

Berkeley's *A Priori* Argument for God's Existence

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Abstract: Berkeley's appeal to *a posteriori* arguments for God's existence supports belief only in a God who is finite. But by appealing to an *a priori* argument for God's existence, Berkeley emphasizes God's infinity. In this latter argument, God is not the efficient cause of *particular* finite things in the world, for such an explanation does not provide a justification or rationale for why the totality of finite things would exist in the first place. Instead, God is understood as the creator of the total unity of all there is, the *whole* of creation. In this *a priori* argument, we should not focus on the specific objects that God creates, for that requires that we think that God knows each finite thing as distinct from every other. Rather, we should recognize how God creates all things in creating the complex, infinite totality of finite perceivings, each of which exists in virtue of the distinctions and relations it expresses.

Scholarship on Berkeley's doctrine of God generally assumes that his proof for the existence of God depends on God's being either the cause of the world we experience or the perceiver who identifies and sustains things in the absence of other perceivers.¹ This might seem at first to frame the discussion of God's existence in the familiar terms of the cosmological argument or the design argument. But such arguments treat God as an object of thought—which for Berkeley, would make God a passive idea rather than an active mind. That, he rejects.

Instead, Berkeley proposes other ways to show that God exists. Each of these other ways assumes that God is a mind who ultimately explains our perceptions of things in the world. Apart from God's identifying, differentiating, and associating our ideas (as well as the minds that have those ideas), there are no ideas distinct from one another or in relation to one another.

1. Bennett refers to these arguments as the Passivity and Continuity Arguments. See Jonathan Bennett, "Berkeley and God," *Philosophy* 40 (1965): 207–21. In the Divine Language Argument (*Alciphron* IV.7–12), God communicates to us through the way he orders the universe; see E. G. King, "Language, Berkeley, and God," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 1 (1970): 112–123, esp. 113–116; A. David Kline, "Berkeley's Divine Language Argument," in *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley*, ed. Ernest Sosa (Boston: D. Reidel, 1987), 129–142, esp. 129–131; and Douglas M. Jesseph, "Berkeley, God, and Explanation," in *Early Modern Philosophy: Mind, Matter, and Metaphysics*, ed. Christia Mercer and Eileen O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 183–205, esp. 187.

Of course, this does not require that Berkeley always claim that God is *infinite*, for a very powerful and knowledgeable (though not infinite) God could perceive everything we think of without knowing or creating all that can exist. So, where he does not explicitly attempt to prove the existence of an infinite God, Berkeley invokes one or more of the *a posteriori* arguments for which he is well-known (such as the passivity or continuity accounts). But in cases where he aims to prove demonstratively that an infinite God exists, he invokes an *a priori* argument in which the proposition “God exists” is a self-evident truth that does not rely on our experience of “the beauty and usefulness of the several parts of the creation” but simply the “bare existence” of the sensible world (DHP 212).² This bare existence refers not only to the world we perceive but also to the pure possibility of the existence of any world, and it is that pure possibility on which Berkeley relies to prove the existence of an infinite God.

In this paper I indicate how Berkeley’s use of *a posteriori* arguments supports a view of God that is accessible and persuasive for finite minds. However, those arguments ultimately support belief only in a God who is finite. So, I show how, by appealing to an *a priori* argument for God’s existence, Berkeley emphasizes God’s infinity. This does not undermine the previous arguments, for it does not aim to challenge how those arguments support belief in a God who accounts for all we experience. It only indicates that another kind of argument is needed to show how our knowledge of the existence of an infinite God does not depend *a posteriori* on our experience of things in the world.

I. *A Posteriori* Arguments for God’s Existence

2. Abbreviations: PHK=*A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*; DHP=*Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, both in *Works of George Berkeley*, vol. 2, eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson, 1949); Alc=*Alciphron*, vol. 3; and NB=*Notebooks*, in *Philosophical Works* by George Berkeley, ed. M. R. Ayers (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1992).

