

## BERKELEY AND MODERN METAPHYSICS

BILL BREWER

Notoriously, Berkeley combines his denial of the existence of mind-independent matter with the insistence that most of what common sense claims about physical objects is perfectly true (1975a, 1975b).<sup>1</sup> As I explain (§ 1), he suggests two broad strategies for this reconciliation, one of which importantly subdivides. Thus, I distinguish three Berkeleyian metaphysical views. The subsequent argument is as follows. Reflection, both upon Berkeley's ingenious construal of science as approaching towards an essentially indirect identification of the causal-explanatory ground of the order and nature of our ideas in God's volitional strategy, and also upon the currently orthodox status of a Humean principle about the a posteriority of causation, points towards an isomorphism between the three Berkeleyian views and three more modern metaphysical views, explicitly advertised as realist, in at least some sense which is supposed to be in stark contrast with Berkeley's anti-realist immaterialism (§ 2). The real distinctions between the three modern views, and, correspondingly, between the three Berkeleyian views, are semantic rather than genuinely metaphysical (§ 3). All six views share a fundamental assumption, that the causal explanatory grounds of the order and nature of our experiences are distinct from the direct objects of those experiences, in a technical sense to be made precise, in virtue of which they fail ultimately to sustain our intuitive commitment to empirical realism, the thesis that physical objects are, both the very things which are presented

---

<sup>1</sup> My discussion of Berkeley throughout draws most heavily on these two primary texts. I make no further specific reference to them, and make only sparing reference to the secondary literature where necessary.

DRAFT

to us in perception, and exist, and are as they are, independently of anyone's thought or experience of them (§ 4). I conclude (§ 5) by offering the denial of this shared assumption as the most basic statement of what is required to sustain empirical realism, and raising a pressing challenge.

I start with some terminology. Physical objects are such things as stones, tables, trees, people and other animals. I identify this domain of entities in the first instance by extension. Physical object language is the language in which we speak and write about physical objects. For the entities of a given kind to be mind-independent is for them to exist, and be intrinsically as they are, independently of anyone's thought or experience of them. Otherwise they are mind-dependent. When a person has a perceptual experience, to say that o is its direct object, is to say that the subjective character of that experience is constituted, in part, by o itself. Its identity and nature provide the canonical characterization of her subjective condition. Describing that condition as one in which o is presented to her makes perspicuous what it is like for her to be in that condition.

{Of course there are many who reject the idea that the subjective character of perceptual experience is to be given by reference to direct objects of this kind. For the purposes of the present discussion, I assume that some such characterization can be given, for the following reasons. First, Berkeley clearly makes this assumption, and the options for his metaphysical system are quite clear in this context. Second, the modern metaphysical views with which I am concerned are to my mind also most clearly defined and distinguished in the context of this assumption, although their proponents normally formulate what I say here, in terms of direct objects of

DRAFT

experience, by using some notion of how things appear to the subject in that experience.<sup>2</sup> Third, the assumption facilitates my articulation of the prospects for empirical realism, given the range of views which I discuss. Fourth, I think that this assumption that the subjective character of perceptual experience is to be given by reference to its direct objects is true. Arguments in support of these four reasons must be given elsewhere if this paper is to be manageable in length.<sup>3</sup>}

## § 1 Berkeley's options

Effectively on the basis of considerations concerning illusion and hallucination, Berkeley endorses the widely held assumption of the time that the direct objects of perception are mind-dependent. Since physical objects, such as stones, tables, trees, people and other animals, are in some way presented to us in perception – indeed, perception is the source of our understanding of which things these are, and provides the indispensable basic control upon our investigation into their natures – they must be appropriately related to the direct objects of perception. Berkeley's many, varied and powerful arguments against Locke's materialism aim to establish that physical objects are therefore likewise mind-dependent. Given crucial constraints upon the appropriate relations which physical objects must bear to the mind-dependent direct objects of perception, any conviction that such objects have mind-independent,

---

<sup>2</sup> This assumption is clearly intended to skirt a number of significant and controversial issues, especially given the current orthodoxy of attempts to account for the subjective character of perceptual experience in terms of its representational content. Most of what I have to say here is in my view ultimately neutral on this debate, and could be reformulated in these more orthodox terms. I formulate the definitive distinction between, and assess the relative merits of, the more traditional object-based views of experience, in terms of which the issues are explicitly presented here, and currently more orthodox content-based views, in my forthcoming book Perception and its Objects (Brewer, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> See Brewer, forthcoming.

