WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH BERKELEY? AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL FOLLY

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ABSTRACT: Berkeley is famous for denying the existence of matter and unperceived things except in God's eternal mind. Although his subjective idealism (immaterialism) is dismissed and rejected, he is commonly ranked among the great modern philosophers. My analysis questions his epistemic relativism and skepticism, and presents new critical arguments against spiritual immaterialism, and his theory of God that are relevant today. Discussion of the essential place of God is crucial yet neglected and my article fills this lacuna. Berkeley's skepticism of scientific principles, and devotion to literal Scripture falsifies and misguides his thought. Against the tradition, I argue that as a bishop, his major purpose and motivation was to validate and strengthen God's absolute necessity in the world. Berkeley's dubious yet intriguing immaterialism raises dissent against his legendary status. He influenced Enlightenment philosophy and beyond, albeit critically, especially Hume and Kant. It is past time for a fresh reevaluation of his contribution and niche in the history of philosophy.

KEYWORDS: subjective idealism, immaterialism, divine omniscience, epistemological relativism

Berkeley says matter's not there
when we peer at it and stare;
and though this is quite queer
God knows it is here
when no one's around the chair.

Introduction

Berkeley's subjective idealism influenced, albeit critically, modern and nineteenth-century philosophy, and he thrives as a philosopher's philosopher whose epistemology is of value and research mainly to specialists. Berkeley's startling idealism, which rejects the existence of matter, would claim this paper exists only when perceived, except in God's mind, because objects are collections of ideas. The article differs from the conventional view in that I argue Berkeley's devotion to God and the Church instilled the motivation and purpose underlying his idealism. Against tradition, I present new arguments opposing immaterialism and his theory of the omniscient God, which question his standard reputation and evaluations. His well-known arguments are notoriously paradoxical, intractable, and typically dismissed as fallacious, yet important and intriguing. Nevertheless, his refutation of

Locke's theory of general abstract ideas and his impact in the history of philosophy are no small achievements. It is past time now to reevaluate Berkeley's philosophical reputation and epistemology, considering the major criticism. My prudent approach evaluates his published works and some letters, and excludes unpublished Notebooks written very early, unfinished, unrevised, and it is very possible that he changed his thinking. As I discuss further, at middle age, he wrote that his philosophy taught no truth.

I. Problems in subjective idealism

Berkeley introduces his idealism in the oft-quoted statement. "This perceiving active being is what I call 'mind', 'spirit', 'soul' or 'myself' by which words I do not denote any one of my ideas, but a thing entirely distinct from them where in they exist or, … for an existence of an idea consists in being perceived". (Berkeley1965, 23) The word 'matter' originates from '*materia*' in Latin and Sanskrit, which is derived from 'measure'. The immaterial is unmeasured—the undivided indivisible world, such as ideas or spirit. Berkeley's originality reverses the traditional positions of spirit and matter.

We begin by experiencing matter, and construct concepts of the mind (the invisible) in order to explain it, whereas Berkeley begins with spirits, and conceives that matter is invisible (absent), and God explains it. Contrary to Descartes and materialists, Berkeley holds that qualities of sensible objects consist of collections of ideas, not material substance, and ideas are distinguished from the mind or spirit. This metaphysical position is consistent with his non-material empiricism. 'The world consists only of ideas' is a statement of fact, and also normative, and should be understood as consisting of ideas only. The ambiguity of ***is***—*in fact,* or ***is***—*should,* or both at the same time, is unclear in academic literature. 'God is omniscient' is intended as a factual statement, and the normative sense is only implied.

Sense knowledge represents or corresponds to physical reality and is a reliable truth of what is there. Cartesians argue sense experience of material objects is real yet misleading, while material objects that are never perceived lack meaning. Substance as substratum is the underlying essence of things, the *je ne sais quoi*—a self-contradictory term Berkeley rejects as unnecessary and unknowable. The text shades the distinctions between the Lockean substratum, matter, and material substance, which are not identical and sometimes misinterpreted. Following the consensus, it is agreed that substratum, which supports things, is a philosophical error. For example, the mirage of observing water in the desert is a mistaken idea. The perception seems real, but the materiality of water is an error of wishful thinking--no substratum exists. Desert sand is a collection of ideas, and the oasis is

an illusion of the mind, a misperception. For Berkeley, water itself has no substratum or substance (the unknown stuff), and no matter, yet nevertheless, it is real. De Waal argues:

> We cannot have an *idea* or hypothesis of corporeal substances as an explanation for the ideas we have and the regularities holding among them. However, precisely the same can be said of spirits… but if we cannot have an *idea* of spirits, then positing them to explain the presence of our ideas and the regularities among them is as useless an explanation as the hypothesis of matter. (DeWaal 2006, 2)