The passivity argument (spelled out in PHK 25-32) proposes that, because ideas do not have any causal power themselves, they must be caused by “an incorporeal active substance or spirit” (PHK 26). Since our ideas of sense occur involuntarily, we conclude that they are not creatures of our own will but are the products of “some other will or spirit” (PHK 29). That other will or spirit arranges those ideas in marvelous ways that exhibit a “steadiness, order, and coherence” that we identify as laws of nature (PHK 30). Of course, the effects of God’s actions might be “infinitely more numerous” (PHK 147) than those ascribed to human beings, but that does not prove that God is infinite, for we cannot be certain that *all things* are connected in an orderly fashion, only those things we perceive.

The continuity argument (spelled out in DHP 230-31) suggests that sensible things exist even when I do not perceive them because God perceives them along with, and in relation to, all other ideas. In contrast to the passivity argument, the continuity argument identifies things not in terms of how *we* perceive them (since sometimes we *don’t* perceive them) but in terms of how God comprehends them in relation to *all things*. When we do perceive those objects—that is, when God “exhibits them to our view” according to laws of nature—we justifiably infer that the best explanation for the continuity of our perceptions is God (even if such an abduction does not provide us with certainty).

We no doubt receive an *endless* or unimaginably great number of ideas from God, but Berkeley is careful not to say that God communicates an *infinite* number of ideas to us (PHK 47, 124, 130–131). Even if those sensible things are ‘numberless’ (DHP 215), such empirical observations cannot assure us that the sensible world is *perfectly* harmonious, because we cannot have observations of sensible objects without already presuming the infinite context in terms of which a finite sensible object is conceivable. In this way, Berkeley reveals how *our* ability to

perceive an unimaginably great (though finite) number of sensations prompts us to marvel at the intricacy of God's creation, but it is no proof of an infinite God.

It is unfortunate, then, that some commentators think that all of Berkeley's arguments for God's existence are intended to achieve the same level of certainty.³ No doubt, we can deduce phenomena from laws of nature even while not being able to *demonstrate* phenomena because we do not know that God acts uniformly (PHK 107). Furthermore, our experiences in the world 'suggest' the presence of God, and our knowledge of "so much harmony and contrivance" convinces us that such a belief is rational (PHK 63). But *we* cannot demonstrate "beyond all exception" (PHK 10), *a priori* (PHK 21, 61), with certainty (PHK 61), or self-evidently (PHK 88) that God exists. That does not mean, however, that his existence cannot be known with certainty (DHP 230, 233).

II. The Demonstrative Deduction of the Existence of God

To see how Berkeley is able to *deduce* the existence of an infinite God as the cause of the sensible world, I propose that he provides an argument that *demonstrates* how God exists without basing such a demonstration on our experiences of individual things in the world. So when Berkeley says that "it is evident that the being of a *spirit infinitely wise, good, and powerful* is abundantly sufficient to explain all the appearances of Nature" (PHK 72), I suggest that he is not claiming that we know that God is all-wise, good, or powerful based on what we experience in nature. For our experiences of sensible things in nature are always finite experiences, and finite things are intelligible only in terms of other finite things. We therefore

3. See Kenneth P. Winkler, *Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 286–90; Douglas M. Jesseph, "Berkeley, God, and Explanation," in *Early Modern Philosophy: Mind, Matter, and Metaphysics*, ed. Christia Mercer and Eileen O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 183–205, esp. 186–90; Hugh Hunter, "George Berkeley's Proof for the Existence of God," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 78 (2015): 183–193, esp. 188–89; and Daniel E. Flage, "Is Berkeley's God Omnipotent?" *Review of Metaphysics* 71 (2018): 703–721, esp. 708 n. 27–28, 721.

cannot know that a finite thing is the creation of an *infinite* God by starting with our limited experience of finite things, for even to conceptualize something as finite depends on having a prior sense of the infinite.

