

This is a repository copy of *Berkeley's "esse is percipi" and Collier's "simple" argument*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/3747/>

---

**Article:**

Stoneham, T. [orcid.org/0000-0001-5490-4927](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5490-4927) (2006) Berkeley's "esse is percipi" and Collier's "simple" argument. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*. pp. 211-224. ISSN 0740-0675

---

**Reuse**

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

*promoting access to White Rose research papers*



**Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York**  
**<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>**

---

This is an author produced version of a paper published in **History of Philosophy Quarterly**

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/3747/>

---

**Published paper**

Stoneham, Tom (2006) *Berkeley's "esse is percipi" and Collier's "simple" argument*. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 23 (3). pp. 211-224.

---

*Berkeley's 'esse is percipi' and Collier's 'simple' argument*

Tom Stoneham

Department of Philosophy

University of York

Heslington

York

YO10 5DD

UK

+44-1904-433258

[twcs1@york.ac.uk](mailto:twcs1@york.ac.uk)

### ***Berkeley's 'esse is percipi' and Collier's 'simple' argument***

*Almost all<sup>i</sup> who write on Collier note a striking similarity between a short passage in his Clavis Universalis and the famous claim that esse is percipi in Berkeley's Principles. This essay explores that similarity in more detail than has been done before. The comparison forces us to address an issue about the nature of passivity in Berkeley's theory of mind. Two interpretations consistent with the text are offered and one is favoured on the grounds that it makes some of Berkeley's arguments more plausible. The idealisms of Berkeley and Collier are shown to have a common source.*

#### ***Introduction***

Arthur Collier was, even in his own time, an obscure Wiltshire clergyman. He was born in 1680, educated at Balliol with his younger brother William, and from 1704 until his death in 1732, was Rector of Langford Magna near Salisbury, a living which had been held by his father, grandfather and great grandfather. William held the living of a neighbouring parish. Both brothers were prodigiously interested in metaphysics, and the clerical community to the west of Salisbury must have seemed a hotbed of abstract speculation in the first decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for Norris held the living of nearby Bemerton.

In 1713 Arthur Collier published a slim volume entitled *Clavis Universalis* which argues against the existence of an external world.<sup>ii</sup> While stylistically and philosophically inferior to Berkeley's works on the subject, the similarities and differences are of interest. Collier restricts his attention to the visible world, accepting that it has 'seeming' or 'quasi-externeity' but, in the first instance, arguing that this is not sufficient reason to believe it actually external. He then proceeds to argue that the visible world cannot be external, not pausing to contemplate the apparent consequence that it has an impossible appearance. In the second part of the book, he argues that any external world, even if not perceptible, is impossible. The arguments here draw heavily on Bayle but are presented in a way which appears to foreshadow the first two Kantian antinomies.

There is no conclusive evidence that Collier had read or even heard of Berkeley before the publication of the *Clavis*. Shortly afterwards, in a letter to Samuel Clarke on 14th

February 1713/4, he refers to 'Mr Berkeley's book' (note the singular) and in 1730 refers to the *Three Dialogues* as 'the only [other] book on that subject, which I ever heard of in the world'<sup>iii</sup>. If we take him at his word, then, he never read the *Principles* and only came across the *Three Dialogues* after, and possibly as a consequence of, publishing the *Clavis*.

### ***Comparing the two arguments***

It is worth quoting the whole of Collier's 'simple' argument for it gives the full flavour of his curious style (the spelling and punctuation have been modernized in this passage):

[To this I might add another, which (if possible) is a yet more simple manner of proceeding to the same conclusion. And it is this. The objects we speak about are supposed to be visible; and that they are visible or seen is supposed to be *all* that we know of them, or their existence. If so, they exist as visible, or in other words, their visibility is their existence. This therefore destroys all, or any, distinction between their *Being* and their being *Seen*, by making them both the same thing; and this evidently at the same time destroys the externity of them. But this argument has the misfortune of being too simple and evident for the generality of readers, who are apt to fancy that light itself is not seen but by the help of darkness; and so, without insisting any further on this head, I proceed to some other points which may *seem* to be more intelligible.] (*Clavis*, pp.36-7)

The similarity between Collier's identification of Being and being Seen and Berkeley's famous '*esse is percipi*' is obvious, but the routes that they take to this conclusion initially appear very different indeed. Collier's key premise is an epistemic claim, that what is seen is all that we know about visible objects, and the reference to existence seems to embody just one aspect of what is so known. Whereas Berkeley argues from the meaning of the word