Matter and spirit are explanatory hypotheses; however, only the former is verifiable. Since it is not possible to possess an idea of spirits, or ideas of ideas, Berkeley admits that having a theory of spirits or ideas does not solve the problem. However, we can have a notion of soul, spirit, and operations of minds, but his explanation is too brief. If the theory is useless, then I do not see a way he escapes this dilemma. Unfortunately, his manuscript on spirits was lost and never rewritten, probably because it was unsolvable or unsatisfactory. Oddly, de Waal distinguishes between two meanings of matter. "Berkeley does not deny the existence of all matter, but only of what he calls 'unthinking matter'". (DeWaal 31) This is the unknown, unthinking, senseless substance. It is common knowledge that Berkeley dispenses with both the substratum and matter. All matter, in fact, is unthinking, except brains, which Berkeley never mentions. Obviously, minds think; matter cannot—thus, de Waal and Berkeley's putative distinction is useless or imprecise here. If Berkeley only intended to refute the unknown substratum or idea of substance, his immaterialism is rather uncontroversial because it is tenable and an unnecessary hypothesis. Matter is a nonentity—inert and senseless, not a solid, figured, moveable substance. But if one means only that matter is senseless and inert, then. Berkeley admits this possibility exists, but its meaning and particulars are left open—perhaps atoms or shadows?

The opposing position could be argued easily—only matter exists and no spirit, which relies on commonly accepted science and sensory observation. Hobbes[1], who he believed was an atheist, (and d'Holbach) held this view and scientific materialism, also. Atomic structures are the fundamental evidence for matter, and excluding or rejecting them requires convincing empirical reasons that did not exist then. Yet, historically, the assumption has been that empiricism entails existing perceptible matter. Conventionally, physical objects consist of real matter when perceived with at least one normal sense faculty, and verified with unbiased, reliable observers of its veracity. In this way, the classic Cartesian problem of how

[1] It is debatable whether Hobbes believed in God. Critics question his sincerity.

two substances, matter and mind, interact is diffused into one substance of two kinds: ideas and spirits.

Georges Dicker's criticism attacks the putative effects of collections of ideas in the world. That is, how is it possible that collections of ideas cause pain or pleasure? The objection is that Berkeley provides no understanding of the science and laws of nature. Real caterpillars become butterflies, not ideas or spirits of caterpillars, material acorns become oak trees, not ideas of them. Generally, his criticism is accurate and convincing, despite erroneous objections of two critics, and except for the comparison of Mill to Berkeley, which I discuss further.

> But it is not the case that ideas of iron sitting in the rain are regularly followed by ideas of rusted iron, or that ideas of caterpillars are regularly followed by ideas of butterflies… our ideas of sense do not exhibit anything like the amount of order that laws of nature imply.[2] (Dicker 2011 250-51)

Berkeley commits the "fundamental mistake of reading into his 'ideas of sense' an order and systematic character that belongs only to a world that is distinct from ideas and whose existence he rejects". (Dicker 2011, 250-51)

This should be obvious, yet Berkeley is blinded by his obsession with sensual ideas and his faith, and fails to understand the actual processes of nature and its functions. All regularities and patterns in nature are grounded upon predictions of material things from human reason, not merely eyesight and sound. The claim everything in nature is purely God's work cannot suffice as explanation, though it was very acceptable in medieval times and some theists still do. Berkeley commits egregious errors by overlooking and refusing to consider significant natural principles.

> If by 'nature' is meant only the visible s*eries* of effects and sensations imprinted on our minds, according to certain fixed and general laws, then it is plain that 'nature', taken in this sense, cannot produce anything at all. But if by 'nature' is meant some being distinct from God, as well as from the laws of nature, and things perceived by sense, I must confess that word is to me an empty sound without any intelligible meaning annexed to it. (Berkeley 1965, 34)

Nature is a general name for earth processes and things, but if Scripture is the final word, then nature itself is meaningless, as Berkeley rejects any nontheistic science. Without God, nature taken separately is an empty word and lacks meaning in his idealism. During his time, the new scientists held that nature is highly productive, according to discovered physical laws and forces independent of a theology. Later, natural forces and evolutionary processes were ascertained to exist

[2] He quips that Berkeley has left no stone unturned.

independently. His false position was and is indefensible, as Dicker and other critics contend. Standard realism holds that visual perceptions are a synthesis of human eyesight, and qualities in objects themselves, and universal concepts. Objects possess qualities because human minds are structured and categorized to perceive things that seem to possess sensory attributes, as Kant showed in *Critique of Pure Reason.* Arguably, undiscovered places and objects would exist, but are unknown without human and perhaps primate minds—animal intelligence was unknown to Berkeley.

