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THE THEOLOGICAL ORTHODOXY OF BERKELEY’S IMMATERIALISM

James S. Spiegel

Ever since George Berkeley first published Principles of Human Knowledge his metaphysics has been opposed by, among others, some Christian philosophers who allege that his ideas fly in the face of orthodox Christian belief. The irony is that Berkeley’s entire professional career is marked by an unwavering commitment to demonstrating the reasonableness of the Christian faith. In fact, Berkeley’s immaterialist metaphysical system can be seen as an apologetic device. In this paper, I inquire into the question whether Berkeley’s immaterialist metaphysics is congruent with the Christian scriptures. I conclude that not only are Berkeley’s principles consistent with scripture, a case can be made for the claim that certain biblical passages actually recommend his brand of immaterialism.

1. Introduction

It is well known that the chief end of Berkeley’s philosophical labors was to defend the Christian religion. He says as much in the closing section of the Principles, where he states that that work was calculated to “better dispose [his readers] to reverence and embrace the salutary truths of the Gospel, which to know and to practice is the highest perfection of human nature.” This being Berkeley’s aim, it is no surprise that he is careful to insist that his metaphysics is fully consistent with biblical principles. Indeed, in the Philosophical Commentaries, he proclaims “there is nothing in Scripture that can possibly be wrested against me, but, perhaps, many things for me.” Here Berkeley’s claim is two-fold. On the one hand, he boldly asserts that his immaterialism implies nothing which in any way contradicts scripture; on the other hand, he suggests that in scripture there are to be found some passages which in fact favor his immaterialism. For the sake of brevity, let us call the above two claims Berkeley’s “consistency” thesis and the “endorsement” thesis, respectively. In this paper I shall assess these two theses, investigating, first, Berkeley’s defense of the biblical soundness of his immaterialism and, second, the degree to which, if at all, his immaterialism is recommended by scripture.
II. Berkeley’s Immaterialism and the Consistency Thesis

Before proceeding to an examination of these two theses, let us review the essential features of Berkeley’s metaphysics which earn him the title “immaterialist” and which his Christian opponents have on occasion found offensive. The central thesis of Berkeley’s system is the principle *esse est percipi aut percipere* (to be is to be perceived or to perceive). Nothing which is not itself a mind exists independently of perception by some mind. In the *Principles* Berkeley arrives at this conclusion by arguing as follows. Since an object is nothing more than a collection of sensible qualities, and sensible qualities are ideas, an object is just a collection of ideas. Now since ideas are mind dependent, existing only when perceived, it follows that objects exist only when perceived. Their *esse* is *percipi*. In Berkeley’s ontology, then, there are two categories of being: minds and ideas. There exist only ideas perceived and minds perceiving them. Ideas are entirely passive, having “nothing of power or agency included in them,” while minds are “simple, undivided, active substance[s].” Only mind possesses the power to produce and perceive ideas. Insofar as it does the former it is called *will*; as it does the latter it is called the *understanding*.

Implicit in Berkeley’s principle that to be is to be perceived is a denial of material substance, the inert, qualitiless “I know not what” of which Locke spoke and in which, according to him, all of the sensible qualities of bodies subsist. This doctrine is repudiated by Berkeley as unintelligible, since it is impossible to conceive of something which is unperceived, and Locke’s material substance, itself possessing no sensible qualities, is unperceivable. These are, in a nutshell, Berkeley’s philosophical reasons for rejecting material substance. But, as we shall see in evaluating his “consistency” thesis, his objections are not entirely philosophical but theological as well.

Berkeley’s “consistency” thesis, once again, is that his immaterialism in no way implies anything which is inconsistent with scripture. I want now to explore those doctrines or issues which the orthodox Christian might think to be threatened by a Berkeleyan metaphysics. That is, I shall discuss those issues where inconsistency between Berkeley’s immaterialism and scripture might be (and in some cases has been) alleged.

In both the *Principles* and the *Dialogues* Berkeley anticipates objections from scripture. In the former he proposes the objection that although no rational demonstration of the existence of bodies can be made

> the Holy Scriptures are so clear in the point as will sufficiently convince every good Christian that bodies do really exist, and are something more than mere ideas, there being in Holy Writ innumerable facts related which evidently suppose the reality of timber and stone, mountains and rivers, and cities, and human bodies.