DRAFT

material natures cannot be sustained. Nevertheless, as I say, he insists that much of our commonsense conception of the physical world expressed in physical object language is true. This much I take for granted as familiar background concerning Berkeley.

He has two broad strategies for developing this overall position.<sup>4</sup>

Idealism, (I), identifies physical objects with mereological sums of mind-dependent direct objects of perception.<sup>5</sup> Here there are two varieties. G-idealism, (GI), identifies physical objects with mereological sums of mind-dependent direct objects of God's experience.<sup>6</sup> H-idealism, (HI), identifies physical objects with mereological sums of mind-dependent direct objects of humans' experience.<sup>7</sup>

Phenomenalism, (P), systematically analyses whole sentences of physical object language in terms of patterns amongst the actual and possible mind-dependent direct objects of perception, without asserting numerical identities between particular physical objects and anything mind-dependent. Strictly speaking, and notwithstanding the surface structure of the sentences of physical object language, we do not make genuine (objectual) reference to physical objects at all. Rather, truth-conditions are

---

<sup>4</sup> I first encountered this basic distinction in Foster (1985). I have also been helped in my understanding of Berkeley's options by Stoneham (2002).

<sup>5</sup> This is Foster's (1985) 'mentalist realism'.

<sup>6</sup> Strictly speaking, this is not perceptual experience, since God is active in its production rather than passive in its reception. Furthermore, the most plausible reading of Berkeley's gestures in this direction identifies each physical object with a single such 'idea' in God's mind, or perhaps even with a single element of one overall idea which is the whole physical world. Thus, according to (GI), physical objects are (mereological parts of) mind-dependent objects of God's active-creative experience.

<sup>7</sup> See Stoneham (2002, ch. 8) on this distinction between (GI) and (HI).

DRAFT

given for whole physical object language sentences by truth-functional constructions of sentences concerning the actual and counterfactual course of human experience.<sup>8</sup>

The basic contrast between the idealist and phenomenalist strategies is a disagreement about what constitute the semantic primitives of physical object language. These are the basic units of the language, to which semantic assignments are made, on the basis of which truth conditions may systematically be determined for all the well-formed sentences of the language. According to (I), the semantic primitives of physical object language include referring expressions and predicates; according to (P), they include instead whole atomic sentences.

Thus, according to (I), referring expressions of physical object language, such as ‘that table’, or ‘Phaebo’ – the name of my kids’ cat – for example, are assigned mereological sums of mind-dependent objects as their reference: sums of ideas in God’s mind, according to (GI), and sums of direct objects of human perception, according to (HI). Satisfaction clauses for predicates are not straightforward; but the basic idea would be that a physical object language predicate such as ‘x is brown’, is satisfied by an object iff that object has enough (of the right kind of) brown-type mind-dependent direct objects of experience as parts.

According to (P), on the other hand, truth conditions will be given directly for whole atomic sentences of physical object language roughly along the following lines.

---

<sup>8</sup> This is Foster’s ‘mentalist reductionism’.

DRAFT

‘That table is brown’ is true iff my perceptual experience now has a brown-table-type direct object, and it did so yesterday at the same time, and it will do tomorrow, and it would continue to do so if I were to stay in my office all night, and your perceptual experience would have a brown-table-type direct object if you were to come into my office, and...

The truth-functors of physical object language are given standard treatment on both accounts. Notice, though, that physical object language quantification is objectual according to (I), whereas it is substitutional, according to (P).