Instead of assuming that Berkeley's proof for the existence of God begins, then, with the fact that there are sensible (finite) things in the world that need to be explained, we need to begin by explaining how our experiences of all sensible (finite) things are possible in the first place. As Berkeley concludes at the end of the *Principles*, that cannot be done without recognizing how God "deserves the *first* place in our studies" (PHK 156, emphasis added). That is, without first knowing that God exists, we cannot make sense of saying that *all* other (finite) things exist as a uniform or collective totality about which one can predicate "magnificence, beauty, and perfection" (PHK 146). For apart from a divinely constituted harmony, finite things are unrelateable because they have no identities.

God is thus not some *thing* that just happens to be infinite, for that would beg the question of how God is or comes to be perceived as being that thing. That is why God is not a thing or object at all but rather the "active efficient cause" of all things. We can still say of God that he is a mind, that he has a will and understanding, and that he is an immaterial substance, but what we mean by such expressions is that he is the *principle* or *substance* of differentiation and association of all ideas. As such, to say that God is infinite—specifically, an infinite mind—means that he is the principle or activity whereby all actual *and* potential things are differentiated and identified relative to one another.

To think about God in this way is not to reason *a posteriori*—that is, using associations of discrete ideas as the basis for what we (as finite minds) experience or imagine—for that would assume that we could speak about ideas that are already differentiated and identified without knowing how they have come to be identified and differentiated. Instead, for us to think about

God is to think about the cause of the orderly and uniform sequences of ideas that characterize the comprehension of all things in relation to one another. Our finite minds are thus different from God's mind precisely because we do not perceive how *all things* are in harmony with all other things.

God is therefore not an infinite mind who happens to impose his ideas on finite minds—as if those minds could be conceived apart from the ideas they have or somehow can be thought to exist independently of or logically prior to their having the specific set of ideas that identifies them. Rather, he is the will that there be a comprehensive order of finite (i.e. disconnected) minds perceiving discernible (often seemingly disconnected) objects. Accordingly, to say that God creates finite minds means that he wills the harmonious totality of all sets of perceivings and perceptions. In creating this totality of minds, God knows that certain combinations of ideas will be perceived disharmoniously (i.e. painfully); but in the grand scheme of things, that is “indispensably necessary to our well-being” (PHK 153). So, despite how things often appear to be evil, they are in fact good when understood in the context of the harmony of the “whole system” of beings.

In short, the key for understanding Berkeley's notion of God lies not in modeling the divine mind on a finite mind and just removing the finite mind's limitations—for that would be to model the subjectivity of God (and even our own minds) on the objectivity of the contents of our own ideas. Nor does it lie in thinking of God as the ultimate justification for the existence of the sensible world, for that would focus our concerns on the world of our experience rather than the perfections (e.g. goodness, life) that are ‘properly’ ascribed to God (Alc IV.20: 168). Instead, we need to emphasize the comprehensiveness of God's knowledge. For as long as we lack a prior sense of that comprehensiveness, we cannot develop an integrated way of thinking about how all actual, possible, and impossible acts of perception are intelligible.

Indeed, when Berkeley notes that “all sensible things must be perceived by [God]” (DHP 212), or refers to “the will of an omnipotent spirit” (DHP 219), or remarks that “there are certain things perceived by the mind of God” (DHP 220), or agrees that God is an agent, “a being purely active” (DHP 230)—he means nothing other than God is the willful perceiving of the totality of all distinctions. This is in keeping with Berkeley’s point that a substance is not some *independent* thing that underlies or supports ideas; rather, it *is* the differentiation and association of the complex totality of those ideas. God is thus the will that all actual and possible ideas be differentiated and associated. In this sense, the meaning of ‘God’ is exactly the same as the meaning of ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’, for as Berkeley observes, “the Spirit, the active thing, that which is soul and God, is the Will alone” (NB 712). Indeed, the only thing that distinguishes God from us—and it is a big distinction—is the order, variety, and comprehension of what we will.⁴

III. The Inherent Infinity of Divine Perception

Since we cannot demonstrate the existence of an infinite God based on our limited observations of regularities in nature, all we can attest to are observations that *seem* to be regular (from our limited perspectives). Anything we might say about God based on such observations would certainly be nothing more than probable, including even how we speak about God as knowing, powerful, or good. In the end, someone who relies on finite experiences of things in the world as the basis for claims about the nature of God as their cause seemingly can never conclude anything about God other than his finitude. So, to say of God that he is good, loving, etc. is simply to say how *we* think of him and the effects of his will from our finite perspectives.