Berkeley’s reply, of course, is to deny that his principles in any way
conflict with the scriptures or “the right use and significance of language.” He is prepared to abide by the “vulgar acceptance” of such words such as “timber”, “stone”, “body”, etc. which denote tangible objects and to distinguish between real and imaginary objects. And, reiterating his central thesis, he reminds us that it is only “matter”, as some philosophers use the term, which he denies. In the Dialogues, through Philonous, he presents us with this challenge:

As for solid corporeal substances, I desire you to shew where Moses makes any mention of them; and if they should be mentioned by him, or any other inspired writer, it would still be incumbent upon you to show those words were not taken in the vulgar acceptation, for things falling under our senses, but in the philosophic acceptation, for Matter, or an unknown quiddity, with an absolute existence.  

Until then, Berkeley urges, the authority of the scriptures is irrelevant to the discussion, for they are neutral on the issue of material substance. In this way Berkeley shifts the burden of proof onto the matterist, convinced that he has already fully demonstrated the truth of esse est percipere. But with regard to the propriety of God’s use of material substance, Berkeley has yet another argument—from the principle of parsimony. In section 61 of the Principles he argues that the use of material substance in creating the world would be unnecessary and superfluous for an omnipotent deity. That is, Berkeley in effect asks, why should God use material substance in doing that which “might have been effected by the mere command of His will without all that apparatus”? To posit the existence of matter, then, when God can accomplish all that he has accomplished without it, is to violate Ockham’s razor (or, at least, the theological principle that a being of perfect wisdom and power will always effect his ends by the simplest and most expeditious means). The existence and operations of the universe are entirely explicable by God’s will and are needlessly explained with the addition of corporeal substance.

Theologically Berkeley considers the doctrine equally repugnant, because it implies that “God has created innumerable beings that are entirely useless and serve no manner of purpose.” Belief in material substance, then, amounts to the highest irreverence, for it suggests divine frivolity in the creation of the physical world.

A second potential objection from scripture pertains to Berkeley’s doctrine of mind or spirit. His view, we will recall, is that there exist only two kinds of things, spirits and ideas, or respectively, perceiving subjects and that which is perceived. So, Berkeley tells us, we have no idea of spirit. Now the problem is this. The Old and New Testaments, especially the latter, are replete with hundreds of discussions of and references to the human soul or spirit which clearly presuppose that we have some ideas of these entities. Numerous particular attributes are predicated of the human soul or spirit, for example, that it can be “downcast,” “steadfast,” “broken,” “joyful,” “contrite,” “lowly,” and “strong.”
How is Berkeley's professed ontology to be reconciled with this bibli­
cal language? He seems to have glimpsed the seriousness of the prob­
lem, for he deals with the matter explicitly in the Principles as follows. Spirit, being an active substance which perceives, cannot itself be per­
ceived for this implies passivity, a characteristic of ideas only. He says of spirit that it is an active being. So "there can be no idea 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."15 Therefore, spirit "cannot be of itself perceived, but only by the effects
which it produces."16 Berkeley's position here in no way precludes him
from describing spirits using the same sorts of ascriptions employed by
the psalmists noted above, for these do not require the having of an idea
of spirit, in the strict sense.

The technical distinction Berkeley makes in this context in order to
allow for knowledge of spirit is between "ideational" and "notional"
knowledge. He writes, "We may be said to have some knowledge or
notion of our own minds, of spirits and active beings, whereof in a strict
sense we have not ideas."17 Unfortunately, Berkeley says little more in
the way of explicating this distinction.18 This much we know, that
notional knowledge has an active being as its object rather than a pas­
itive being, which is the object of ideational knowledge. Furthermore,
the object of notional knowledge is perceived indirectly, through its
effects, whereas the object of ideational knowledge is directly per­
ceived.19 It seems that Berkeley is suggesting that notional knowledge is
best (or only) understood as knowledge which is non-ideational. At any
rate, his doctrine of notions, cryptic though it is, is certainly motivated
by his concern to preserve the possibility of genuine knowledge of spir­
its, which in turn can be seen as an attempt to reconcile his immaterial­
ism with the basic scriptural presumption of this possibility.20