'exist', that is from a semantic rather than an epistemic position, and with an exclusive focus on existence:

I think an intuitive knowledge may be obtained of this [that the various sensations or ideas imprinted on the sense ... cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them], 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; ... 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 like expressions. ... Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible that they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them. (*Principles* §3)<sup>iv</sup>

Far from appealing to meanings of ordinary words like this, Collier actually thinks that ordinary language is committed to exactly what he wants to deny:

... notwithstanding that there is scarce a word in [the common language] but what supposes the Being of an External World, or that the Visible World is External (*Clavis*, p.120).

Collier goes on to say, in effect, that we should speak with the vulgar and think with the learned, and he even uses the same example as Berkeley (*Principles* §51), of a Copernican talking about the sun rising, when he makes that point (though remember that Berkeley only holds the common way of speaking to be mistaken about causal relations, not about existence and mind-dependence). In his conclusion, Collier claims that there are some subjects for which one *must* use the language of external existence for to speak otherwise would be 'Vain, Nonsensical and Absurd' (*Clavis*, p.137). So if Berkeley's argument really is just an appeal to ordinary language, he and Collier could not be more different on this point.

However, it is an anachronistic mistake to read the argument of *Principles* §3 as premised on a semantic claim about the word 'exist'. We find it obvious that any word of our language is susceptible to an explicative definition; we expect single language dictionaries to have entries for the most common of words, such as 'cat' or the verb 'to be'. Consequently, when Berkeley writes about the 'meaning of *exist*', we simply assume that he intends to offer something akin to a dictionary definition or conceptual analysis, namely non-circular necessary and/or sufficient conditions for the application of the word, making explicit the implicit knowledge of competent speakers. But the idea that it makes sense to set about doing that for *any* word of the language can be traced back to Johnson's idiosyncratic approach to the task of writing a prescriptive dictionary, and thus to 1755 which succeeds Berkeley's death let alone the composition of the *Principles*. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century single-language English dictionaries were explicitly restricted to 'hard' words, usually derived from Latin, Greek or Hebrew, and aimed at 'Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskilfull persons'.<sup>v</sup> At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, John Kersey was producing dictionaries which excluded technical terms and jargon, but also tried to be very extensive (he reached 38,000 headwords by 1706), but he still restricted himself to 'significant words'. The first serious attempt at recording all English words was Nathaniel Bailey's *Universal Etymological Dictionary* of 1721, but he saw no point in giving definitions as we understand them to the words which everyone learns as a small child. For example, he defines 'cat' and 'horse' as 'a creature well known' and 'a beast well known' respectively.

If Berkeley's talk of meaning should not be treated as an attempt to fill in the right hand side of the analytic philosophers' bi-conditional 'necessarily: x exists if and only if ...', then how should it be interpreted? We can take as a starting point the perfectly familiar, ordinary sense of 'meaning' in which the meaning of an utterance is the *point* or *purpose* of making that utterance. One point of making an assertion is to speak the truth, but we can see

that the reasons for a speech act, for making an utterance, often go beyond evidence for its truth. We can, and often do, ask what someone is trying to do by making an assertion, what is the point of that assertion (e.g. 'What do you mean by saying that?'). So perhaps Berkeley should be read as saying that there is no point or purpose in claiming that something perceptible exists other than that it is, or was, or will be perceived. This would be a natural way to read 'trifling with words' in *Principles* §81:

yet for anyone to pretend to a notion of entity or existence, *abstracted* from *spirit* and *idea*, from perceiving and being perceived, is, I suspect, a downright repugnancy and trifling with words.

Trifling actions are meaningless in the sense that they have no point, and speaking nonsense, being pointless (comedy aside), would be trifling. But there are ways of trifling with words which are not so obviously nonsensical. If one asks about the non-trifling uses to which a word may be put, one is not interested in linguistic meaning narrowly construed, about what we now call the content or truth-conditions of an utterance, but in the practical uses to which we can reasonably put our language. Similarly for Berkeley's claims about the meaning of 'exist' in *Principles* §3: he is asking us to reflect upon the point or purpose of saying that a sensible thing exists. As such he is making a substantive *modal* claim about language, a modal claim which one could come to believe in the normal way, that is on the basis of reflection and unsuccessfully seeking counterexamples.