On both Berkeleyian strategies, the order and nature of human perception is causally explained by God’s free volitional strategy: the very volitional strategy by which He effectively creates the physical world. So the question naturally arises what the place and status of the scientific world-view is supposed to be on Berkeley’s account. The enterprise in question here is that of aiming, on the basis of systematic and controlled experiment, jointly to identify the most fundamental constituents of physical reality, and the basic laws of nature governing their behaviour, in such a way as to facilitate the most accurate, general and comprehensive prediction, explanation and understanding of the observable physical world. How does Berkeley understand these laws of nature governing the behaviour of such fundamental constituents? He is certainly keen to emphasize and explain the fact that such scientific theory is a remarkable achievement, which progressively improves and extends our comprehension of the observable physical world. The key idea is that it constitutes a method by which we may gradually improve our understanding of God’ intentions in creating the physical world.

DRAFT

We begin to discern patterns and regularities amongst the mind-dependent direct objects of our perception. For example, visual experience of a fire is normally such that, if it is followed by kinaesthetic experience of approach, then the result is increased tactual experience of heat, leading eventually to pain. Similarly, auditory experience of a doorbell is a sign that, had we had kinaesthetic experience of turning our head towards the window a little earlier, we would likely have had visual experience of a person approaching the front door and reaching out her hand – to ring the bell, as we say. Recall that the direct objects of experience amongst which we discern these patterns are: (a) resemblances of the ideas in God’s mind which are physical objects, according to (GI); (b) parts of physical objects themselves, according to (HI); or (c) the realm of reference, facts about which constitute the truth-conditions of physical object language, according to (P). So, one way or another, God’s creation of the physical world is responsible for this systematic order in our experience. Thus, our knowledge of such patterns provides us with some understanding of His volitional strategy in creating the physical world. We know that these patterns are the means by which His strategy is executed. Such observable patterns are fairly local, and hardly extensive in space and time, though. We move towards a deeper understanding of His intentions in creating physical reality when we embark on the scientific enterprise of ‘getting to the bottom’ of perceptible patterns and regularities by framing more general and universal laws of nature relating various fundamental theoretical-physical entities.<sup>9</sup> As we do so, we expand our knowledge of the patterns and regularities amongst the direct objects of perception along every

---

<sup>9</sup> I call these ‘theoretical-physical entities’ because they are not physical objects in my sense, which is explicated by example, as consisting of such things as stones, tables, trees, people and other animals. Rather, they are theoretical postulates, introduced in the context of certain basic laws of nature governing their behaviour, in the service of our prediction and explanation of the course of our perceptual experience.

DRAFT

dimension: encompassing those involving the objects of other humans' experience, at other times and places, and even in different possible, but not actual, circumstances. In this way, according to Berkeley, scientific investigation provides an increasingly general, detailed and accurate characterization of the content of God's volitional strategy in creating the physical world. Notice, though, that this scientific characterization is constitutionally restricted to merely instrumental, or operational, access. It provides insight only into God's means; His end, or ultimate point and purpose, in creating the physical world, remains essentially mysterious.

## § 2 Three more modern metaphysical views

On behalf of Kant, Rae Langton advances an argument for the Humility Thesis, (HT), that we can have no knowledge of the intrinsic properties of the objects which are the causal explanatory grounds of our perceptual experiences (Langton, 1998). David Lewis endorses (HT) on his own behalf (Lewis, 2002). Very crudely, Langton's purportedly Kantian argument is this.

Perception is, as any source of knowledge must be, a causal process. The objects which are the causes of perceptual experiences therefore have no a priori intelligible relations with our experiences themselves, which are the effects of such objects on us. The only characterization of the objects presented to us in this way in experience which is available to us on the basis of such experience is therefore relational: as those objects which produce such and such experiences in us in such and such circumstances, and which also have the various effects which they do on the other things around us, which in turn produce such and such other experiences in us. We

DRAFT

can have no knowledge whatsoever of the intrinsic properties of the objects which are the causal explanatory grounds of our perceptual experiences.

I do not myself find this argument compelling. For I have independent grounds to reject its Humean premise, that there are never a priori intelligible relations between causal grounds and the powers which they bestow, and therefore that there can be no such relations between the intrinsic natures of the objects which are the causal grounds of our experiences, and the specific subjective characters of the experiences which they have the power to produce in us in virtue of these natures. Correlatively, any conception of our experiences as independent effects, distinct from the physical objects which are their causes, is therefore entirely inaccurate. I pursue this debate elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> For the moment, my question is what the options are for modern metaphysics in the presence of (HT). So far as I can see, there are, broadly speaking, three possibilities.