A third objection from scripture comes from Berkeley's associate
Samuel Johnson. He argues that given Berkeley's view of bodies as col­
lections of ideas the perception of which is not really dependent upon
sense organs, the doctrine of bodily resurrection seems to be under­
mind, since upon death it is conceivable that "we should still be attend­
ed with the same ideas of bodies as we have now."21 The result is that
the wonder of physical resurrection is diminished by the ease of its
explicableness under Berkeley’s principles. Johnson’s ironic conclusion
is that immaterialist metaphysics explains too much and that therefore
Berkeley's ontology "seems to have no place for any resurrection at ali,
at least in the sense that word seems to bear in St. John 5:28, 29."22

Berkeley’s reply to Johnson is that his principles imply no exotic view
of bodily death and resurrection but that they may be conceived as easi­
ly with as without corporeal substance. He writes, "it seems very easy
to conceive the soul to exist in a separate state...and to exercise herself on
new ideas, without the intervention of these tangible things we call bod­
ies."23 Berkeley's response here is again indicative of his assumption
that the burden of proof is not upon him to show the consistency of his
principles with the doctrine of bodily resurrection but rather rests upon
critics such as Johnson to demonstrate their inconsistency.24 However, in
replying as he does Berkeley focuses on the possibility of disembodied existence rather than on the possibility of physical resurrection, and the former does not imply the latter. But since Berkeley does not deny the existence of bodies in the usual sense of the term, it is not clear from Johnson’s objection why this should be a particularly troublesome point for Berkeley. For as Berkeley reminds Johnson, it is sufficient for him to account for physical resurrection that “we allow sensible bodies, i.e. such as are immediately perceived by sight and touch; the existence of which I am so far from questioning...”\(^25\) Now it might be the case that Johnson’s point rather is that Berkeley cannot adequately distinguish between physical resurrection and disembodied existence. But if this is his point then, again, Berkeley’s reply is appropriate when he describes the disembodied state as a condition in which the soul perceives without the intervention of sense organs.

A fourth potential source of contention between Berkeley and his theologically orthodox critics concerns the matter of common sense. In his notebooks Berkeley makes the following candid remark which many commentators have since found incredible, or at least paradoxical, considering the novelty of his metaphysics: “All things in the Scripture wch side with the Vulgar against the Learned side with me also. I side in all things with the Mob.”\(^26\) Later, through Philonous in the Dialogues, this claim is uncompromised. He declares “I am content, Hylas, to appeal to the common sense of the world for the truth of my notion.”\(^28\)

Whether in fact Berkeley is properly considered a defender of common sense is still an open question and an issue which is today widely disputed. Commentators such as Luce, Jessop, Grayling, and Pappas have argued in defense of this claim, while Bennett, Pitcher, and Tipton among others have maintained that Berkeleyan immaterialism opposes common sense. Because of the complexity of this issue I will refrain from entering into this debate here. Nor do I believe that demonstrating Berkeley’s metaphysics to be consistent with common sense is necessary in order to vindicate it against the charge of theological heterodoxy. Our present concern is to evaluate immaterialism in light of scripture, not to determine whether it is amenable to all the common sense convictions of ordinary folk. Our focus, then, is restricted only to the first claim Berkeley makes in entry 405 of his notebooks: “All things in the Scripture wch side with the Vulgar against the Learned side with me also.” The question as to whether Berkeley’s subsequent claim is correct, that he does “side in all things with the mob,” is outside the scope of this paper. I should note, nevertheless, that I believe the claim that his immaterialism is consistent with common sense to be defensible.\(^29\)

In defending Berkeley’s first assertion in notebook entry 405, it is important to make two observations. First, as has already been noted, the scriptures and the Genesis story in particular are neutral on the topic of material substance. The biblical writers simply do not take a clear side on the issue (though, as I shall try to show later, some passages seem to suggest a Berkeleyan immaterialism). Thus, even if one concedes that belief in corporeal substance is commonsensical, immaterialism remains unthreatened until it is also shown that the scriptural posi-
tion supports this conviction, a claim that Berkeley defies his antagonists to justify.

