

PIOTR K. SZALEK

## BERKELEY, PSYCHOLOGISM, AND THE MODES OF EXISTENCE\*

### INTRODUCTION

In the course of the history of human thought, George Berkeley's philosophy is one of the most ambitious and challenging attempts to reformulate the metaphysical framework of the relation between mind and world.<sup>1</sup> It consists of the project, which was directed primarily against philosophical and religious scepticism and culminates in his famous explicit denial of the existence of matter as a substance. The crucial role in this proposal is played by the existential thesis *esse est percipi aut percipere*, "to be is to be perceived or to perceive", announced enthusiastically by Berkeley as the New Principle.

Although essential (and controversial), this existential aspect of Berkeleian thought is surprisingly neglected by many commentators, with the remarkable

---

PIOTR K. SZALEK, PhD, John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Faculty of Philosophy; correspondence address: Wydział Filozofii KUL, Al. Raławickie 14, 20-950 Lublin, Poland; e-mail: [piotr.szalek@kul.pl](mailto:piotr.szalek@kul.pl); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0805-425X>.

\* The work on this paper was possible due to the generous support of the National Science Centre, Poland (NCN Sonata 14 grant no. 2018/31/D/HS1/03759). I would like to express my special gratitude to James Harris, Bertil Belfrage, Alison Simmons, and Simon Blackburn for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the editors, especially Jacek Wojtysiak, Natalia Gondek, and Tomasz Pałkowski, and the anonymous referees of *Roczniki Filozoficzne*. The argument presented in the paper is an updated English reconstruction of a main line of the comprehensive treatment of Berkeley's definition of the physical world's existence, which I originally published in Polish in the form of a book titled *Istnienie i umysł. Studium podstaw filozofii George'a Berkeley'a* [Existence and mind: a study of the foundations of George Berkeley's philosophy] (Kraków: Universitas, 2016), 127–206.

<sup>1</sup> The paper is dedicated to Professor Stanisław Judycki, who inspired my research on Berkeley's philosophy. The paper was to have been published in a special issue of *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 72, no. 2 (2024), devoted to Professor Judycki's philosophy, but due to unforeseen circumstances, it is published in the current issue.

Articles are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0)

exception of Michael Ayers (1986), Anthony Grayling (1986), and Stephen H. Daniel (2021, 56–66), presumably due to the dominant epistemological tendency in the interpretation of his philosophy and, in consequence, of the principle as well.<sup>2</sup> It provokes Ayers to note:

Berkeley's claims about existence raise an apparently less than an obvious question, or at any rate one which seldom asked: why did Berkeley believe, or come to believe, that at the heart of his theory lies a theory about the *existence* or, more particularly, about the meaning of the word "exist"? Consider his fundamental claim that sensible qualities and things cannot exist unperceived, and cannot be conceived to exist unperceived. It is surely not a mere matter of formal translation to convert this claim into the claim that "exists" or the existential "is", when predicated of a sensible thing, means is perceived. (AYERS 1986, 567; see also DANIEL 2021, 66)

The aim of this paper is to reconstruct and analyse the notion of the existence of the external world elaborated by Berkeley<sup>3</sup>. In order to accomplish this task, I will clarify the notion of existence as regards physical reality following the Berkeleian New Principle. I will examine the motivation for emphasising the importance of the notion of existence with respect to its metaphysical assumptions and possible influences by the closest metaphysical context to Berkeley's philosophy. The metaphysical exegesis of Berkeley's work helps to understand the ambiguity connected to the degree of the external world's dependence on the mind in his view. In other words, it helps to understand in what sense the world might be understood in psychologistic terms as a part of the existence of the mind perceiving.<sup>4</sup>

In what follows, I present an interpretation of Berkeley's New Principle expressed in his major works. The primary texts are *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Understanding* (1710; hereafter quoted as the *Principles*) and the *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713; hereafter quoted as the *Dialogues*). The crucial role of the proper understanding of the arguments contained in the *Principles* and *Dialogues* is played also by

<sup>2</sup> For an instructive outline of the historiography of Berkeley's philosophy see Daniel (2021, 1–10).

<sup>3</sup> The paper is a supplement to the historical reconstruction of the origins of the Berkeleian definition of existence I proposed in SZALEK (2008, 93–113), (2009, 145–59), and (2016, 41–126).

<sup>4</sup> According to what I call psychologism in this paper, the content of our conscious acts (or, according to 17th-century Cartesian philosophy, ideas) is exclusively an internal element of this mind. On the contrary, in the case of anti-psychologism, the content of our mind is described as ontologically autonomous, i.e. as independent from the knowing subject. In such a view, Locke and Arnauld might be treated as representatives of psychologism, while Malebranche of anti-psychologism. See DANIEL (2021, 67, 68, 122–23) and HILL (2022, 46); cf. CRANE (2014, 2–4).