According to Scientific Realism, (SR), physical objects, like stones tables, trees, people and other animals are mereological sums, over space and time, of the constituents of an intrinsically unknowable mind-independent reality, which is the subject matter of fundamental physics, and which causally grounds the order and nature of human perceptual experience, which, in turn, constitutes the various ways such physical objects appear to us.

According to Modern Transcendental Idealism, (MTI), physical objects are mereological sums of the mind-dependent direct objects of various humans'

---

<sup>10</sup> Brewer, forthcoming.

DRAFT

perceptual experiences over time. The order and nature of these experiences is causally grounded in the intrinsically unknowable mind-independent reality which is the subject matter of fundamental physics. Although this position is idealist about physical objects themselves, the stones tables, trees, people and other animals, which we all know and love, it insists, in opposition to Berkeley's appeal to the volitional strategy of God's infinite mind, that the casual explanatory ground of the order and nature of human experience is mind-independent, although intrinsically totally unknowable. It is not a view which is often endorsed explicitly today; but I do believe that some temptation towards it is evident in much modern metaphysics, given the alternatives available once (HT) is in place. I give an example of this temptation in Lewis below.

According to Reductionism, (R), there are, strictly speaking, no persisting physical objects, such as stones tables, trees, people and other animals. Sentences 'about' such things are reducible to sentences about the actual and counterfactual order and nature of various humans' perceptual experiences over time, where the truth of these sentences is in turn grounded in the way things are in the intrinsically unknowable mind-independent reality which is the subject matter of fundamental physics.

Following Langton's (1998) Kant, Lewis (2002) presents (HT) as a thesis concerning our epistemological relation with physical objects themselves, such as stones tables, trees, people and other animals. This identifies his metaphysical position as a version of (SR), which is surely his official view. But now consider his argument for a perdurance account of the persistence of such physical objects (Lewis, 1998). As he puts it himself,

The principal and decisive objection against endurance, as an account of the persistence of ordinary things such as people or puddles, is the problem of temporary intrinsics. Persisting things change their intrinsic properties. For instance, shape: when I sit, I have a bent shape; when I stand, I have a straightened shape. Both shapes are temporary intrinsic properties; I have them only some of the time. How is such change possible? I know of only three solutions. (Lewis, 1998, p. 205)

Lewis' argument is that two of these 'solutions' are untenable. The first denies that shapes are intrinsic properties of physical objects. "They are disguised relations, which an enduring thing may bear to times" (p. 205). Lewis objects that this is "simply incredible, if we are speaking of the persistence of ordinary things. ... If we know what shape is, we know that it is a property, not a relation. The second 'solution' is to claim that "the only intrinsic properties of a thing are those it has at the present moment. Other times are like false stories" (p. 205). Lewis objects here that this "rejects persistence altogether. ... In saying that there are no other times, as opposed to false representations thereof, it goes against what we all believe" (p. 206). The third possibility, which must therefore be the correct solution, is to invoke perdurantism as an account of the persistence of physical objects: "different temporary intrinsics ... belong to different ... temporal parts" (p. 206).

The crucial premise is that bent and straightened are different intrinsic shape properties of ordinary physical objects. This is surely incompatible with (SR), though. For, recall that, according to (SR), all the properties of physical objects which we know on the basis of perception are relational: they are their dispositions to produce various experiences in us, which present us merely with their appearances. It is these

DRAFT

appearances which change from bent to straight as we perceive shape to change when Lewis stands up. That is to say, insofar as bent and straightened are construed as intrinsic properties which we know on the basis of perception, they must be construed by the proponent of (HT) as intrinsic properties of mind-dependent direct objects of experience. Thus, identifying physical objects with those objects of which the shapes we perceive to change in this way are intrinsic properties, assimilates the position to a version of (MTI), as opposed (SR).