Someone, of course, might object that although the scriptures make no explicit reference to matter, their consistent support of common sense generally serves as an indirect defense of realism (i.e., the thesis that [a] the objects we seem to perceive are real and [b] objects continue to exist when not perceived). Immaterialism is, in contrast, an esoteric doctrine, not readily comprehended, let alone accepted, by ordinary folk. Therefore, the scriptures implicitly side with the vulgar against Berkeley on the question of corporeal substance. This objection leads us to the second observation, namely that scripture itself does not consistently side with common sense. Quite the contrary, the Bible is replete with stories, doctrines, and moral rules which fly in the face of common sense. Historical accounts of abominable Egyptian plagues, partings of the Red Sea and Jordan river, spontaneously crumbled city walls at Jericho, and scores of miracles; metaphysical tenets of a triune godhead, divine incarnation, and justification by faith; and moral imperatives such as “love your enemies” and “bless those who curse you”, to sample just a few, are admittedly opposed to common sense beliefs. Theologically sensitive rivals of Berkeleyan immaterialism who base their critique on common sense are wont to overlook this crucial consideration. The point here is that even if it is granted that matterism has common sense as an advocate, this fact alone does not show that it is supported by scripture. Immaterialism, as it turns out, just might be one of the many non-commonsense doctrines which is either allowed by or, as I shall suggest, actually recommended by the scriptures.

The final, and perhaps most serious, objection to Berkeley’s immaterialism I want to address regards the problem of evil. By all indications it is a complaint which Berkeley himself took very seriously, for he addresses the matter in several of his works. Let us look to the Principles first where, in his typical fashion, he states the objection both convincingly and eloquently:

...monsters, untimely births, fruits blasted in the blossom, rains failing in desert places, miseries incident to human life, and the like, are so many arguments that the whole frame of nature is not immediately actuated and superintended by a spirit of infinite wisdom and goodness.

What Berkeley outlines here is the problem of “natural” evil, as distinct from the problem of moral evil. To this objection Berkeley offers in reply the Leibnizian “aesthetic” theodicy. “Blemishes and defects of nature,” he asserts, serve to contribute to the beauty and goodness of the whole just as in a painting shadows are necessary to complement the brighter parts. But since we are finite beings we are able to glimpse but a small portion of the whole, whereupon we impugn God on the basis of our ignorance.

In the Dialogues, Berkeley again treats the problem of evil, but this time the subject is moral evil rather than natural evil. With regard to immoral
actions performed by human beings he notes first that “the imputation of guilt is the same, whether a person commits such an action with or without an instrument,” where in this context the “instrument” on the matterist’s account is understood to be material substance. In this way, Berkeley argues that his immaterialism is, for good or ill, on equal footing with realism when it comes to the problem of moral evil. If given his principles the benevolence of God must be denied because of the presence of moral evil in the world, then the same follows for the philosopher who assumes the principles of matterism. Interposing material substance between God and human misconduct provides no buffer against divine responsibility. Just as a murderer is equally culpable for his act whether he uses a gun or his fist, God is culpable (if culpable at all) for natural evil whether or not he created the world using corporeal substance. Thus, Berkeley’s intention here is simply to show that any theodicy which works here for the matterist works equally well for the immaterialist. There is no difference between them on this issue.

But Berkeley has an additional reply. He writes,

\[
\text{sin or moral turpitude doth not consist in the outward physical action or motion, but in the internal deviation of the will from the laws of reason and religion,... therefore...the making God an immediate cause of all such actions is not making Him the Author of sin.}^{33}
\]

However, one might object, to cause such action is tantamount to willing it. For God, to cause an event is to will it, since he presumably knows what he is doing whenever he undertakes an action. Thus, it seems, the distinction Berkeley draws here fails to exonerate God from responsibility for human sin, for obviously God must will or intend whatever he brings to pass. He does not ordain blindly.

Berkeley does indeed face a serious problem here. However, as with the objection above, it is not immaterialism specifically which is indicted here but the more general doctrine of the immediate providence of God. Berkeley’s principles place him squarely within a much larger tradition of Christian theology that affirms the divine foreordination of all things. Anyone within this tradition, including those of the matterist stripe, must grapple with the thorny problem of reconciling divine determinism, human responsibility, and the goodness of God. There is much more to be said (and has been said) about this issue, but this is not the place for it. The point here is that Berkeley’s immaterialist metaphysics does not subject him to any more formidable problem of evil than that which confronts certain other matterists. For both the task of forging a satisfactory theodicy in light of the sovereignty of God is equally onerous.