One chief design of the *Dialogues*, Berkeley states on the front page, "is to open a method for rendering the sciences more easy, useful and compendious." (1965, 103) However, in theory and practice, the reverse is true: it renders the natural and physical sciences with significantly less utility and greater difficulty. This claim is overly sanguine and indicative of his lack of knowledge of recent scientific methods. The new Science (in its broad and narrow meanings) had begun to question and already replace Aristotelian philosophy. The idea that scientific facts rely on observable objective knowledge was known, and no genuine scientist then or presently would accept his proposition. His premise entails that experiences possess greater subjectivity and epistemological relativity than is commonly accepted. Consequently, Berkeley's philosophy renders scientific knowledge subjective, highly variable, and unreliable. Philonous oddly contrasts the relative perspective of things between mites and humans, which is incomprehensible and impossible for the sightless mites. He argues that primary and secondary qualities are perceived radically differently, which is intended to show that these qualities exist only in minds and not inherent to sensory things. The strange comparison was chosen for its extreme size differential and is trivially true, but realistic comparisons cannot support this bad argument.

Berkeley's examples in defense are simple and theoretical, but realistic ones reveal major mistakes. In the first case, suppose a blind man is standing next to an elephant. He feels its massive leathery body, smells its odor, and even without sight, he knows it is a material physical thing of great size, and not merely his perceptions. When the elephant pushes him to the ground and his body is crushed, he knows the agonizing experience is unquestionably caused by animal matter. No one could honestly deny its massive material stuff exists in external reality. Real muscle and bone kill, not a spiritual reality. In one respect, the idealism is apropos for sightless people who rely on their other senses when possible. The unseen object may have no scent, taste or sound, and tactile sensations may be irrelevant or misleading. In these cases, the idealism shows favor, yet no one would intelligently accept it.

The second example. Tons of rock demolish thousands of people in earthquakes (recently in Turkey and Syria), high on Richter scales—unforgettable

sights of direct observation or on the media. Telling a survivor or family member no material stuff exists would be offensive and ridiculous because no observer, or any rational person, would hold this ostrich thinking based on ordinary experience and science. Obviously, real rocks and earth destroy lives and property, not our ideas of them. These life examples cannot disprove Berkeley's argument, yet they serve as empirical disputes or problems, and not merely exceptions, ~~and~~ nor does quantum energy resolve this quandary. The refutation of subjective idealism must be discovered through rigorous epistemology in addition to concrete issues.

Humans originate and ground knowledge, but *contrar*y to Berkeley, epistemological subjectivity does not necessarily follow nor is implied. However, physical reality is objectively true based on common scientific agreement with minor differences in evidence. I argue in another paper that empiricism and a weak idealism can be compatible and defensible with an anti-realist position, consistent with science. Berkeley's devotion to his religious beliefs and/ or disbelief in scientific knowledge in his time leads his idealism down a false path, which opposes the strive for objectivity. He knew of the innovative work in chemistry of Albert Boyle (1627-1691), who noted that Ireland in the 1680s lacked this knowledge. He probably did not read Francis Bacon's inductive scientific method in *Novum Organum*, but would have benefited from the new science, despite (or because) of Bacon's belief in matter.

Textual discussion of spirits or minds

> A spirit is one simple, undivided, active being—as it perceives ideas it is called 'the understanding' ... hence there can be no i*dea* formed of a soul or spirit; for all ideas whatever, being passive and inert they cannot represent unto us, by way of image or likeness that which acts. (Berkeley 1965, 27 text)

Propositions 1. "The mind is entirely distinct from ideas," and 2. 'Ideas exist only in the mind" are two firm tenets. His distinction between spirits and ideas is a classic dichotomy, but the term 'spirit' is unnecessary, ambiguous, and tied to medieval thought. He states the mind is not the ideas, and ideas are in the mind quite clearly, and the phrase 'in the mind' is meant figuratively as an expression, not metaphorically like a thing. Some scholars suggest this refers to the mind as a container or receptacle, which is an unwarranted assumption. His 'Likeness principle' distinguishes mind from its ideas, and in *Principles* he notably states ideas can only be like other ideas.

> An idea can be like nothing but an idea; a color or figure can be like nothing but another color or figure. If we look but ever so little into our thoughts, we shall find it impossible for us to conceive a likeness except only between our ideas. Again I ask whether those supposed originals or external things, of which our ideas are the pictures or representations, be themselves perceivable or no?" (Berkeley 1965, 25

8text)

Things must be conceived to have a conception of them, and without perception, they cannot be conceived. If we say the ideas or pictures are not perceivable, he asks, how can colors be like something invisible, or something soft or hard be intangible? After stating what appears a truism, a color can only be like another color, he attempts to critique representationalism. Berkeley acknowledges the contradiction that the visible cannot be invisible simultaneously at a given moment. This seems a rhetorical question—obviously, concepts and ideas are invisible, and are reputed to be copies or images which represent sense objects. However, Berkeley overlooks or misconstrues the importance and purpose of memory, which stores perceptions and enables knowledge possible. Hume and Kant showed that the function of memory is crucial for knowledge and conceptual learning. Berkeley does not exactly commit to an ontology, except for showing opposition to general abstract terms, to which I agree. Classical representationalism is unsophisticated and considered a dubious epistemology, but nevertheless, it was, and may still be, a fundamental viable theory. Despite or perhaps because of the lack of defense, the so-called Likeness principle is a topic for analyzing his epistemic distinctions of meaning.