Berkeley's private philosophical notebooks (probably written in 1707 and 1708), titled *Philosophical Commentaries* by Arthur A. Luce in his *editio diplomatica* of 1944.<sup>5</sup> In many points of the interpretation, it is of extraordinary interest and value because it highlights (at least heuristically) Berkeley's preparatory work for his first two major publications. And, in consequence, it contains many unpublished or ambiguously expressed ideas, which help to reconstruct his motivation, development, and the proper design of arguments. Moreover, they also explicitly state the opposition to, and the agreement with, other particular philosophers by name.

To clarify the meaning of the New Principle, I will analyse the modes of existence of physical reality. I will explore this existential aspect of Berkeleyian philosophy by emphasising the notion of existence and the concept of spiritual substance, which are, as I argue, the two essential components of the New Principle. In that respect, I will try to offer a key to the interpretation of Berkeley's philosophy in terms of its metaphysical foundations, and I will discuss the modes of the existence of physical reality drawn from the thesis *esse est percipi* 'to be is to be perceived'. I will argue that the proper, full form of the thesis should be reconstructed in possibilist (although not phenomenalist) terms as follows: *esse est percipi aut posse percipi*, to be is to be perceived or be possibly perceived (i.e. to be perceivable).

# 1. THE MODE OF EXISTENCE OF THE PHYSICAL REALITY:

## *ESSE EST PERCIPI AUT POSSE PERCIPI*

Berkeley declares in the *Philosophical Commentaries* that the so-called New Principle is crucial to his philosophical project. And, as I will show, it is indeed the case. Paraphrasing the words of Ayers, it could be said that the New Principle is like a keystone of the Berkeleyan philosophical monument. "[I]t is so as an arch is dependent upon its keystone: if the keystone can be dislodged, the arch will fall, but it is the supporting pressure of the rest of the arch that makes the keystone difficult to dislodge" (AYERS [1975] 1998, xxiv).

The New Principle might be interpreted in three major ways: (1) as consisting in the *esse est percipi* thesis (see, e.g., LUCE 1945, 57–67), or (2) as consisting in stressing that "the mind is the substance that supports sensible things, by perceiving them" (AYERS 1970, 49), or as (3) combining both these

---

<sup>5</sup> All references to Berkeley's works are to the critical edition of all his works by Arthur A. Luce and Thomas E. Jessop (1948–1955).

claims, that is, that the thesis about the nature of substance is implied by the thesis about existence (see, e.g., GRAYLING 1986, 47–49). In my interpretation, I will opt for (3), showing that there is a strict correlation between the notion of existence and the discovery that spirit is the only substance. Hence, *esse est percipi* should be considered in the proper form as “Existence is *percipi* or *percipere*”, and concerns “the nature & meaning & import of Existence” (*Philosophical Commentaries*, entry 429). I will follow here the contention of Berkeley himself, who states that the notion of the nature of existence implicitly follows that of spirit as the only substance (see entry 279). In spite of the dominant, purely epistemological interpretation of the Berkeleian New Principle, I would like to explore its significance within metaphysics. In this and the following parts, I will emphasise the notion of existence and the concept of spiritual substance as a key to a metaphysical interpretation of Berkeley’s philosophy.

Berkeley offers an account of the New Principle in the *Principles*, §§ 1–7. According to him, human knowledge consists of objects that are “either ideas actually imprinted on the senses” or ideas of “memory and imagination” (§ 1; see FIELDS 2022, 259–60). Apart from ideas, there is something which knows or perceives them, and “this perceiving, active beings what I call mind, spirit, soul, or my self” and it is “entirely distinct” from the ideas it perceives (*Principles*, § 2).

Assuming, in accordance with the seventeenth-century predecessors, that our thoughts, passions and ideas of imagination do not “exist without the mind”, Berkeley argues that it “seems no less evident that the various sensations or ideas imprinted on the sense, however, blended or combined together (that is, whatever objects they compose) cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them” (*Principles*, § 3; see also HILL 2022, 46–47; DANIEL 2021, 67). Thus, the conceptual framework of the sensible object should be reformulated or re-expressed in terms of the actual or possible perceptions. And therefore, as he put it, “[f]or 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 minds or thinking things which perceive them” (§ 3). The absolute existence of sensible objects independent of perceptions is then on this ground a “manifest contradiction”. It is the case according to Berkeley, because “what are the forementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense, and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations; and is it

plainly repugnant that any of these or any combination of them should exist unperceived?" (§ 4).

The next step of Berkeley is to show that the opinion that sensible objects can exist independently of being perceived depends on the illegitimately assumed doctrine of abstract ideas (*Principles*, § 5). However, it is "perfectly unintelligible to abstract the existence of a thing from its being an object 'perceived or known'" and as far as they are not perceived or do not exist in a finite mind, "they must have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some eternal spirit" (§ 6). And, finally, on the basis of the above premises, Berkeley concludes that "there is not any other substance than spirit, or that which perceives" (§ 7).