III. The Endorsement Thesis and Scriptural Recommendations of Berkeley’s Immaterialism

Now that we have shown how Berkeley deflects criticism of his system for theological impropriety, let us look into his bolder “endorsement” thesis which maintains, we will recall, that the scriptures actually
testify in behalf of his metaphysics. Although, as we have seen, Berkeley offered repeated defenses of the "consistency" thesis, he was not so explicit in his support of the "endorsement" thesis. Rather, he was mostly content with merely appending to his arguments biblical texts, leaving to the reader the task of embellishing a specific application. His favorite passage is found in the book of Acts where the apostle Paul, speaking at a meeting on Mars Hill, remarks that in God "we live and move and have our being." (The context of this passage is especially noteworthy, considering that the audience of Paul's discourse very likely included Stoic and Epicurean philosophers.) But what exactly is the significance of this passage as it pertains to Berkeley's immaterialism? Why is he so confident that it is relevant to, let alone that it serves to bolster, his position? The answer becomes clear when we note a particular implication of his denial of material substance. Since sensible qualities do not inhere in matter, their subsistence can only be explained by the divine mind. The world has no existence independent of a perceiving spirit but continues to exist only because God perceives it. Thus, a notion entertained by Descartes three quarters of a century earlier Berkeley also defends as true, asserting that "the divine conservation of things is equipollent to, and in fact, the same thing with a continued repeated creation; in a word, that conservation and creation differ only in the terminus a quo."

If one carefully examines the creation account given in the book of Genesis, I believe there is to be found there a possible recommendation of Berkeley's brand of inmaterialism. But before doing so, I want to spell out in greater detail the precise relationship between God and the world which is entailed by a Berkeleyan metaphysics.

But let me first briefly characterize the theologically conscious matterist interpretation of the Genesis creation account, specifically the sort of narrative which Hylas might have provided had he obliged when Philonous pressed him for such an explanation, saying "as for solid corporeal substances, I desire you to shew where Moses makes any mention of them." Hylas, as it turns out, offers no such evidence, nor does he bother to present even the contours of an interpretation of the creation story from the perspective of a matterist. However, we might imagine that it would go something like this: In the beginning God created matter, solid corporeal substance, which he subsequently formed into various shapes, e.g. the earth, sun, moon, living creatures, and so on. Of course, his creation of matter and his giving it particular forms need not to have been temporally distinct acts, but they are at least conceptually distinct.

It is important to note that on the matterist account we really have no conception as to how God created matter ex nihilo. We only know that he did so. This is a metaphysical mystery to us finite beings. Moreover, there is nothing in human experience analogous to what God did in creation. It is true, human beings do create objects in a sense, but our creativity is more precisely a reformation or modification of objects that already exist. What we make is always out of pre-existing material. This is not the case with God's creative acts, however, for he requires no
pre-existing material. He created out of nothing.

Now on the matterist conception the existence of the world independently of the perception of any particular spirit, including God, is conceivable, even granting God’s initial creation of the world. Nonetheless, a theologically sensitive matterist such as Hylas would insist the world is ruled by God, for it is governed by his laws, i.e., the laws of nature. In fashioning the world the creator built into it certain fixed, physical principles such as the laws of thermodynamics, the ideal gas law, the laws of gravity, inertia, action and reaction, etc. These insure that the physical world remains uniform, which in turn works to the benefit of God’s creatures, for we learn what to expect and hence are better equipped to get along in the world. Still, despite the uniformity of nature, God does intervene miraculously at times, suspending or holding in abeyance some law or laws of nature, to perform a deed to assist his creatures, such as parting the Red Sea or transforming a staff into a snake.

Now having looked at a matterist understanding of the Mosaic creation account and God’s continued governance of the cosmos, let us see what Berkeley has to say about these things. In the third Dialogue Hylas objects as follows to Philonous’ principles:

The scripture account of the creation is what appears to me utterly irreconcilable with your notions. Moses tells us of a creation: a creation of what? of ideas? No certainly, but of things, of real things, solid corporeal substances. Bring your principles to agree with this, and I shall perhaps agree with you.