II. GOD (Principles 146-156; Dialogues III 4-5)

God is pivotal and essential in Berkeley's idealism. The Continuity Argument depends on the omnipotent God who preserves and sustains the existence of the entire world. Berkeley's God in the Bible is acceptable for theists who accept the divine attributes of omnipotence, perfect Goodness, and omniscience. Philonous argues by deduction:

> Men commonly believe that all things are known and perceived by God, because they believe the being of a God; whereas I, on the other side, immediately and necessarily conclude the being of a God because all sensible things must be perceived by Him" … and further, "sensible things do really exist; and if they really exist, they are necessarily perceived by an infinite mind: therefore, there is an infinite mind, or God. (Berkeley 1965, 153. 3)

This twist of the argument is inconclusive, with many basic assumptions which are not accepted by most Christians. If God possesses omniscience, the existence of the entire world and its entities are always maintained when objects are not perceived or beyond human knowledge--it is certain and never questioned. God's eternal knowledge is an absolute necessity for preserving the world. Locke and

others who opposed idealism and supported material substance would have objected strongly to his doctrine. Still, it is possible to endorse a materialist metaphysics and hold God as the only necessary and unique Creator-First Cause. Conversely, it is possible, and highly implausible to hold that the world consists only of ideas without the existence of God. This is hypothetical, which no one seriously believes, but it is a possibility, though probably untenable. The problem is that atheists/agnostics would have no ultimate source of knowledge or strong argument to explain the continued existence of unperceived things.

Berkeley's discussion of divine omniscience is minimal because his faith in God's wisdom is from Scripture rather than argument. He presupposes the divine attributes differ from humans by degree, not in kind, yet seemingly this sets limits on God's powers, which is self-contradictory. If God exists, it is more logical that His powers are an unfathomable kind, totally unlike humans or any being. Theologians such as Aquinas argued it is impossible to possess true knowledge of God by definition, to which Berkeley agrees, considering the remark of Philonous:

> God is a Being of transcendent and unlimited perfections; his Nature, therefore, is incomprehensible to finite spirits. It is not, therefore, to be expected that any man, whether *materialist* or *immaterialist*, should have exactly just notions of the Deity, His attributes, and ways of operation. If, then, you would infer anything against me, your difficulty must be drawn from the inadequateness of our conceptions of the divine nature, which is unavoidable on any scheme… (Berkeley 1965, 201, third dialogue)

If God's nature is incomprehensible, then how does Berkeley account for his knowledge of God? The inconsistency is unresolved—unless Philonous in this context is not speaking for Berkeley. Throughout the *Dialogues* and *Principles,* he claims to know significant aspects of God's nature. Berkeley could reply that his principles are not 'exactly just notions', but this is both vague and ambiguous—*just* may mean *fairness* or *only*. If Berkeley's concepts are not 'exactly just notions', it is difficult to interpret them because the arguments for God (and His attributes) exceed what is knowable. God knows everything, including every sort of painful sensation, Philonous says, e.g., toothaches and rare diseases. Berkeley cannot have it both ways. Either God's nature is incomprehensible, or some knowledge is possible and perhaps a *priori* certain. A common objection is if God is incomprehensible, then we cannot know *in actuality* whether He is perfectly Good, omniscient, and omnipotent. He argues that God is unknowable, and then assumes he understands Divine nature from reason and not only from faith. Philonous' defense is that no difficulty should be inferred with his views, only against our inadequate conceptions of God. This assumption enables a safe cover for Berkeley's arguments, and it is unjustified.

He does not stop there. He defends the Design argument as certainty, and contends it is sufficient to demonstrate the totality of God's powers. "I say it is evident the being of a spirit infinitely wise, good and powerful is abundantly sufficient to explain all the appearances of Nature". (Berkeley 1949, 252) The vivid defense from Philonous in *Dialogues* is in lyrical prose, marveling with adulation at the beauty and organization of nature. Berkeley's creative style is at his best—poetic, and filled with awe at the natural wonders from God. Picaresque scenes and emotional appeal substitute for logic like a churchly oration.