Perhaps Lewis' reply would be that the properties which shape terms like 'bent' and 'straightened' actually name are instead certain intrinsic properties of intrinsically unknowable physical objects, as these are understood according to (SR), of which the so-called 'bentness' and 'straightenedness' which we perceive are the mere appearances to us. Intrinsic shape, on this view, is that determinable property which causally grounds the change in appearance which we experience when Lewis stands up, whatever property that may be. Strictly speaking though, we have no conclusive reason to regard standing as a change in that intrinsic property of physical objects on this construal. More importantly, this response is inconsistent with the Lewis' firm implication, in rejecting the first purported solution to the problem of temporary intrinsics above, that we do "know what shape is" (p. 205). For the consequence of Lewis' envisaged reply would be precisely that we do not: we know only the appearance which it produces in us, which we are misleadingly inclined to call by the same name.

Put succinctly, the problem for Lewis is that (SR) entails that every property of physical objects that we know on the basis of perception is relational; yet the

DRAFT

argument for a perdurance account of the persistence of physical objects requires that some of their properties that we know on the basis of perception should be intrinsic.

In any case, my point at this stage is not so much to accuse Lewis himself of inconsistency, but rather to illustrate the temptation, even amongst proponents of (SR), towards the idea that physical objects such as stones tables, trees, people and other animals, are presented to us in perception, in a sense which most naturally suggests (MTI), given (HT), {although it may be possible to mimic this idea to some extent in this context with a version of (R), rather as Berkeley aims to endorse this very idea even under the interpretation of his positive metaphysical view as a version of (P)}. According to this idea, towards which I am suggesting that even Lewis himself shows some temptation, physical objects are the objects we all know and love, as it were, in the sense that we know at least some of their intrinsic properties on the basis of our perception of them. This is incompatible with (SR).<sup>11</sup>

As I have characterized the three options currently on offer to more modern metaphysicians than Berkeley, they all simply take for granted the Humean causal principle that there are never a priori intelligible relations between causal grounds and the powers which they bestow, and therefore that there can be no such relations between the intrinsic natures of the objects which are the causal grounds of our

---

<sup>11</sup> It is also an idea which provides crucial leverage in Berkeley's (1975a, 1975b) argument against Locke's (1975) materialism. Like Lewis, Locke wishes to secure some perceptual acquaintance with the intrinsic properties of physical objects, through his thesis that our ideas of primary qualities at least resemble those qualities in the objects themselves. Just as this is strictly incompatible with Lewis' official (SR), Berkeley argues that it is inconsistent with Locke's distinction between the mind-dependent ideas, which are the direct objects of our perceptions, and the purportedly mind-independent physical objects themselves which are supposed to be their causes.

DRAFT

experiences, and the specific subjective characters of the experiences which they have the power to produce in us in virtue of these natures. Thus, all three share a commitment to (HT). Hence they all regard the scientific world-view as a merely relational identification of the intrinsically unknowable mind-independent reality which constitutes the causal explanatory ground of the order and nature of our actual and counterfactual perceptual experiences. According to Berkeley, on the other hand, as we saw above, scientific investigation provides an increasingly general, detailed and accurate characterization of the content of God's intention in creating the observable physical world as he does, which nevertheless is bound to concern itself only with His means rather than His ultimate end. So he regards the scientific world-view as a merely relational identification of the intrinsically unknowable volitional strategy of God which constitutes the causal explanatory ground of the order and nature of our actual and counterfactual experiences. By mapping the modern metaphysician's intrinsically unknowable mind-independent reality onto Berkeley's intrinsically unknowable divine intention we therefore have the following general isomorphism between Berkeleyian more modern metaphysics.

(GI)  $\equiv$  (SR)

(HI)  $\equiv$  (MTI)

(P)  $\equiv$  (R)

§ 3 Metaphysics and semantics

DRAFT

All six of these metaphysical views share the conviction that the actual and counterfactual order and nature of human perceptual experience is causally grounded in an intrinsically unknowable reality, of which the scientific world-view – ideally at least – constitutes an increasingly general, detailed and accurate, although irremediably relational, characterization. In this context, the differences between the three paired positions – first, (GI)/(SR); second, (HI)/(MTI); and third, (P)/(R) – are best understood as semantic, rather than genuinely metaphysical, although the name we give these differences is hardly to the point. The key dimension of variation concerns the semantics of physical object language: what is the correct account of the semantic role of our everyday terms for particular physical objects, the terms we use to talk of individual stones, tables, trees, people and other animals? There are three fundamentally different such accounts on offer.