In the face of this challenge Philonous makes a distinction between two senses of the word “ideas”. What Philonous does not intend by this term when speaking of the created order is “fictions” or “fancies of the mind”. Instead, he understands the proper denotation of “ideas” to be “immediate objects of the understanding, or sensible things which cannot exist unperceived, or out of a mind”. Yet, he reminds Hylas that in everyday parlance sense objects are called “things” rather than “ideas”. Hence, Philonous is able to conclude that in creation God made real things. Thus having defended his allegiance to the “vulgar acceptation” of the Genesis creation account, Philonous takes the offensive, noting that neither Moses nor any other inspired writer refers to “solid corporeal substance,” or matter in its philosophic sense, as an “unknown quiddity, with an absolute existence.” Therefore, Philonous concludes, his own principles are no more repugnant to the Mosaic creation account than are those of Hylas. Still Hylas is unmoved and presses him for a fuller explanation. Of course, Philonous is happy to comply with his request:

When things are said to begin or end their existence we do not mean this with regard to God, but His creatures. All objects are eternally known to God, or, which is the same thing, have an eternal existence in His mind: but when things, before imperceptible to creatures, are, by a divine decree of God, perceptible
to them, then are they said to begin a relative existence, with respect to created minds. Upon reading therefore the Mosaic account of the creation, I understand that the several parts of the world became gradually perceivable to finite spirits, endowed with proper faculties; so that, whoever such were present, they were in truth perceived by them. This is the literal obvious sense suggested to me by the words of the Holy Scripture.\footnote{41}

There are then two kinds of divine ideas: (1) those which are eternal archetypes existing solely in the mind of God and (2) those which are temporal and relative ectypes, perceived not only by the mind of God but by other spirits as well.\footnote{42} The former may be said to be “private” with regard to the divine mind, while the latter are “public”, that is, accessible by minds other than God’s. Now the act of creation, according to Philonous involves essentially making ectypes from certain divine archetypes, or publicizing what once was private, known only to God. About this Jonathan Dancy writes,

On this view, the world we live in, our world, is nothing other than (part of) the contents of the mind of God. It is not just that God causes us to have ideas like his; when we open our eyes and see what is there, we are having ideas which are God’s.\footnote{43}

in short, the world consists of God’s public ideas. And the creation of the world was simply the process in which these ideas first became public, perceivable by finite spirits.

With this understanding of Berkeley’s conception of the creation of the world, we are prepared to look closely at the opening chapter of Genesis to test his immaterialistic account of creation for ourselves. Recall that in the narrative each of God’s creative acts in the first chapter of Genesis is prefaced with the phrase “And God said...” This is the refrain through the first twenty-four verses of Genesis. “And God said...”: “Let there be light” (v. 3), “Let there be an expanse between the waters” (v. 6), “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place and let dry ground appear” (v. 9), “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees...” (v. 11), “Let there be lights in the expense of the sky to separate the day from the night...” (v. 14), “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth...” (v. 20), “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds...” (v. 24). At every juncture of creation, God speaks things into existence. He creates “by the word of his mouth”. To use the vocabulary of immaterialism, this is the means by which he makes his private, archetypal ideas public and ectypal.

Now it is also plain from the Genesis story that we as human beings mirror God’s nature in some significant way: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”\footnote{44} When one considers the mystery and superlativeness of the divine being, this is a very cryptic passage indeed. What does it mean to say that we are created in God’s image? The full implications of
this passage we will leave to theologians to debate, but in the present context we are led to inquire as to whether we mirror the divine being in the way Berkeley’s creation account would seem to suggest we do. That is, if it is the case from scripture that we are created in God’s likeness and it is also the case that God creates by speaking things into existence, wherein lies any similarity between God and us on this score? Is there evidence to suggest a Berkeleyan interpretation here? I would answer this question in the affirmative and submit that we need look no further than ordinary experience to find all the confirmation we need of Berkeley’s account. Let us simply examine the way we humans speak. In short, to speak is, among other things, to make one’s thoughts public. For example, I am now thinking about my cat, Simon, specifically that he has a bushy tail. This is a private thought of mine to which no person other than myself has access. But when I utter the words, say, “My cat, Simon, has a bushy tail”, I publicize these thoughts. They are still my thoughts, in a sense, but having expressed them in audible words other persons may become privy to them. I have made my ideas public.

What I am suggesting is that there is a fruitful analogy between the manner in which God created the world and the ordinary human experience of sharing ideas through speech. God created, i.e., made his ideas public, through the spoken word. Likewise, we who are made in his image publicize our ideas by speaking. Hence, in this way Berkeley’s immaterialist interpretation of the Genesis story of creation offers us a sense in which human beings are divine image bearers that the usual matterist conception does not.