So saying an assertion such as 'There is a table but no one has ever perceived it or will ever perceive it' is meaningless, *in the sense now being attributed to Berkeley*, is not to say that it is empty, or nonsense or analytically false. Nor is it to say that we could never have any evidence for that claim. These further points may be *consequences* of idealism, but they are not what Berkeley is using as a premise in *Principles* §3. Rather, what he wants to say is that we could never be in a situation in which there would be any point or purpose in making

that assertion (trivial counterexamples like philosophical arguments aside), that any such assertion would always be mere *trifling* with words. And as long as we focus on 'sensible things' rather than insensibles such as bacteria and electrons, which are the subject of different arguments, the point seems correct. There is only any point in making assertions about such things in so far as they have some effect or impact upon our lives, and the only way they can do that is through our perception of them. Or at least, the only way that they can effect us *directly* is through our perception of them, though they may effect us indirectly through their relations to other sensibles which we perceive. Let us grant Berkeley this modal claim about purposeful uses of language. We should now ask, how does he get from this claim about the meaning or purpose of existence talk to his famous claim about sensible things, namely that 'their *esse* is *percipi*'?

Note that his conclusion is not the oft misquoted Latin tag '*esse est percipi*': he has not simply written the sentence 'to be is to be perceived' in Latin. Rather he has used a familiar technical term in scholastic philosophy, '*esse*', which is a noun not an infinitive, meaning being or essence.<sup>vi</sup> It is striking that he should choose to do this in his published work, where he otherwise is careful to avoid the technical terminology of the Schools. So *Principles* §3 has as its conclusion not a claim about the ordinary notion of existence, but one about a philosophical notion, namely that the essence or nature of a sensible thing is perceivedness, and on the current interpretation, his ground for this is that the only point or purpose of an assertion that such a thing exists is to say that it is, or will, or has been perceived by someone.<sup>vii</sup> That is, if you think hard about why we assert that various sensible things exist, you will see that it is only ever to say that there are actually perceived, thus their nature is to be perceived, they possess perceivedness essentially, their *esse* is *percipi*. Unfortunately this argument is terrible, for even if a sensible thing were only contingently perceived, it could still be that the whole of our interest in it was exhausted by our perception of it. Even if

Berkeley is correct that *as far as we are concerned* it exists if and only if it is perceived, he cannot conclude that *necessarily* it exists if and only if it is perceived. Berkeley seems to have moved illegitimately from how things are for us to how they are in themselves.

Interestingly, Collier makes a very similar move in his 'Simple' argument, going from how things are *for us* to how they are *in themselves*:

... that they are visible or seen is supposed to be *all* that we know of them, or their existence. If so, they exist as visible, or in other words, their visibility is their existence. (*ibid.*)

His premise is that the extent of our knowledge of visible things, and in particular the extent of our knowledge of their existence, is what we see of them, from which he concludes that their existence consists in their being seen: they only exist *for us* as visible so they only exist as visible. The fallacy is obvious. However, we should not be happy with merely noting the existence of this bad inference in both Berkeley and Collier, rather we should ask ourselves what could these two idealists have been thinking which made this seem a good inference.

### ***The Transparency Thesis***

One clue comes in a letter written by Collier on March 8<sup>th</sup> 1713/4:

He [i.e. a certain Mr Balch who had criticised Collier] cannot show another in the world, besides Mr Berkeley and myself, who hold the testimony of sense to be infallible as to this point [i.e. the existence of visible objects].<sup>viii</sup>

Given the prevalence at the time of the view that Berkeley was denying the existence of the ordinary objects we take ourselves to perceive, this is very striking: Collier was clearly an early sympathetic reader of Berkeley. Of course, we are interested at the present juncture in the alleged infallibility of perception with respect to not just the existence but also the nature of sensible things, for we want to know why both Berkeley and Collier are prepared to infer

from how things must be for us to how they must be in themselves. But we can expect the two to have a common source. Let us call the wider infallibility of not only the existence but also the nature of the objects of sense the 'transparency thesis'. Berkeley asserts the full-blown transparency thesis later on in the *Principles*:

Colour, figure, motion, extension and the like ... are perfectly known, there being nothing in them which is not perceived. (*Principles* §87)

A thesis such as this is clearly strong enough to get from Berkeley's and Collier's respective premises about how perceptible objects are for us to their conclusions about the nature of those objects. But finding a premise strong enough to reach one's conclusion is easy; it is justifying it which is hard. So what reasons can we find in Berkeley and Collier for transparency?