In my opinion, then, the New Principle presented in the *Principles* by Berkeley expresses the contention that the *esse* of the sensible things *is to be perceived* (first component) and because whatever is perceived is an idea, the fundamental categories of what exists are minds and their ideas. That is, the world contains only the perceiving minds and their perceived ideas, and subsequently, the only genuine substance is the mind or spirit (see MCCracken [1986] 1999, 146).

The above interpretation is confirmed by Berkeley's statements in the *Philosophical Commentaries*, where he was preparing the main line of the argument subsequently elaborated in the *Principles*. He makes clear there that the New Principle is the view on the nature of existence followed by the implied view on the spirit or mind as the only substance, and that it is the discovery of "the obvious tho amazing truth", which offers the most adequate response to the sceptical threat (entry 279; see also entry 491).

In the *Philosophical Commentaries*, there are at least two explicit formulations of the New Principle as follows:

Our simple ideas are so many simple thoughts or perceptions, & that a perception cannot exist without a thing to perceive it or any longer than it is perceived, that a thought cannot be in an unthinking thing. (entry 280)

And

[T]he Principle, i.e. that neither our ideas nor anything like our ideas can possibly be in an unperceiving thing. (entry 378)

According to the New Principle, then, the mind is only one kind of substance since to exist is to perceive, which is exactly to be a mind, or to be perceived, which is simply to be mind-dependent. Moreover, Berkeley explic-

itly says that the assumption that makes the conclusion about the nature of dominance of spiritual or mental substance possible is the claim that *esse est percipi aut percipere*. He writes:

'tis on the Discovery of the nature & meaning & import of Existence that I chiefly insist.... This puts a wide difference betwixt the sceptics and me. This I think wholly new. I am sure 'tis new to me. (entry 491)

And subsequently, in the published works,

I am content to put the whole upon this issue; if you can but conceive it possible for one extended movable substance, or in general, for any one idea or anything like idea, to exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it, I shall readily give up the cause. (*Principles*, § 22)

It is on this therefore that I insist, to wit, that the absolute existence of unthinking things are words without meaning, or which include a contradiction. This is what I repeat and inculcate, and earnestly recommend to the attentive thoughts of the reader. (*Principles*, § 24)

Philonous: Now I am content to put our dispute upon this issue. If you can frame in your thoughts a distinct abstract idea of motion or extension, divested of all those sensible modes, as swift and slow, great and small, round and square, and the like, which are acknowledged to exist only in the mind, I will then yield the point you contend for. (*First Dialogue*, 193)

The anti-sceptical character of the New Principle is evident if we realise that it is designed to demonstrate that there is no corporeal, extended or material substance, because on the ground of the Principle there is and can only be a spiritual substance. If there is no material substance, there is no cognitive or ontological gap between perception (or experiencing, in general) of the external world and a supposedly real (absolute) material world existing beyond it, and thence no reason for sceptical doubts. In my opinion, that is the reason why Berkeley so enthusiastically proclaims the New Principle in the *Philosophical Commentaries*, declaring: "The reverse of the Principle introduced Scepticism" (entry 304; see also 411). And indeed, if we assert this Principle, we can overcome scepticism: the world is just like the perception of it. In other words, we receive the answer to the ontological question of what exists or, in more detail, what the meaning of existence is, and what ontological categories of the world really exist.

## 2. THE CONCEPT OF EXISTENCE OF PHYSICAL REALITY

*Esse est percipi* concerns only the sensible objects, whereas *esse* of spirit consists in *percipere*. In § 3 of the *Principles*, Berkeley faces the problem of how to conceive physical existence. If we assume that a physical reality (i.e. ideas of senses) requires actual awareness in some mind, then we have to ask whether anything exists when created minds are not aware of it. The most common answer (stated by Berkeley in §§ 6 and 48 of the *Principles*) to that question might be that they indeed do. However, it is only because there is an uncreated mind that is aware of it all the time. (In this answer, Berkeley seems to offer the requirement for existence first—*esse est percipi*—and then asks the conditions that could be satisfied.)