First, according to (GI) and (SR), these are to be construed as genuinely referring expressions, whose referents are elements of the intrinsically unknowable reality which causally grounds the order and nature of our perceptions ‘of them’. Scientific investigation works towards an indirect, relational characterization of these things, and background philosophical theory provides a general conception of the kind of intrinsically unknowable reality of which they are a part. Very roughly indeed, in the context of my comparison here between Berkeleyian and more modern metaphysical views, science yields a shared description of physical things in terms of the ultimate causes of such and such observable phenomena; philosophy presents a model for making some kind of sense in very general terms of what these causes might be: Divine mental phenomena of some sort, according to Berkeley, or the grounds of various complex dispositions to affect observable phenomena which are ascribed to

DRAFT

points in an n-dimensional 'spacetime', according to more modern metaphysicians.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the referent of 'my laptop', for example is, either a mind-dependent direct object of God's active-creative experience, or a mereological sum over spacetime of certain fundamental physical-theoretical entities.

Second, according to (HI) and (MTI), everyday terms for particular physical objects are again to be construed as genuinely referring expressions. Their referents on these views, though, are mereological sums over time and over various actual human subjects (and possibly also over various non-actual possible world counterparts of actual human subjects) of the mind-dependent direct objects of perceptual experience. The actual and counterfactual order and nature of these experiences is causally grounded in the intrinsically unknowable reality which is relationally described by the scientific world-view, however this may generally be understood. Persisting physical objects like my laptop are perduring mereological sums of the mind-dependent direct objects of such experiences.

Third, according to (P) and (R), everyday terms for particular physical objects are not to be construed as genuinely referring expressions. Rather, whole sentences containing such terms are to be given truth conditions by logical constructions of sentences referring to human beings and the mind-dependent direct objects of their actual and possible perceptual experiences. The truth values of these latter sentences are in turn casually grounded in the facts about the intrinsically unknowable reality which is relationally described by the scientific world-view. Thus, to a first

---

<sup>12</sup> Notice in both cases that this is some kind of abstraction from an aspect of our own mental lives: again very crudely, from our experience of mental activity, in the first case; and from the spatiotemporally organized direct objects of our passive perceptual experience, in the second.

DRAFT

approximation only, ‘my laptop is turned on’ is true iff I, you, or anyone else, has, or would have, suitable turned-on-laptop type experiences under such and such relevant circumstances, where our actually or counterfactually having these experiences is causally determined by the relevant scientific facts, which relationally identify, either God’s creative volitional strategy in relation to the physical world, or the ‘spacetime’ distribution of fundamental physical-theoretical entities.

Thus, although the metaphysics of physical objects is in a way quite different on each of the three options which I have been discussing, either for Berkeley or for modern metaphysics, these differences are in each case the product of a single underlying metaphysical picture and a range of alternatives concerning the semantics of physical object language. The underlying picture in Berkeley’s case is of actual and counterfactual human perceptual experiences causally grounded in God’s intrinsically humanly inaccessible creative volitional strategy concerning the physical world. In the more modern case, it is of these same human experiences grounded instead in the distribution over spacetime of various postulated unobservable, and again intrinsically inaccessible, physical-theoretical entities. The range of three basic semantic options in each case is as just set out.

#### § 4 Empirical realism

Intuitively, none of the six views which I have been discussing sustain empirical realism, the thesis that physical objects are, both the very things which are presented to us in perception, and exist and are as they are, intrinsically at least, independently of anyone’s thought or experience of them. Indeed, identifying the domain of the

primary-empirical with the direct objects of perception, we have the following shortcomings in each of the views under consideration.

(GI) Physical objects are neither primary-empirical nor mind-independent. They are the direct objects of God's active-creative experience, which may still be presented to us in some sense in perception, since the direct objects of our own perceptual experiences may resemble those of God's creative experience, which are physical objects themselves. For they are both fundamentally the same kind of entity: mind-dependent direct objects of experience.