There is a common interpretation of the opening sections of the *Principles* which holds that Berkeley simply helps himself to this by sleight of hand: he stipulates that the objects of perception are 'ideas' and then appeals to a contemporary philosophical theory of ideas, as special mental objects, to support the transparency thesis. This interpretation is supported by the phrase omitted from *Principles* §87 above: 'considered only as so many *sensations* in the mind'. If this interpretation were right, it would make Berkeley a much less interesting philosopher, not least of all because it seems that he may have misunderstood the theory of ideas, at least as it appears in Locke. But it certainly does have the virtue of explaining why he accepts transparency with no argument or discussion.

Collier cannot be accused of relying on a philosophical theory of ideas in the same way, because he does not use the language of ideas or sensations at all, preferring instead 'visible objects', 'things seen' and occasionally 'bodies'. He does at one point argue, like Berkeley, that if one accepts the mind-dependence of secondary qualities, then one must also accept the mind-dependence of all perceived qualities (*Clavis*, pp.20-2), but he does not ever

use the term 'idea' and nor does he rest much weight on this particular argument. Rather than relying on a pre-existing theory of ideas, he offers something a bit closer to an argument for transparency, at least with respect to the existence of visible objects:

For is there any other possible Way of *seeing* a Thing than by having such or such a Thing *present* to our Minds? ... Then may we think, without thinking on any Thing; or perceive, without having any Thing in our Mind. (*Clavis*, p.36)

This is a version of an argument we find in Plato (*Theaetetus*, 188e) and Malebranche:

I am thinking of a variety of things: of a number, of a circle, of a house, of such and such beings, of being. Thus, all these things exist, at least while I think of them. ... For if the circle I perceived were nothing, in thinking of it I would be thinking of nothing. (*Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, I, iv)<sup>ix</sup>

It is clear that Malebranche takes thinking about something as being related to it in a certain way and Collier both extends this to perception and specifies the relation as being 'present to the mind'. These two moves allow him to conclude that visible objects 'cannot possibly be *External* to, at a *Distance* from, or *Independent* on, us' (*Clavis*, p.36). What is interesting about the argument in Malebranche and Collier is that it does not rest upon a theory of the nature of the *objects* of perception, but upon a claim about the *relation* we stand in to things we think about or perceive.

So it is important to distinguish two very different reasons for accepting transparency. One would be that the *objects* of knowledge or perception are such as to prevent error, that they are the kind of thing which is as it seems and seems as it is: they are mental objects or sensations, along the lines of a common understanding of pains. The other would be that the *relation* we hold to these objects is such that nothing is hidden. For Collier it is clearly the latter, but what about Berkeley? To answer that question, we need to know a great deal more about how Berkeley conceived the perceptual relation.

### ***'Passive Reception'***

Berkeley tells us that perceived ideas exist 'in the mind' but *not* 'by way of mode or accident'. Rather they exist in the mind as objects of perception. The main thing he tells us about perception is that it is passive. And interestingly he uses this, rather than the Humean 'double existence' move, to argue against an act-object account of perception in the *First Dialogue* (*Dialogues*, pp.196-7). His objection to an act-object account is that it requires the active involvement of the mind, where active is taken to mean voluntary, in what he regards as a purely passive process. But it has seemed to many that this argument can be neatly side-stepped, that we can keep the distinction integral to the act-object account between the mental event of perceiving and the object perceived, by allowing the mental event to be involuntary, to be passive, to be something that happens to us not something we do. In order to maintain his objection to the act-object account, if Berkeley would have to claim that all mental events or occurrences are voluntary acts of that mind, that there can be no mental act in perception which is not a voluntary action by the perceiver. But if that were the case, no other thing, not even God, could cause one of our mental events, since all our mental events would be under our voluntary control. God could not cause someone to think about Berkeley or to imagine a tree: God's actions could at best be an occasion for our volitions which then cause those mental events.

