sort as never to exist asunder, but on the contrary to constitute one Sovereign of all things. ... There is first the source of all perfection, or *Fons Deitatis*; secondly, the supreme reason, order, or *λόγος*; and lastly, the spirit, which quickens and inspires. We are sprung from the Father, irradiated or enlightened by the Son, and moved by the Spirit. Certainly, that there is Father, Son, and Spirit; that these bear analogy to the sun, light, and heat; and are otherwise expressed by the terms Principle, Mind, and Soul, by One or *τὸ ἕν*, Intellect, and Life, by Good, Word, and Love; and that generation was not attributed to the second Hypostasis, the *νοῦς* or *λόγος*, in respect of time (Sect. 352), but only in respect of origin and order, as an eternal necessary emanation[.]²⁸

If we see the triune Christian God as filling the creative role of the One, Intellect, and Soul, then Berkeley will not need to introduce matter in his because passivity replaces the need for either matter qua Aristotlian potentiality or even matter as mere Plotinian privation in the account of the being of the physical world.

Let's begin with potentiality. God in acting on me is not actualizing a potentiality that I possess. Again, my essence is activity. And activity is volition. As Berkeley conceives of them, sensations, due to their passivity, are not modes of my volitions. It is helpful to contrast Berkeley's view with Descartes' on this point. Descartes takes the essence of mind to be thought. And he considers both volition and sensation to be modes of thought and thus modes of the thinking substances. This leads to the infamous "painted

²⁸Berkeley, *Siris* 362, vol. 5, p. 162. Here, Berkeley is to a certain extent echoing Ralph Cudworth's largely favorable assessment of the parallel between the so-called "Platonic Trinity" of the Neoplatonists and the Christian Trinity in The True Intellectual System of the Universe, "Chapter Four."

soul" problem for Cartesianism, i.e., "that it is the soul itself that is white or black, hot or cold, of a low or sharp tone."²⁹ The root of the problem is that the Cartesians draw the mental/physical divide with the conscious/non-conscious distinction rather than the active/passive distinction. Consequently, since both are equally conscious to the mind, sensations are just as much modifications of the mental substance as are its volitions. When a Cartesian material substance comes into contact with the perceptual organs of one's body, a potentiality of the thinking substance is actualized. A potential mode of the substance is realized as a sensation. Not so on Berkeley's account. On his account sensations are not modes of the active substance because they are conceived of in opposition to the essential nature of spirit.³⁰ They are entirely passive things. Ideas, therefore, cannot be modes of an essentially active spiritual substance. They are something distinct from the self. The mind does not stand in the subject-mode relation to sensations; sensations do not inhere in it. Rather, ideas stand in an external relation to them, the perceiver-perceived relation. As such, they do not constitute activations of potentialities of spirits.

Nor does my passivity with respect to sensations represent privations of spirit in the sense of a lack. Being opposite to soul in nature, they are not something that souls can lack. Rather, ideas arise as a function of the finiteness of my nature as an active thing in relation to the infinite, pure activity of God. At the limit of its activity, Plotinus' Soul runs up against privation and thus matter. But at the limit of a Berkeleyan finite soul's activity it runs up against, not evil and privation, but God's wholly good activity. His love. The result is sensations, i.e., the sensible world. And the sensible world that God's activity on us creates, Berkeley consistently defends as good and beautiful.

In defense against arguments from natural evil, Berkeley is then free to appeal to a traditional line of reply. In response to the objection that "the slow and gradual methods observed in the production of natural things...monsters, untimely births, fruits blasted in the blossom, rains falling in desert places, [and the] miseries incident to human life are so many arguments that the whole frame of Nature is not immediately actuated and

²⁹ Tad Schmaltz. Malebranche's Theory of the Soul, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 82.

³⁰ See footnote 25.

superintended by a spirit of infinite wisdom and goodness,"³¹ Berkeley appeals to the need for the world to be orderly in such a way as to be rendered predictable and thus navigable for finite intellects like ourselves. This, in turn, speaks to the wisdom and goodness of God. In addition, he tells us that "[w]e should further consider, that the very blemishes and defects of Nature are not without their use, in that they make an agreeable sort of variety, and augment the beauty of the rest of the creation, as shades in a picture serve to set off the brighter and more enlightened parts."³² Moreover the mixture of pleasure and pain that we find in the world is necessary to our well-being. Throughout, Berkeley follows the general strategy that the Neoplatonists took up from the Stoics against the objections from natural evils that Gnostics and the Manicheans pressed. The root problem is that "our prospects are too narrow: we take, for instance, the idea of some one particular pain into our thoughts, and account it *evil*."³³ We must look at the whole of God's creation and the relations between all its parts. To this strategy he adds that If we do this, along with consideration of "the nature of human freedom, and the design with which we are put into the world; we shall be forced to acknowledge that those particular things, which considered in themselves appear to be evil, have the nature of good, when considered as linked with the whole system of beings."³⁴

Conclusion

It is Berkeley's view that evil does not enter through God's activity in creating the sensible world, but rather in the misuse of our freedom and neglect of the end for which we were created. It enters through vice. And it is not matter, but the belief in matter that made the first entrance of vice possible. Materialism provides us with the pernicious illusion that God's activity is not immediately all around us, intimately present at every second, in every place. Again, Berkeley holds that it is impossible that one fully "pierced and enlightened with a thorough sense of the omnipresence, holiness, and justice" of God, could violate his laws. Materialism makes this possible. It amounts to an attempt to shield our sinful activity from God. In an early notebook entry Berkeley tells us that the " ffall

³¹ Berkeley, Principles 151, vol. 2, p. 110.

³² Ibid. 152, vol. 2, p. 111.

³³ Ibid. 153, vol. 2, p. 111-2.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 112.

of Adam" and the "rise of Idolatry" are to be "expounded by material substances."³⁵ In light of which we might go so far as to say that Berkeley viewed the impulse towards materialism as springing from the same basic impulse that drove Adam and Eve to turn away, hide from God in the bushes, and attempt to cover themselves after eating the forbidden fruit. If so, Berkeley's view is that materialism is ultimately both a source and a product of man's awareness of his own sinfulness, an attempt to create a curtain of inert, unperceiving things to veil his vices from God's view so that he will be free from His judgment. Matter is neither potentiality nor privation; it is neither wax nor mirror. Matter is a mere fig leaf.

³⁵ Notebook A, volume 1, page 53, entry 413.