(SR) Physical objects are mind-independent, since the fundamental physical-theoretical entities which are their parts are mind-independent; but they are not primary-empirical. It may be claimed that they are nevertheless still presented to us in perception, in virtue of their resemblance, in respect of the primary qualities at least, with the direct objects of our perceptual experiences. I argue elsewhere, though, that Berkeley is right in his objection to Locke (1975), that this resemblance thesis cannot be sustained in this context. For "an idea [or mind-dependent thing] can be like nothing but an idea" (Berkeley, 1975b, § 8).<sup>13</sup>

(HI)/(MTI) Physical objects are primary-empirical, since the direct objects of the actual and counterfactual perceptual experiences which are their parts are primary-empirical; but physical objects are not mind-independent: they are simply mereological sums of these mind-dependent parts.

---

<sup>13</sup> See Brewer, 2004, forthcoming(a), and forthcoming(b).

DRAFT

(P)/(R)        There are no physical objects. Physical object language sentences are analysed in terms of sentences concerning what is primary-empirical, whose truth values are causally grounded in the intrinsically unknowable reality relationally described by the scientific world-view. According to (P), what is primary-empirical may resemble this reality; but the reality is itself mind-dependent. According to (R), this reality is mind-independent; but any claims of its resemblance with what is primary-empirical are, for precisely this reason, in my view, once again following Berkeley's arguments against Locke, untenable.

In any case, nothing is both primary-empirical and mind-independent; and nothing mind-independent may be construed as presented in perception in some less direct way by appeal to the notion of resemblance.

The isomorphism between the Berkeleyian and modern views, which I discussed in § 2, and the semantic, rather than ultimately metaphysical, conception of the variation amongst the views within each of these two ranges of options, which I discussed in § 3, strongly suggest a diagnosis for this universal failure. All six views insist upon a strict distinction and independence between the causal explanatory grounds of the order and nature of our perceptual experiences, on the one hand, and the direct objects of those experiences, which partially constitute their own subjective character, on the other. It is this distinction which I claim constitutes a fundamental obstacle to their sustaining empirical realism.

§ 5    Conclusion

DRAFT

If my diagnosis is correct, then a crucial condition for sustaining empirical realism is the identification of the causal explanatory grounds of the actual and counterfactual order and nature of human perceptual experiences with their direct objects, in my sense, namely those objects which partially constitute the subjective character of such experiences.

{A key objection to this identification, which is explicit in my discussion of the options for modern metaphysics above, stems from the Humean causal principle, that there cannot be a priori intelligible relations between causal grounds and the powers which they bestow, and therefore that there can be no such relations between the intrinsic natures of the objects which are the causal grounds of our experiences, and the specific subjective characters of the experiences which they have the power to produce in us in virtue of these natures. For (HT) follows: we can have no knowledge of the intrinsic properties of the objects which are the causal explanatory grounds of our perceptual experiences, and therefore these objects cannot possibly be the direct objects of those experiences, in my sense. As I said, I think that there are independent objections to the Humean principle. So that objection to empirical realism is ineffective.<sup>14</sup>

Another historically and contemporarily powerful objection to the empirical realist thesis that it is physical objects themselves, such as stones, tables, trees, people and other animals, which are, both the mind-independent causal grounds of the order and nature of our perceptual experiences, and the direct objects of those very experiences,

---

<sup>14</sup> See Brewer, forthcoming(a), and forthcoming(b).

DRAFT

derives from the argument from illusion. I believe that this is likewise ineffective; but that is also a debate for elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the core of empirical realism is the idea that physical objects are the enduring causal explanatory grounds of the actual and counterfactual order and nature of our perceptual experiences, which are also the direct objects of those very experiences. They are therefore, both independent of our, or anyone else's, experiences of them, and also the very things which are presented to us in such experiences.