Now Berkeley does take all God's mental events to be voluntary actions, concluding that He does not perceive by sense at all:

But God, whom no external being can affect, who perceives nothing by sense as we do, whose will is absolute and independent, causing all things, and liable to be thwarted or resisted by nothing; it is evident, such a being as this can suffer nothing,

nor be affected with any painful sensation, *or indeed any sensation at all.* (*Dialogues* p.241, my emphasis)

Thus, in order to distinguish us creatures from God, and to allow that we can have sense perception, Berkeley must allow that there is something passive in our minds. Which is exactly what he does in the correspondence with Johnson. Johnson writes:

There is certainly something passive in our souls, we are purely passive in the reception of our ideas; (5<sup>th</sup> February 1730)<sup>x</sup>

and Berkeley responds:

That the soul of man is passive as well as active I make no doubt. (24<sup>th</sup> March 1730)<sup>xi</sup>

It seems to follow that there are two sorts of occurrence in our minds, passive perceivings and active willings, and thus the mind has both an active part and a passive part. But the matter is not as simple as it seems, for Berkeley does *not* allow that we have two faculties, an active will and a passive sense-perception, for he is clear that the mind is both active and undivided:

A spirit is one simple, undivided, active being: as it perceives ideas, it is called the understanding, and as it produces or otherwise operates about them, it is called the will. (*Principles* §27)

So God's essential activity rules out his having sense-perceptions, which are *essentially* passive,<sup>xii</sup> whereas our more humble, finite active nature leaves us somehow able to receive ideas passively. Perhaps our passive reception of ideas consists in a restriction or limitation upon our power to choose which ideas we perceive. However, the passive event of perceiving those ideas would still create a problem for Berkeley's theory of mind. To see this, suppose that Berkeley is thinking of activity along the lines of a Cartesian essential attribute of all minds, both Divine and created. Then every mental state, event or occurrence is a mode of that mind's activity, which seems to rule out human perception just as much as divine perception, for a passive perception is not a mode of activity.

Thus there is a *prima facie* problem in Berkeley's theory of mind. The mind is simple, undivided and essentially active, and yet created minds are passive in their reception of ideas. The problem is exceptionally clear in *Principles* §139 where we are told that 'a soul or spirit is an active being, whose existence consists not in being perceived, but in perceiving ideas and thinking.'

In the unfortunate absence of Part 2 of the *Principles*, we must speculate on how this problem could be resolved, and I can think of two proposals.

(1) Perhaps Berkeley is not using 'active' and 'passive' as contraries, perhaps he thinks that, in sense perception, the mind is both passive, because not in control, and actively receptive. This would reconcile indivisibility of the mind with the appearance of separate active and passive faculties and also explain why he includes perception of ideas by the understanding as an activity in *Principles* §27 while treating it elsewhere as passive. It would also make linguistic sense if he was using 'passive' as the contrary not of 'active' but of 'impassive', a term he reserves to describe God's inability to be affected with sensations. Thus our passivity would sometimes consist in our being the patient in an interaction, whereas God is always the agent, but being a patient can itself be an activity.

However, at *Principles* §27, *Dialogues* pp.213, 217 and 231 ideas are described as 'passive and inert' and at *Principles* §69 the same phrase is used to describe matter, in both cases trying to draw a contrast with the active nature of (finite) minds, which contrast requires active and passive to be contraries. Of course, this only shows that 'passive' is the contrary of 'active' if Berkeley's use is univocal, and one might think that the conjunction 'passive and inert' signals a particular use of the term. However, there are also uses of 'passive' to mean inactive which do not have the qualification 'and inert' at *Principles* §§70 and 141. What would be needed to establish the charge of equivocation would be uses of

'passive' which can be read as 'being a patient' but not as 'inert'. The only two candidates in the early works are *Principles* §139:

I answer, all the unthinking objects of the mind agree, in that they are intirely passive, and their existence consists only in being perceived: whereas a soul or spirit is an active being, whose existence consists not in being perceived, but in perceiving ideas and thinking

and *Dialogues* p.217 (from the mouth of Hylas):

And indeed it is very plain, that when I stir my finger, it remains passive; but my will which produced the motion, is active.

But neither forces that reading, so the textual evidence is inconclusive on the point.

(2) Berkeley may have made a general distinction between the active understanding, which is the faculty of judgement, knowledge and reason and can be identified with the mind, and the purely passive business of sense-perception. Thus, when he writes in *Principles* §27 of the perception of ideas by the understanding, he should not be taken to include sense-perceptions. This would amount to a denial of the receptivity of perception, for if all mental occurrences or events are active, and sense-perception is not, then it does not involve any mental event (though it may be accompanied by one). He certainly made a sharp distinction between understanding and sense perception in the *Theory of Vision Vindicated* (1733):

To perceive is one thing; to judge is another. So likewise, to be suggested is one thing, and to be inferred another. Things are suggested and perceived by sense. We make judgments and inferences by the understanding. (§42)

And even later in *Siris* (1744):

As understanding perceiveth not, that is, doth not hear, or see, or feel, so sense knoweth not: and although the mind may use both sense and fancy, as means whereby

to arrive at knowledge, yet sense, or soul so far forth as sensitive, knoweth nothing.