> Even in rocks and deserts is there not an agreeable wildness? How sincere a pleasure it is to behold the natural beauties of the earth!... what delicacy, what beauty, what contrivance in animal and vegetable bodies! How exquisitely are all things suited… to preserve and renew our relish for them… (Berkeley 1965, 151-52.3)

He influenced Hume's empiricism and the dialogue in *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* that criticized Christian theism. Hume attacked the Design argument through his character Philo, who is closest to Hume's own views, I believe. The similar spelling of Philo and Philonous is no coincidence. Philo demeans God who imitated others and states:

> Many worlds might have been botched and bungled throughout an eternity, ere this system was struck out: Much labor lost… many fruitless trials made". (Hume 1947, 167 pt.v)

Further on,

> You have no reason, on your theory, for ascribing perfection to the Deity even in his finite capacity; or for supposing him free from every error, mistake and incoherence in his undertakings. There are many inexplicable difficulties in the works of nature…[3] (Hume 1947, 166 pt. v)

The text criticizes Berkeley, and Leibniz's 'the greatest of all possible worlds' argument, satirized by Voltaire in *Candide,* and subjective idealism has been a subject of parody. We are in no position to judge whether nature is good or evil, since there is no other comparison, Hume holds. Moreover, this *a posteriori* argument from nature cannot rule out several Deities or demigods who created the world. It was credible in pre-Darwinian ages, but significantly less among the educated population presently.

The following objections to Berkeley's concept of God are based upon omniscience and Goodness.

[3] In Hume's Dialogues, the three characters are Philo, the skeptic, Demea, the mystic, and Cleanthes, a theist.

One. A traditional presupposition is that divine omniscience is perfect, regardless of whether God's knowledge of the future is equal to the present and past. Prominent theists hold that God knows future actions only when they happen, and cannot predict human future events. Berkeley holds God's knowledge is timeless and unlimited from the Beginning and cannot be diminished. All objects are eternally known by God and become perceptible to humans at His will, and through the regularities of nature. God preserves the existence of every minute entity: microscopic, sand, all lifeforms, and the totality, particularly when they are unperceived—to perceive is to know of its existence. Famously stated: *esse es percippi.*

If true, God would possess knowledge of infinitely all entities, including ordinary dust and microbes, in the past and presently. The question is then, how is this knowledge possible, and what is its purpose or reason? No reason at all, I think, but perhaps others will resolve the principle which claims everything has sufficient reasons for its existence. If the Principle of Sufficient Reason holds, then this particular reason is unknown. At most, Berkeley proposes an omnipotent God who is wholly omniscient, but whether His existence is within or external to the world seems unknowable. If God is beyond time, as he believes, then God is Outside, external to the world and not bound by human time. If He exists in unknowable divine time, then the question remains--how is divine total knowledge possible? These unresolvable mysteries cannot be explored here. Only God determines and has cognizance of His omniscient power, which is conjecture to humans. It is logically possible that perfect and infinite knowledge are not identical because divine perfection does not necessarily entail the infinite, and the reverse—the infinite does not entail perfection. Narrow definitions are necessary in order to avoid circular and redundant arguments, but this is difficult for 'infinite,' 'perfection,' and 'omniscience' because definite knowledge is elusive and beyond human understanding.

Two. The second assumption is that God is All-Good /Loving, and therefore would not deceive humans about reality, unless possibly for special divine reasons. God would not trick humans, and when humans are fooled by their errors, intelligence, or lack of ability, and is not God's fault. In *Meditation Four,* Descartes explains:

> To begin with, I acknowledge that it is impossible for God ever to deceive me for trickery and deception are always indicative of some imperfection…the will to deceive undoubtedly attests to maliciousness or weakness. Accordingly, deception is incompatible with God." (Descartes 2000, 122)

As Berkeley understood Descartes, it follows that external reality exists because it is against God's nature to permit or create a deceptive world. In *Dialogues,* Hylas (the materialist) asks:

> After all, can it be supposed God would deceive all mankind? Do you imagine he would have induced the whole world to believe the being of matter if there was no such thing? (Berkeley 1949, 243)

Philonous evades a direct answer and denies that God deceived mankind. Instead, he says all mankind does not believe in matter, and only a few philosophers believe it, which is clearly false, and Berkeley does not either. Societies have always known things were composed of material stuff, even if they had no explanations for understanding it. Of course, the existence of matter is common knowledge—first from folk wisdom and intuition, then by scientific observations, and prior to the word 'matter' in languages.