A final challenge for any empirical realism of this form, which also comes out clearly in my discussion of the various Berkeleyian and modern failures to vindicate it, is to articulate the place and status of the scientific world-view. For the idea that the order and nature of our perceptual experience is causally grounded in the enduring physical objects whose identity and intrinsic properties partially constitute the subjective character of that experience puts significant prima facie pressure, at least, on the idea, common to all six 'failures' above, that the scientific world-view provides a merely relational identification of the intrinsically unknowable causal grounds of perception.

I can see the following three possible lines of response to this challenge, none of which is much more than an inarticulate gesture as it stands. First, some kind of instrumentalism may be advanced concerning the world-view presented by fundamental science, according to which the function of scientific theories is to provide effective instruments for the production of true (observational) predictions.<sup>16</sup> Second, what is perhaps a close relation of instrumentalism, it may be suggested that

---

<sup>15</sup> See Brewer, 2004, and forthcoming(b).

<sup>16</sup> See e.g. Ladyman, 2002, p. 266.

DRAFT

the scientific world-view presents an increasingly rich and detailed systematisation of the complex dispositions to affect observable phenomena, which are organized by being ascribed to points in an n-dimensional 'spacetime', and which are grounded, not in any intrinsically unknowable microscopic physical-theoretical entities at all, but rather in the enduring physical objects themselves which constitute the direct objects of our perceptual experience. Thus, physical objects such as stones, tables, trees, people and other animals explanatorily ground the truth of the various merely relational characterizations of what is going on where in the physical world which are offered by scientific theory on the basis of experimental observation. Third, some form of pluralism may be offered, according to which both fundamental science and ordinary perception disclose mind-independent causal grounds of various observable phenomena. These are perfectly compatible routes towards different aspects of what ultimately explains the nature and behaviour of physical things and our access to them in perceptual experience. Mind-independent reality itself has ample room for the deliverances of both.

The challenge to provide a plausible understanding of the place and status of the scientific world-view compatible with empirical realism as I have formulated it is clearly substantive and pressing. I myself have sympathy with both the second and third options listed above; but the business of properly explicating all three possibilities, and of assessing their individual coherence and relative merits must again be postponed for another occasion.

## **References**

- Berkeley, G. 1975a. Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous. In M. Ayers (ed.), George Berkeley: Philosophical Works. London: Everyman.
- 1975b. A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge. In M. Ayers (ed.), George Berkeley: Philosophical Works. London: Everyman.
- Brewer, B. 2004. 'Realism and the Nature of Perceptual Experience'. Philosophical Issues, **14**, 61-77.
- Forthcoming(a). 'Indirect Realism and Kantian Humility'.
- Forthcoming(b). Perception and its Objects. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Foster, J. 1985. 'Berkeley on the Physical World'. In J. Foster and H. Robinson, (eds.), Essays on Berkeley. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ladyman, J. 2002. Understanding Philosophy of Science. London: Routledge.
- Langton, R. 1998. Kantian Humility. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, D. 1998. 'The Problem of Temporary Intrinsic: an Excerpt from On the Plurality of Worlds'. In P. Van Inwagen and D. W. Zimmerman (eds.), Metaphysics: The Big Questions. Oxford: Blackwell.
- 2002. 'Ramseyan Humility'. Gareth Evans Memorial Lecture to Oxford University, delivered posthumously by Stephanie Lewis, 2.iii.02.
- Locke, J. 1975. An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, ed. P. H. Nidditch. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stoneham, T. 2002. Berkeley's World. Oxford University Press.

DRAFT

## BERKELEY AND MODERN METAPHYSICS

BILL BREWER

Thesis (with key notions to be explicated!): empirical realism entails that the direct objects of our perceptual experiences must be their causal explanatory grounds.

### § 1 Berkeley's options

Idealism (I) – (GI) vs. (HI) – versus phenomenalism (P)

### § 2 Three more modern metaphysical views

The Humility Thesis (HT)

Scientific Realism (S) versus

Modern Transcendental Idealism (MTI) versus

Reductionism (R)

(GI) ≡ (SR)

(HI) ≡ (MTI)

(P) ≡ (R)

### § 3 Metaphysics and semantics

### § 4 Empirical realism

Thesis

### § 5 Conclusion

Challenge: to articulate the place and status of the scientific world-view