However, as we become more enlightened “with a thorough sense of the omnipresence, holiness, and justice of that *Almighty Spirit*” (PHK 155), we recognize that that finite perspective

4. See Stephen H. Daniel, *George Berkeley and Early Modern Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), Chapter 14 (“Berkeley on God”).

is not the perspective from which we speak legitimately about how we relate to God as infinite. Instead of thinking of God as some object distinct from ourselves, we learn to think of him as the active principle by which we identify ourselves as engaging the system of all other beings (PHK 151). It is through God that we thus recognize how we are related infinitely to everything else.

Again, this requires that we think of God not as some object that is presupposed by the differentiation and integration of all actual and possible things, but as the activity of such identification. To think of God as a substance or cause is to think of him as the will *that there be* objects (both actual and possible) in infinite combinations. Of course, this exercise is “extremely inadequate” (DHP 231), since “our prospects are too narrow,” and we fail to appreciate how

if we enlarge our view, so as to comprehend the various ends, connexions, and dependencies of things . . . 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. (PHK 153)

That is, when considered as linked to the whole system of beings, everything we experience is appropriate or fitting, even those things that we often think of as evil (i.e. from our narrow perspectives). In this way, we learn to “abide the evil” we receive from God, because we cannot trust our judgments about good and evil simply on the basis that we are pleased or displeased by some particular feature of our experience.

In this sense, God, for Berkeley, is not the efficient cause of *particular* finite things in the world, for such an explanation does not provide a justification or rationale for why the totality of finite things would exist in the first place. For that kind of explanation—which is “altogether worthy a philosopher”—we need to appeal to a final cause that explains how “the whole creation is the workmanship of a *wise and good agent*” (PHK 107). So instead of thinking of God as the

creator of all individual things, we need to think of him as the creator of the total unity of all there is, the *whole* of creation. We should focus not on the *specific* things that God creates, for that requires that we think that God knows each finite thing as distinct from every other. Rather, we should recognize how God creates all things as objects of an infinity of finite perceivings (NB 578–81), each one of which identifies an object that points beyond itself to all that it is not.

Accordingly, the things that God creates have “a steadiness, order, and coherence, and are not excited at random, as those which are the effects of human wills often are, but in a regular train or series, the admirable connexion whereof sufficiently testifies the wisdom and benevolence of its Author” (PHK 30). Only from our finite perspective do we think that God creates a ‘collection’ of finite things. In fact, what God creates is a complex totality, a uniform organization in which human minds are the finite principles of differentiation that exist in virtue of the distinctions and relations they express.

No doubt, we learn of God’s will by familiarizing ourselves with the laws of nature. But since the laws are no more than summaries of observations, there seems to be little justification in concluding that God is *infinite* based on the finitude of what we experience. That is why Berkeley challenges such an objection by emphasizing how God creates and organizes the *whole* system of beings. Again, the issue here is not about concluding that God is all-wise *because* we recognize how what we know of the world seems orderly; it is about how the system of beings we understand can be understood as a ‘whole’ only if God is all-wise. So, unless we think of the things we experience in terms of an infinite God, we will always think of them as fragmented and never in a way that allows us to understand what we experience comprehensively.

This collective, universal, totalizing feature of God’s discriminatory activity distinguishes him from finite perceivers and allows Berkeley to appeal to both *a posteriori* and *a priori* proofs for God’s existence. What makes Berkeley’s strategy different from those of his contemporaries

is how his shift to understanding God as the subject of perception allows him to speak about the existence of God and finite perceivers univocally without committing him to a form of pantheism. In perceiving *all* things (both possible and actual) together, collectively, harmoniously, simultaneously—and infinitely—God challenges any attempt to think of the concept of totality in discursive terms. And that makes Berkeley's account of God unique.