For discussion, let us assume Berkeley is correct that matter is unreal, and our knowledge of it is continuously misunderstood. To be misled is human error, and since God is All-loving he cannot allow deliberate deceptions, and could have easily prevented or halted our 'false' belief in matter. Foundational knowledge cannot and should not be ascribed to human errors and illusions. However, conceivably, at any time, it was possible for God to bring about the conditions and discovery whereby humans understood that matter is unreal and only mental substance exists. Without anyone's knowledge, God could have instilled certain ideas of matter within scientists who would prove this unreality. The alleged 'deception' would have no divine reason or purpose, seemingly, and would only impede our understanding of the real world. Science has uncovered numerous false beliefs and illusions, but matter is certainly not one. With hubris and sarcasm, one could then argue that God chose Berkeley to impart His 'wisdom' about matter to us and correct this egregious error. By fate, God would wait until Berkeley's books appeared, as if He whispered, "Hello George. God here. You're right about matter; it's a hoax. Everything consists of ideas. Now spread the word." One might object Berkeley's free will chose this radical view and God enabled it, but it is questionable whether this explanation absolves human errors and evil. At any historical time, an intelligent person could have 'discovered' the illusion of matter. He stands in the tradition of apologists who have defended or assumed without cogency a myriad of incredulous claims over two millennia.

The major reason for writing *Principles* and *Dialogues* arguably was largely to validate and defend God against the materialists, atheists, and freethinkers, such as John Toland and fringe Enlightenment rebels. His hatred and fear of atheism (and atheists) are evident here. "It is no longer worth while to bestow a particular

consideration of the absurdities of every wretched sect of atheists." (Berkeley 1965, 67 Prin.) Eliminate matter, and atheism will fall to the ground. But the same can be said of immaterialism—if the Church is eliminated, then religion collapses.

Berkeley became an immaterialist very early, but it is impossible to know in what year, Jones' biography states. His immaterialism was published by age 25, and throughout his remaining life, he served the Irish Anglican Church as bishop from 1734 to near the end in 1753, engaged in moral and spiritual duties. His primary passion and mission were to spread Christian doctrine to the common man, including Bermuda, where he planned to build a school. Thus, explanations of Berkeley which overlook his strict Protestantism risk misrepresenting his philosophy. It is similar to considering Sartre only an existentialist, and ignoring his Marxism and political life, or that Martin Luther King was a civil rights leader while overlooking the minister. In his biography of Berkeley, Luce wrote he was a faithful diocesan and good pastor, and discharged his duties with zeal and foresight (Luce 1949.) This is a compelling reason to argue that his rejection of matter, and criticism of Descartes and Locke are intended to defend God's omniscience and glory over our sense-world, and to promote "a pious sense of the presence of God". It is why he disdains Hobbes and Spinoza, whose ideas are threatening, though neither endorsed atheism. Hobbes' materialism is anathema, though it does not literally exclude God, and Spinoza, who was Jewish, famously defended a form of pantheism. The absence of matter, *if* established, would provide strong metaphysical reasons for God's omniscience of the human world. However, there is no evidence at all for the absence of matter.

Berkeley's idealism critically influenced philosophy, particularly John Stuart Mill, who found it attractive for his empiricism, yet was also skeptical. However, Dicker's interpretation, which claims Mill considered himself a Berkeleyan, misreads Mill's intentions. Granted, Mill is sympathetic to idealism, but he is certainly no Berkeleyan idealist, and opposes him by certifying the existence of matter. Nowhere does Mill state that it is non-existent. Mill's lack of criticism of Berkeley does not imply assent or support, as a close reading proves. Dicker quotes Mill, "these possibilities, which are conditional certainties, need a special name to distinguish them from mere vague possibilities … matter then may be defined as 'permanent possibility' of sensation". (Dicker 2011, 275) Second line excluded. This is from Kant's 'Refutation of Idealism' in the C*ritique,* but his attempt to refute 'dogmatic idealism' is too brief.[4]

[4] Kant read only extracts from Berkeley because of his limited English. He, too, was accused of Berkeleyism in the first edition of the Critique. See (Ewing 1938, 182).

Dicker's position is unwarranted regardless of Mill's statements, and his phenomenalism does not imply or infer Berkeleyism. On the contrary, Mill argues these possibilities of sensation (perception) are certain, permanent, and guaranteed. Mill states Calcutta still exists when it is unperceived, and the white paper is still there when it is out of sight—the permanent possibilities of sensation remain. Mill is closer to common sense empiricism, very contrary to Berkeley. In a misconstrued sentence, Mill suggests a useful phrase for Berkeley's ideas—'permanent possibilities of sensation' (perception)—, and when read verbatim, provokes unnecessary analysis. When taken literally, sensible objects remain permanently possible (potentially) to perceive things and in actuality. When seeing an optical illusion, only my idea of the illusion appears real until the true image is discovered.[5] Both images are permanent possibilities of sensation. An agnostic, he argued strongly against belief in God in his essays on religion, and never accepted the idea that God must preserve the world of ideas to prevent sensory chaos.