The question is then whether Berkley intended to be understood that to exist is to be an actual or possible object of perception, or just an actual object of perception. In other words, does physical existence require actual or only potential awareness? As Jonathan Dancy rightly observes:

The interesting thing is that Berkley seems to completely unimpressed by this question. It seems very much as if he does not think it matters, since he appears to express both views without seeing any difference between them. But why not? One possibility is that he does not think we can achieve a concept of a merely possible idea—an idea that is available for perception, but not actually being perceived. In the Third Dialogue he asks, rhetorically: “And what is perceivable but an idea? And can an idea exist without being actually perceived?” (p. 234) He could perhaps argue that we could only achieve the concept of a perceivable but unperceived idea as a result of an illegitimate abstraction. We would need, impossibly, to abstract the “being perceived” from the idea, which is impossible. We can, of course, think about an idea without thinking about its presence to a mind; but this does nothing to show that there could be an idea that is not present to mind. (DANCY 1998, 43)

Following Dancy (1998, 42–23), however, we can attempt to determine the answer to the question about actual or possible awareness. We have some textual evidence of Berkley’s concern in that matter. In order to show that his view is compatible with a biblical account of the Creation, Berkley answers the question about the existence of physical reality when not perceived by created minds. He writes: “All objects are externally known by God, or which is the same thing, have an eternal existence in his mind: but when things before imperceptible to creatures, are by a decree of God, made perceptible to

them; then are they said to begin a relative existence, with respect to created minds" (*Third Dialogue*, 252). In my opinion, considering these premises, there are three general possible interpretations of both remarks, explained in the following sections as (i) degrees of existence, (ii) the theory of powers, and (iii) Grayling's possibilist account:

### 3. SOLUTION I: DEGREES OF EXISTENCE

First, following a convention of Dancy, it could be formulated as follows. We could understand that there are three stages of existence: (i) there is eternal existence in the mind of God; (ii) there is a relative existence (vel perceptibility) that commenced at the Creation (before the Creation, there were no created minds to perceive); (iii) there is actual real existence, which requires actuality being perceived by the created mind. However, the major disadvantage of this interpretation is that, as a consequence, the real existence seems to be "gappy". If we are not aware of things, they exist, but then, the existence they have is not real existence but only relative (second stage) existence.

In my opinion, the other interpretation seems to be more attractive. Indeed, the *esse est percipi* principle seems to be intended so that to exist is actually to be perceived; however, from the perspective of the finite perceiver, the physical existence consists in its being as an actual or possible object of perception. The crucial point here is that the possibility for the finite perceiver is explained in terms of the actuality for God. In that sense, Berkeley offers the counterfactual analysis of perceivability. From the perspective of the infinite mind, viz. God, Berkeley's *esse* is properly *percipi*, but from the finitary point of view it is also "aut posse percipi" (LUCE 1945, 61).

### 4. SOLUTION II: THE THEORY OF POWERS

In the *Philosophical Commentaries*, at least at the beginning of his considerations, Berkeley was testing a solution that an object *could be perceived* in terms of God's powers to cause ideas in the finite minds:

Bodies etc do exist even when not perceived they being powers in the active Being. (entry 52)



For Berkeley, God is the direct cause of our sensations, which are produced by Him in human beings according to the laws of nature (ordered by Him). In that context, any possibility of sensation is dependent upon actuality in the terms of the divine intention or thought. This point could, however, create some inconsistency in the Berkeleian project. The problem is whether Berkeley is inconsistent in trying to account for sensible things and qualities in terms of the divine powers or dispositions to cause ideas in us, and at the same time to identify them with the ideas caused. In other words, the supposed inconsistency here is in allowing that a physical object exists when out of sight, and asserting that it is a collection of ideas.

And indeed, as observed by Grayling (1986, 97), the powers theory is considered by Berkeley to be in the context of two of the other theses he was considering at the early stage, as it is indicated in *Philosophical Commentaries*, namely:

T1: The first one is the thesis that qualities cannot persist without the mind. He expresses this as follows:

Extension to exist in a thoughtless thing is a contradiction. (entry 37)

T2: The other thesis is that for qualities existing as powers in God's mind, "to cause them in us under appropriate circumstances, there is therefore a means of thinking about primary qualities as somehow analogous to the corpuscularian view" (GRAYLING 1986, 97); however, that is following the mind-dependence assumption of Berkeley expressed by him as follows:

Nothing corresponds to our primary ideas without but powers, hence a direct & brief demonstration of an active powerful being distinct from us on whom we depend. Etc (entry 41)

However, soon he realised the problems connected with this theory and commented in entry 50 that "[n]othing but ideas perceivable", which collides with the power theory, although it was applied to the description of the finite minds, not to God. Because of this inconsistency, finally, the power theory seemed to him less plausible, although surprisingly, until entry 802 (i.e. almost the end of the *Philosophical Commentaries*), he was still referring occasionally to the theory. Berkeley was tempted to consider God and things unperceived by finite minds as existing as "combinations of powers" (entry 80). However, at the same time, since these objects exist as powers in the mind of

God, Berkeley asks himself, “Powers quaere whether more or one merely?” (entry 84). We can plausibly suppose that this kind of doubt leads Berkeley to state that:

Bodies etc do exist whether we think of ‘em or not, they being taken in a twofold sense. Collections of thoughts & collections of powers to cause those thoughts. These latter exist, tho’ perhaps a parte dei it may be one simple perfect power. (entry 282)