For, as it is rightly observed in the *Theaetetus* of Plato, science consists not in the passive perceptions, but in the reasoning upon them. (§305)

Unfortunately, there is no such clear statement in the earlier works, but nor is there anything inconsistent with this interpretation. This omission might be explained by the fact that at the time he wrote the *Principles* and *Dialogues* he still intended to publish Part 2 of the *Principles*, which was to have dealt explicitly with these matters. Furthermore, we should note that in both these later works Berkeley writes as if he is stating the obvious, as if he expects the reader to concur without argument. And if he did take this distinction to be obvious, then the emphasis on the passivity of perception, coupled with the essential activity of mind, would amount to a denial of receptivity: the passive reception of ideas is not a reception at all, for the perceiving mind contributes nothing to the occurrence of a perceiving.

We have then two incompatible interpretations of Berkeley's conception of sense perception and no textual evidence which will decide conclusively between them. What is undeniable is that Berkeley took sense perception to be passive. Either he reconciled this with the essential activity of the mind by saying that it also involved an involuntary but active receptivity, or by denying that sense perception itself involved any event or occurrence of receptivity on the part of the perceiving mind. However, Berkeley's inexplicit, unquestioning reliance on the transparency thesis in the crucial argument of *Principles* §3 gives us an indirect reason for favouring the latter interpretation. For it is thinking of perception as having a structure involving an event of receptivity on the part of the subject which makes the transparency thesis so implausible. In fact, we may make an even stronger claim: only the second interpretation provides a charitable explanation of Berkeley's unquestioning commitment to the transparency of perception.

### *Conclusion*

Once we have interpreted Berkeley as accepting transparency by denying receptivity, we can see that the striking similarity between his *esse is percipi* and Collier's simple argument is far from superficial. Both arguments rely upon the transparency thesis, and furthermore, both authors accept transparency because they think it follows from the nature of the *relation of perception*, and not because they think it follows from the nature of the objects of perception, that is, not because they think the objects of perception are mental and therefore known through and through. This is obvious in Collier but obscured in Berkeley by his decision to use 'idea' to describe the objects of perception. But careful attention to Berkeley's opinion that perception is passive reveals that he thinks that to perceive is just to have some thing before the mind, that perceived objects are available for reason and judgement, but that their being perceived does not itself involve any mental act. This combination of views, which we might provocatively call 'Pre-Kantian Innocence', explains Berkeley's uncritical acceptance of transparency. And only if transparency derives in this way from a conception of the perceptual relation, rather than of the objects of perception, can it be used as a non-question-begging assumption in an argument for the conclusion that those objects of perception are mind-dependent. And that is precisely what both Berkeley and Collier are concerned to do.<sup>xiii</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> For example, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century we find the comparison in such different writers as Bowman, E. (ed), *Clavis Universalis*, Chicago, Open Court, 1909; Johnston, G. *The Development of Berkeley's Philosophy*, London, Macmillan, 1923, p.380; Muirhead, J., *The Platonic Tradition in Anglo-Saxon Philosophy*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1931, p.111; McCracken, C. and Tipton, I., *Berkeley's Principles and Dialogues: Background Source Materials*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p.149. Unsurprisingly, the comparison tends not to be made when the author is writing about the relation between Collier and Malebranche, e.g. McCracken, C., *Malebranche and British Philosophy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1983, pp.194-5, or between Collier and Kant, e.g. Brykman, G., 'Kant, Berkeley, et la «Méthode Sceptique»', *Kant et la Pensée Moderne: Alternatives Critiques*, Bordeaux, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1996, pp.131-3.

<sup>ii</sup> The title-page reads in full:

*Clavis Universalis: or, A New Inquiry after Truth. Being a Demonstration of the Non-Existence, or Impossibility, of an External World.* By Arth. Collier, Rector of Langford Magna, near Sarum. Printed for Robert Gosling, at the Mitre and Crown against St. Dunstan's Church in Fleetstreet. 1713.