III. The Skeptic

One fundamental question provoked by his idealism is the neglected issue of Berkeley's skepticism, and his views on this epistemological tenet and common sense. The investigation of the basic issue is essential to our reevaluation. Ironically, he is a radical skeptic who strongly opposed fundamental skepticism, which he believed led to the danger of atheism and agnosticism. Historically, skepticism has been burdened with a mixed reputation and unpopularity until recent times. The kind prevalent in epistemology is distinguished from that which doubts fundamental reality and the possibility of knowledge. Clearly, the irony is that Berkeley argues defenders of matter are the true skeptics. However, Reid argues:

> Of all the opinions that have ever been advanced by philosophers, this of Bishop Berkeley, that there is no material world, seems the strangest, and the most apt to bring philosophy into ridicule with plain men who are guided by the dictates of

[5] Permit this analogy to the experiences and production of movies. The film's unreal background scenes are transposed from computers into film as if the actors are on location when they are in Hollywood studios. The technique is a classic illusion, especially in science fiction and fantasy. Film computerization becomes, in effect, esse est percipi. The Berkeleyan magic works as if the portrayals in the film have no matter, and CGI effects streamline the illusion. Sets and props are viewed as solid mass but are merely appearances with false fronts, or nothing is actually there. Audiences are watching 'ideas' of the object, not material stuff. Vehicles are illusions, and images of people may be A.I. generated. Movies that combine animation with real actors are borderline examples of subjective idealism. This effect is not as prominent on television and computer streaming.

> nature and common sense. (Reid in West 2023, 2-4)

Reid's opposition to Berkeley's skepticism is valid and acceptable. Generally, philosophers and the educated contend Berkeley's position is unworthy of belief, which establishes him as a true skeptic, regardless of his disagreement. The 'plain men' or non-philosophers need no further proof that philosophy is absurd and out-of-sync with the real world, as he is a philosopher's philosopher. Peter West, agreeably, contends Reid does not think Berkeley's theory of perception made a positive contribution to philosophical inquiry or a defense of common sense. The latter is an understatement—it contradicts common sense. Hume said sarcastically, 'that ingenious author' provides the best lessons of skepticism in philosophy—'ingenious' is rhetoric and not praise.

> All his arguments, though otherwise intended, are in reality merely skeptical appears from this—that they admit of no answer and produce no conviction. 2. Their only effect is to cause momentary amazement and irresolution and confusion which is the result of skepticism. (Hume 1962, 154-55. text12)

Hume notes the position is contrary to natural instinct and/or reason with no evidence. Moreover, Berkeley only raises questions without answers, which is true and a default truth of philosophy in general. Berkeley is a serious skeptic, but statement 1) is an insufficient reason for skepticism, and 2) is untrue because amazement and confusion are the first steps toward understanding him. Berkeley's skepticism of Newton's theory of absolute time and space was correct, yet for the wrong reasons, not those of recent physics, though immaterialism is generally consistent with quantum theory. Berkeley is skeptical of the important principles (attraction, gravity) which he argues cannot alone explain nature. His early interest was Plato, a favorite philosopher, whose theory of sense perceptions and world of Ideas influenced him.

Critics and contemporaries like Samuel Johnson, held that his idealism is counter to normal intuition, common sense, and scientific observations, and an easy target for ridicule and rejection. He received hostile, disagreeable reviews among Enlightenment thinkers such as Baxter (1886-1750) and Home (Lord Kames, 1696-1782). For this reason, criticism has been divided on Berkeley's sincerity by those who question his true intent. Surely, the 'vulgar' uneducated and the public question his sincerity and dismiss his idealism. My understanding is that Berkeley believes idealism *should* be, but is not philosophical common sense, and his motives and work are honest—to doubt it undermines his integrity. He believed his beliefs of God were common sense, but probably not idealism. Reid suggested the claim that it is common sense is a rhetorical strategy to mitigate criticism.

On a practical level, subjective idealism poses the challenge of living and thinking like a true Berkeleyan, rather than assuming it is purely academic. For the self-aware idealist, everyday activity would not change until personal accidents or significant events instigate anomalies or exceptions. Introspective idealists would momentarily reflect upon their environment differently, but probably not change their minds, like Berkeley, who witnessed Mount Vesuvius erupting— these calamities were called signs and warnings from God. It is implausible that Berkeley himself was an immaterialist in practice, whatever this entails, and possibly experienced cognitive dissonance between conceiving his physical body as material or ideas. In actuality, living as an immaterialist would be delusional, and very strange, I think.