And,

Bodies taken for Powers do exist when not perceived but this existence is not actual. When I say a power exists no more is meant than if in the light I open my eyes & look that way I shall see it i.e. the body &c (entry 293a; see also 293)

What is power then? Berkeley describes power as “no simple idea. It means nothing but the Relation between cause and effect” (entry 493). At an earlier stage, he writes: “[t]he simple idea called Power seems obscure or rather none at all, but only the relation ‘twixt cause and effect” (entry 461). As a consequence, perceivability consists in the causal power of God to produce ideas in the finite minds (see entry 831). However, there is no detailed explanation of this causal relation, but it seems plausible to assume that he considered using this category in the second part of the *Principles* devoted to the spirits and God. There is some indication, such as, for instance, at entry 699 of the *Philosophical Commentaries*, where he was thinking about the relation between power and volition, which could play an important role in the consideration of the nature of the mind.

After formulating the New Principle (the *esse est percipi* thesis) in entries 279 and 280, the entries about power theory were decreasing. This tendency seems to culminate at entry 802, where Berkeley writes:

Not to mention the Combination of Powers theory but to say the things the effects themselves to really exist even when not actually perceived but still with relation to perception.

Berkeley explicitly stated here that “the things the effects themselves” exist only in virtue of the “relation to perception”.

## 5. SOLUTION III: GRAYLING'S POSSIBILIST ACCOUNT

Anthony Grayling (1986 and 2005) tries to offer the “possibilist account” of Berkeleian *esse est principi* principle in non-phenomenalist terms. Moreover, he disagrees with the phenomenalist interpretation of this principle (for a comparison of such a phenomenalist interpretation, see, for instance, BENNETT 1971).

Classical phenomenism is the view that physical objects are (“logical”) constructions out of actual and possible sense-data. The modal adverbs in that sentence serve to explain how the desk in my study exists when not currently being perceived, by showing that we take as true a counterfactual conditional stating that the desk could be perceived if any perceiver were suitably placed. (GRAYLING 2005, 171)

In other words, on the ground of this view, the existence of sensible things is explained in terms of (at least) enduring possibilities of perception. It implies, however, some kind of ontology of possibilities, namely, the contention that the world contains irreducible possibilities—“[a]n essential commitment of phenomenism, therefore, is that certain counterfactuals are to be taken as barely (that is, non-reductively) true” (GRAYLING 2005, 171). We do not have any textual evidence that Berkeley was committed to any of the ontologies of possibilities.

The key points to understanding Berkeley's view on possible perception or perceivability seem to be found in the *Dialogues*. He writes there as follows:

*Hylas*: Yes, Philonous, I grant the existence of a sensible thing consists in being perceivable, but not in actually being perceived.

*Philonous*: And what is perceivable but an idea? And can an idea exist without being actually perceived? (*Third Dialogue*, 234)

And afterwards:

*Philonous*: The question between the materialist and me is not, whether things have a real existence out of the mind of this or that person, but whether they have an absolute existence, distinct from being perceived by God, and exterior to all minds. (*Third Dialogue*, 235)

However, there are also some other passages in Berkeley's *Principles* that seem to stand in contradiction with this rather *actualist* view. Berkeley writes:

The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study 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.... For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. (*Principles*, § 3)

[W]e may not conclude [that bodies] have no existence except only while they are perceived by us, since there may be some other spirit that perceives them, though we do not. Wherever bodies are said to have no existence without the mind I would not be understood to mean this of that particular mind, but all minds whatsoever. (*Principles*, § 48)

Thus when I shut my eyes, the things I saw may still exist: but it must be in another mind. (*Principles*, § 90)

It is worth mentioning that in the quoted excerpts, Berkeley does not explicitly say about God's perception, although God seems to be implicitly assumed in each case. He speaks about God explicitly in the context of the principle in question in the *Second Dialogue*, when he puts in the mouth of Philonous the following statement:

To me it is evident, for the reasons you allow of, that sensible things cannot exist otherwise than in a mind or spirit. Whence I conclude, not that they have no real existence, but that seeing they depend not on my thought, and have an existence distinct from being perceived by me, *there must be some other mind wherein they exist*. As sure therefore as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite omnipresent spirit who contains and supports it. (*Second Dialogue*, 212)

Considering all the above relevant passages together, according to Grayling, we can formulate the following conclusion: "The perceivability thesis which results in this: to say something is *perceivable* is to say that it is perceived by God (3D234). No idea is ever merely perceivable relative to God, for every idea is in fact perceived by him (cf. 2D212)—the "merely" is there because, of course, what is perceived is *ipso facto* perceivable, an instance of the truth *ab esse ad posse*—hence perceivability, strictly speaking, is relative only to finite perceivers. The possibility that a finite being might perceive x,

therefore, turns on the fact—the actuality—that Gods perceives it” (GRAYLING 1986, 103]. In other words, the *esse est percipi* principle implies that a thing must be in fact *actually* perceived in order to exist. However, the perceivability of the thing unobserved actually by a finite mind is “cashed” in terms of its actually being perceived by an infinite mind.