All pages references are to the original edition.

<sup>iii</sup> *A Specimen of True Philosophy*, Salisbury, Charles Hooton, 1730, reprinted in Parr, S., *Metaphysical Tracts by English Philosophers of the Eighteenth Century*, London, Edward Lumley, 1837, p.114.

<sup>iv</sup> References to Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge*, *Theory of Vision Vindicated* and *Siris* are by section number, and to the *Three Dialogues* are by page number in the edition of Jessop, T. and Luce, A., *The Works of George Berkeley*, Volume 2, London, Thomas Nelson, 1949.

---

<sup>v</sup> Robert Cawdrey, *A Table Alphabeticall*, J. Roberts for E. Weaver, 1604, from the frontispiece.

<sup>vi</sup> It is quite clear that this is how Johnson reads Berkeley, since Johnson uses 'esse' as a noun, asking Berkeley about the 'esse of spirits'. I know of no place where Berkeley wrote the Latin sentence 'esse est percipi', and a search of the electronic version of Jessop and Luce confirms this. Yet even Luce himself makes the mistake (*Berkeley's Immaterialism*, London: Thomas Nelson, 1945, p.58). In Notebook A 429, which is the earliest occurrence of the principle using Latin terms (cf. 408), he does not use 'est', but nor does he use 'esse', writing instead 'Existence is percipi or ...'. This adds weight to the claim that his use of 'esse' in *Principles* §3 is a deliberate and calculated allusion to scholastic conceptions of essence. Collier is more than happy to use 'esse' in its scholastic sense in his *A Specimen of True Philosophy*, and even quotes Aquinas: 'Accidentis esse est inesse' (p. 117).

<sup>vii</sup> In 'Berkeley and the Meaning of Existence', *History of European Ideas*, 7, 1986, pp.567-73, Michael Ayers gives a rather different account of how Berkeley manages to relate claims about existence and essence. Ayers' interpretation is based entirely on the development of Berkeley's thinking revealed in the notebooks, rather than the final version of his views which he chose to publish.

<sup>viii</sup> Benson, R., *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Rev. Arthur Collier, M.A.* London, Edward Lumley, 1837, p.32.

<sup>ix</sup> Malebranche, N., *Dialogues on Metaphysics and Religion*, ed. N. Jolley and trans. D. Scott, Cambridge, CUP, 1997.

<sup>x</sup> Jessop, T. and Luce, A., *The Works of George Berkeley*, Volume 2, London, Thomas Nelson, 1949, p.289. Johnson states his view more fully in his *Elementa Philosophica* (1752):

---

In the perception of these ideas or objects of sense, we find our minds are merely passive, it not being in our power (supposing our organs rightly disposed and situated) whether we will see light and colours, hear sounds, &c. We are not causes to ourselves of these perceptions, nor can they be produced in our minds without a cause, or (which is the same thing) by any imagined unintelligent, inert, or unactive cause (which indeed is a contradiction in terms), from whence it is a demonstration that they must derive to us from an almighty, intelligent active cause, exhibiting them to us, impressing our minds with them, or producing them in us. And consequently (as I intimated), it must be by a perpetual intercourse of our minds with the Deity, the great Author of our beings, or by His perpetual influence or activity upon them, that they are possessed of all these objects of sense and the light by which we perceive them. (I, i, 7)

Johnson here shows a callous indifference to the important distinctions between ideas being exhibited to us, impressed upon us and produced in us.

<sup>xi</sup> *ibid.*, p.293

<sup>xii</sup> There are some very clear statements of this in Notebook B (Jessop, T. and Luce, A., *The Works of George Berkeley*, Volume 1, London, Thomas Nelson, 1948):

Whatsoever has any of our ideas in it must perceive, it being that very having, that passive reception of ideas that denominates the mind perceiving. that being the very essence of perception, or that wherein perception consists. (301)

10 the bare passive reception or having of ideas is call'd perception

11 Whatever has in it an idea, tho it be never so passive, tho it exert no manner of act about it, yet it must perceive. 10 (378)

<sup>xiii</sup> Versions of this paper have been read, and improved by subsequent discussions, at the International Berkeley Conference in Estonia, the York Staff Research Seminar, the Warwick

---

Philosophy Colloquium and the Oxford Early Modern Philosophy Seminar. Travel to Estonia was supported by a British Academy Overseas Conference Grant.