Concluding Evaluation

After 300 years, Berkeley is regarded as a great Enlightenment philosopher of genius, though his rejection of matter and epistemology is unanimously rejected. Overall, Berkeley attempts to prove too much and yet too little. His entire immaterialism is extravagantly excessive, and his explanation and defense of God is too little (assuming He exists). Thrane and De Waal's claim that the tenets of immaterialism can be construed or close to a *reductio ad absurdum* is very possible, yet unproven. (Thrane 1982, 144)[6] His linked series of contentions reveals weak inferences, primarily due to his supreme valuation of Christianity and disvalue of natural science. The theory in its entirety is vulnerable to several fallacies, notably a deductive type of Slippery Slope, in which each premise is necessarily linked to the unavoidable conclusion that matter is non-existent. Generally, the mark of greatness ought to rely on the philosophical major thesis, and the series of premises supporting it are secondary in logic. Moreover, original ideas and provocative thought ought not imply enduring greatness, even when it survives centuries, which is subjective, and not the consensus in contemporary philosophical assessments. The Platonist Cudworth (1617-1688), Malebranche (1638-1715), and others were highly esteemed, whose excellent reputation has long passed.[7] Berkeley's denial of matter is dismissed unanimously when it is understood, a rare ignoble distinction among post-Renaissance philosophers, as an outlier who created a fictional world. Turbayne remarked that his ideas provoke and aggravate instead of persuade, and "his

[6] Berkeley has been charged with other fallacies. Slippery Slope is my idea but unproven.

[7] The Post-Kantian German idealists have also lost followers except in continental philosophy.

paradoxical utterances are plainly wrong" (Turbayne 1965, xxxiii), yet claims he is a great genius in his introduction to Berkeley.

From severe critics, his idealism shows neither greatness nor genius, despite clever argument and enduring persistence of interest. His argumentation is analyzed with greater respect than his conclusion, which indicates the higher priority bestowed on close logical analysis. The famous dictum states that the conclusion must be credible based upon sound argument. To borrow William James' pragmatic metaphor, immaterialism is comparable to a bad check or lines of credit not backed with cash. "Truth lives, in fact, for the most part on a credit system. Our thoughts and beliefs 'pass' so long as nothing challenges them…" (James 1981, 95) Credit passes until it is discovered lacking cash, and when void, it becomes a specious argument. Later in life, Berkeley questioned his philosophical influence and confessed errors.

Writing to Johnson (1729), he admitted:

> What you have seen of mine (*two books*) was published when I was very young, and without doubt hath many defects… I do not, therefore, pretend that my books can teach truth. All I hope for is that they be an occasion to inquisitive men of discovering truth by consulting their own minds and looking into their own thoughts. (my italics) (Berkeley 1965, 228).

Privately, he reveals doubts with his idealism and gives up pretensions for any influence, based partly on highly critical reviews. His prescient valuation of his work should be understood literally, not as an expression of modesty or to avert criticism, because Berkeley excelled at answering objections. If *Dialogues* and *Principles* do not teach truth, then at least they can provide stimulation for our own philosophical reflections. Indeed, the 'defects' continue to spark lively discussion as this paper shows, and he receives due credit. Retrospectively, it is common for writers (including me) to have a lower opinion of their youthful work. One's maturity and age are not always kind to one's younger creativity, yet Berkeley's idealism does provide sufficient philosophical stimulation and insights.

His defense of God ought not necessitate carte blanche reasoning or a *deus ex machina* in which any possible explanation is conceivable. It is important to establish certain guidelines or epistemic rules in order to avoid flamboyant reasoning. Suppose that Berkeley claimed the earth is flat—this idea could be logically consistent with immaterialism with only minor changes. Arguably, Philonous could claim that only horizons are perceived, thus the earth's roundness is merely an idea. Circularity is subjective and God prevents beings from falling off the edge of the world. Although ridiculous, metaphysicians possibly would hail it a classic, and attempt to refute its logic like a mistaken puzzle conundrum. Absurd

examples like solipsism are also applicable, and in this manner, it is useful to define a "berkeleyism" as a philosophical deception of reality.

One critic noted that Berkeley is analogous to a self-deceived magician, whose excellent skills neither persuade nor convince and who fools no one. Matter is gone, disappeared into the invisible and was never really present. The philosophical illusion creates and provokes a fascinating riddle, like a backstage show or cinematography, and the attempts to expose the fallacious methods continue centuries later. History has favored the legacy of the Bishop of Cloyne, and his title attributes him higher respect among brethren. That he lived between the eminent Locke and Kant has accrued value to his philosophy. His fame rests on his unique defense of the relative subjectivity of knowledge. In this vision of a matterless ghost world, materiality is merely an appearance in the magical reality.[8]

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[8] Byron quipped, "when Bishop Berkeley said 'there was no matter,' And proved it—'twas no matter what he said'." in *Works*, Berkeley. 74 fn. In Don Juan canto.

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