Grayling is trying to display the content of this thought in the following way. He introduces three levels of the “machinery of Berkeley’s argument”, namely:

Berkeley distinguishes between “strict,” “speculative,” or “philosophical” ways of understanding matters, and ordinary or “vulgar” ways of doing so. When we “think with the wise” we find it necessary to give explanations at what I shall label “level 1” and “level 3.” When we “talk with the vulgar” we do so at “level 2” (see e.g. PHK 34-40, esp. PHK 37; 45-8, DHP 234-5, N 274).... Level 1 concerns the *phenomenology* of experience, consisting of the data of sensory awareness in the form of minima of colour, sound, and so for the other senses. Level 2 concerns the *phenomena* of experience—the tables, trees, and so forth, that we see and touch in the normal course of perception. The phenomenological level (call it level 1) is apparent to us only on a “strict and speculative” examination of experience. Level 2 phenomena are constituted by level 1 data—not reductively, but mediated in a way revealed by a third, metaphysical, level of explanation (level 3), which describes the causal-intentional activity of mind (ultimately: of an infinite mind) in producing the level 1 data and the level 2 world constituted for us by the organization, coherence, and character of the level 1 data (PHK 25-9, 51-2, DHP 2 [216]). (GRAYLING 2005, 170–71)

In these terms, the phenomenalist interpretation of Berkeley’s principle *esse est percipi* consists only of levels 1 and 2. “It is a familiar problem for phenomenism that level 2 cannot be reduced to level 1 without remainder, and that therefore level 1 can only be sufficient for level 2 if suitably supplemented. The supplement is acceptance of the bare truth of appropriate counterfactuals (and thus an ontology of possibilities)” (GRAYLING 2005, 171). We need, then, in the phenomenalist view, the supplementing level 3, metaphysical one, which, however, is completely different from Berkeley’s one, because it requires the ontology of possibilities.

According to Grayling, the question for Berkeley is then “what makes it possible that if S were in his study he would perceive x” (GRAYLING 1986, 105). It is not a question about any “possible studies”, “possible desks” and “possible perceivers”, but “how things have to be for actual perceivers, studies

and desks to be so placed that if S were in a given study he would perceive a given desk" (105). In other words, it is a question about the conditions required to fulfil it to be true that S stands in the relevant epistemic relation to x. (Specification of that could sustain the associated relevant counterfactuals). And accordingly, "[t]he key condition for present purposes is that if x is perceivable *it is there to be perceived*" (105; emphasis in the original). Because this specification is given in *actualist* terms, or in terms of the actual world, the relevant *de dicto* modality seems to be unproblematic (i.e. does not imply the existential commitment to the real possible worlds).

Is this interpretation in these terms successful? The answer seems to be positive. On Berkeley's view, (i) sensible objects are ideas, and (ii) the existence of ideas is in their being perceived. And, following Grayling, accordingly on this ground:

(Premise 1) "to say that the desk in the study is *perceivable* is to say I might perceive it if I were there", because "I can perceive it only if it exists, it exists".

and

(Premise 2) due to the *esse est percipi* principle, is "to say that it is perceived, then it is perceived";

and

(Premise 3) "whether or not it is being perceived by any finite mind, if it is *true* that it is possible for some finite mind ... to perceive it, it is perceived by God", viz. the infinite mind.

we can conclude that:

Accordingly the perceivability of the desk relative to me – that is, its being possible for me to perceive the desk – ultimately rests on the actuality of God's perceiving the desk. This is what Berkeley means by 'And what is perceivable but an idea? And can an idea exist without actually being perceived? (3D234). (GRAYLING 1986, 106)

The result is that the *esse est percipi* principle should be read as simply saying that *esse* is *percipi*; however, it is possible with respect to the finitary

point of view to add that *esse* is also *aut posse percipi* in the context of the main actualist reading of the principle.

For this reason Berkeley's official thesis cannot be interpreted as in any point having a phenomenalist character, for it rules out the existence of "possible ideas" and hence, the option of describing sensible objects partially in terms of nonfactual qualities, qualities whose status is determined by subjunctive conditionals for an understanding of which the notion of possibility remains irreducible. (107)

To conclude, in Berkeley's view, the possibility is relative to finite minds merely, for the infinite mind, viz. God, whatever is, is actual.

#### 6. THE PUZZLE OF THE RELATION OF THE IDEAS TO THE DIVINE MIND

The above theories lead us to one of the most puzzling elements of Berkeleyian metaphysics. That is the problem of the character of the relation of ideas to the mind of God, or, more precisely, the form taken by ideas in the mind of God (see JUDYCKI 2000, 96–97; see also GRAYLING 1986, 99–100, and MIGELY 2022, 128–49).

Crucial here is the kind of relation, besides the most obvious causal one, that the ideas are supposed by Berkeley to stand to them. God is the cause of human ideas. Berkeley expresses this in various terms, the most often as, God (i) is "producing" ideas in the human mind; (ii) is "exciting" them in finite minds; (iii) "imprinting" them on senses; and (iv) "exhibiting" them to finite minds (see *Principles*, §§ 29, 30, 33, 49, 150; *Second Dialogue*, 210, 215; *Third Dialogue*, 231). The relation is supposed to be the causal one—ideas are the effects of his causal activity. However, it does not explain how God can perceive ideas and what it means to him.

Following Grayling (1986, 99), we can notice that the perception here seems to have a broad meaning. It applies to all ways of *having ideas before the mind*, i.e. sensing, conceiving, remembering, imagining and the other kind of activities of the will- and reason-like. At the same time, Berkeley insists—trying to avoid the association of his project with Malebranche's theory of "seeing all things in God"—that our ideas in any way do not "inhere" in God's mind. He sustains that they are distinct from divine mind analogously to their separate character to human minds, however, "His ideas are not conveyed to

Him by senses, as ours are" (*Third Dialogue*, 241; see *Second Dialogue*, 213–14, and *Principles*, §§ 2, 142).

When Berkeley goes into details, he seems to be attracted by two ways of explaining the character of this relation. It could be described as follows:

- (i) the ideas perceived by God are the *archetypes*, while human ideas are *ectypes* of them (see *Third Dialogue*, 248; *Works* II, 285–87, 292; see also FLAGE [2001], 7–31, and FIELDS [2013], 57–60). God could cause ideas in human minds without having in his mind exactly the same ideas because he perceives only analogously to human perceptions. Archetypes are the eternal, perfect ideas in the mind of God, while ectypes are the imperfect, finite ideas we perceive, acting as copies or representations of those divine archetypes, bridging the gap between God's perfect knowledge and our sensory experience of the world. In this explanation, things exist as ideas in God's mind (archetypes), and when God presents these to us, they become our perceived ideas (ectypes), forming a system where our world is an image of divine thought, not a material substance;
- (ii) the ideas are consequences of God's will (see *Philosophical Commentaries*, entries 52 and 831; see also see MCCracken [1986] 1999, 146). He wills the finite mind to perceive, but these certain ideas are regarded as volitions of the divine mind; however, God's mind's cognitive content about things is not sensual. The content consists rather of the powers or dispositions to produce ideas. Berkeley is accounting for sensible things in terms of divine power, and identifying them with the ideas caused in us, not with the divine power itself.

Eventually, Berkeley chose the first option, "that whatever ideas we perceive from without, are in the mind which affects us" (*Third Dialogue*, 241). That theory expresses the ontological assumption of Berkeley, that to exist is to be perceived.

## CONCLUSIONS

I have undertaken this paper in order to present the interpretation of Berkeley's major works as regards his existential claims about the modes of the existence of the external world. In what proceeded I have emphasised the significance of the metaphysical aspect of Berkeley's New Principle.



The main line of argument of the interpretation could be summarised as follows. Metaphysical reformulation of the concept of existence or the meaning of existence is supposed by Berkeley to be a proper tool to undermine the claim about the existence of material substance, which was perceived by him as the source of the sceptical threat. Berkeley's New Principle is intended to achieve the aim of refuting scepticism by demonstrating that the only substance there can be is mind or spirit.

The New Principle, which is a metaphysical core of this project, consists of two components: (1) the thesis that *esse* of the sensible things *is to be perceived*, which expresses the mode of the existence of physical reality; and (2) because whatever is perceived is an idea, the fundamental categories of what exists are minds and their ideas, that is, the external world contains only the perceiving minds and their perceived ideas, which implies that the only genuine substance is the mind or spirit. The latter component entails the thesis about the mode of the existence of minds, that is, to be for minds is to perceive.

My view is that the existential New Principle is intended indeed to mean that to exist is actually to be perceived; however, from the perspective of the finite perceiver, physical existence consists in its being an actual or possible object of perception. The crucial point here is that the possibility of a finite perceiver is explained in terms of the actuality for God. It evidently emphasises the metaphysical character of the principle, in spite of its purely epistemological interpretation. In that sense, Berkeley offers a counterfactual analysis of perceivability. From that outset, *esse* of sensible things is properly *percipi*, but from the finitary point of view, it is also *aut posse percipi*.

#### REFERENCES

- AYERS, Michael. 1970. "Substance, Reality and the Great, Dead Philosophers." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 7:38–49.
- AYERS, Michael. 1975/1998. Introduction to *Philosophical Works*, by George Berkeley, xv–xxxix. Edited by Michael Ayers. London: Dent.
- AYERS, Michael. 1986. "Berkeley and the Meaning of Existence." *History of European Ideas* 7:567–73.
- BERKELEY, George. 1948–57. *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Edited by Arthur A. Luce and Thomas E. Jessop. Vols. 1–9. London–Edinburgh: Nelson.
- BERKELEY, George. 1710. *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. Vol. 2.
- BERKELEY, George. 1713. *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. Vol. 2.
- BERKELEY, George. 1729–1730. *Philosophical Correspondence with Samuel Johnson*. Vol. 2.
- BERKELEY, George. 1871–1944. *Philosophical Commentaries*. Vol. 1.
- CRANE, Tim. 2014. *Aspects of Psychologism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- DANCY, Jonathan. 1998. "Editor's Introduction." In *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, edited by Jonathan Dancy, 3–53. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- DANIEL, Stephen H. 2021. *George Berkeley and Early Modern Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- FIELDS, Keota. 2013. "Berkeley's Metaphysics of Perception." *Berkeley Studies* 24:51–64.
- FIELDS, Keota. 2022. "Berkeley on Perception." In *The Oxford Handbook of Berkeley*, edited by Samuel C. Rickless, 256–78. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- FLAGE, Daniel E. 2001. "Berkeley's archetypes." *Hermathena* 171:7–31.
- GRAYLING, Anthony C. 1986. *Berkeley: The Central Arguments*. London: Duckworth.
- GRAYLING, Anthony C. 2005. "Berkeley's Argument for Immaterialism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, edited by Kenneth Winkler, 166–89. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- HILL, James W. H. 2022. "Berkeley on Ideas and Notions." In *The Oxford Handbook of Berkeley*, edited by Samuel C. Rickless, 45–63. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- JUDYCKI, Stanisław. 2000. "Idealizm i spirytualizm." *Przegląd Filozoficzny – Nowa Seria* 9 (2):85–105.
- LUCE, Arthur A. 1945. *Berkeley's Immaterialism*. London: Nelson.
- MCCRACKEN, Charles J. 1999. "Berkeley's Notion of Spirit." In *The Empiricists: Critical Essays on Locke, Berkeley, and Hume*, edited by Margaret Atherton, 159–64. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield. First published 1986.
- MIGELY, Genevieve. 2022. "Berkeley on Minds." In *The Oxford Handbook of Berkeley*, edited by Samuel C. Rickless, 128–49. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Szalek, Piotr K. 2008. "O genezie Berkeleyowskiej definicji „istnienia”." In *Oblicza filozofii XVII wieku*, edited by Stanisław Janeczek, 93–113. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL.
- Szalek, Piotr K. 2009. "On the Origins of the Berkeleian Definition of 'Existence'." *Studies in Logic, Grammar, and Rhetoric* 15 (28):145–59. (The English version of Szalek [2008].)
- SZĄŁEK, Piotr K. 2016. *Istnienie i umysł. Studium podstaw filozofii George'a Berkeley'a*. Kraków: Universitas.

## BERKELEY, PSYCHOLOGISM, AND THE MODES OF EXISTENCE

### Summary

This paper aims to reconstruct and analyse the notion of the existence of the external world elaborated by George Berkeley. In order to accomplish this task, I will clarify the notion of existence as regards physical reality following the Berkeleian New Principle. I will examine the motivation for emphasising the importance of the notion of existence in respect of its metaphysical assumptions and possible influences by the closest metaphysical context to Berkeley's philosophy. The metaphysical exegesis of Berkeley's work helps to better understand the ambiguity connected to the degree of the external world's mind dependence in his view. In other words, it helps to understand in what sense the world might be understood in psychologistic terms as a part of the existence of the mind perceiving.

**Keywords:** existence; mind; external world; Descartes; Berkeley

## BERKELEY, PSYCHOLOGIZM I SPOSOBY ISTNIENIA

## Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu rekonstrukcję i analizę Berkeleyowskiego pojęcia istnienia świata zewnętrznego. Aby zrealizować to zadanie, doprecyzuję pojęcie istnienia w odniesieniu do rzeczywistości fizycznej, zgodnie z tzw. nową zasadą Berkeleya. Zbadam motywację do podkreślania wagi pojęcia istnienia w kontekście jego założeń metafizycznych oraz możliwych wpływów kontekstu metafizycznego najbliższego filozofii Berkeleya. Egzegeza metafizyczna prac Berkeleya pomaga lepiej zrozumieć niejednoznaczność związaną ze stopniem zależności świata zewnętrznego od umysłu na gruncie jego filozofii. Innymi słowy, pomaga zrozumieć, w jakim sensie świat może być rozumiany w kategoriach psychologistycznych jako część istnienia postrzegającego umysłu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** istnienie; umysł; świat zewnętrzny; Kartezjusz; Berkeley