Let me draw out the analogy in further detail. First, speaking, we should note, is not necessarily tantamount to making one’s ideas known to another mind but rather only to make them perceivable to or accessible by some other mind (at least in principle). When I say “My cat, Simon, has a bushy tail” there may or may not be anyone else within earshot to hear my utterance and so to access my verbalized ideas. But if someone who understands English were present, they would hear me and, hence, perceive those thoughts of mine which I had just made public. This sort of state of affairs in human speaking parallels Berkeley’s account of unperceived objects when he writes, for example, “The table I write on I say exists, that is I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should 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.” Thus, there need not actually be some finite mind now perceiving my desk for me to be able to say properly that it now exists. Similarly, when I utter some statement when no one else is present to hear me, it is nevertheless the case that I have made my thoughts public, for if someone had been listening, he or she would have perceived my objectified ideas. Both of these cases are comparable to the Genesis creation account insofar as we may say properly that God made his ideas public even if there were no other spirits present to perceive his objectified ideas, for if some being, say, an angel, were present it would have perceived them. Notice as well that whatever oddity or awkwardness there is in saying that God’s unperceived but perceivable ideas (to finite minds) are nonethe-
less public, it is equally odd or awkward to refer to our spoken but unheard (except by ourselves) words as nonetheless public. In either case, this awkwardness might be thought to reveal a limitation to the account. Consequently, even with regard to the potential weakness of these accounts, there seems to be an analogy between human speaking and divine creation.

I should note in passing that I do not without good reason use the terms “publicize” and “objectify” when speaking of God’s ideas which are perceived or perceivable. I do so to preserve what I believe is an accurate rendering of Berkeley’s construal of the creation account and to avoid certain problems into which some commentators needlessly run. Jonathan Dancy, for example, in the passage quoted earlier, is misleading, for he might be construed as suggesting that when God creates he makes his ideas known to someone. We have seen that for Berkeley, given his alternative conditions for existence, this is not necessarily the case. If divine creation did entail for Berkeley that God makes his ideas known to someone (as opposed to knowable), then the question arises “who was there to perceive God’s public ideas during creation?” From a theological perspective, the best reply here for someone such as Dancy is to appeal to the prior existence of angels. The creation of the world might be understood as God’s private ideas becoming publicized to some cherubim, seraphim, or other angelic being(s). This line of response, however, is troubled with the further complication that it does not account for the possibility, acknowledged by Berkeley, that the world might have been created before any finite mind.

Thus far, then, Berkeley’s account of creation, if it occurred in time, seems incomplete, or at least awkward. For if the Berkeleyan picture is accurate, on what grounds can it be meaningfully said that at time $T_1$ prior to creation it was true while at time $T_2$ it was false that were a finite mind present it would have perceived something? Charles McCracken has dealt incisively with this issue. In so doing, he adumbrates key passages from the Dialogue such as this:

> Things, with regard to us, may properly be said to begin their existence, or be created, when God decreed they should become perceptible to intelligent creatures, in that order and manner which He then established, and we now call the laws of nature.

and this one quoted earlier:

> All objects are eternally 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, perceptible to them, then are they said to begin a relative existence, with respect to created minds.

According to McCracken, it is apparent from passages such as these that the key to understanding Berkeley’s explanation as to how we are to make sense of the problem identified above lies in God’s decrees. Thus,
McCracken says that

for Berkeley the creation of the visible world is identical with God's freely making a certain decree: the decree, that is, that certain sense qualities will be perceived in a certain order and connection by such spirits as do exist, or that those qualities would be perceived in that arrangement, were any spirits in existence.

Now such decrees, McCracken explains, differ from God's powers in that the former involve an act of divine will, while the latter do not. Divine decrees are to be understood as "ideas in the mind of God". They are analogous to the "plan or program" of any human being who determines in his mind what actions he will take, given certain contingencies.

Another analogy between human speaking and divine creation according to the Berkeleyan account is revealed when we consider that what a person says when he or she speaks tells us something about who he or she is. Through verbal communication one displays his or her intelligence, creativity, interests, moral convictions and so on. In short, by listening to what a person says we can learn a great deal about him or her. Similarly, for Berkeley, through observing the creator's visual language we are able to infer much about the author of the world. As Philonous says in the second dialogue, "from the variety, order, and manner of [sensible impressions] I conclude the Author of them to be wise, powerful, and good, beyond all comprehension." Hence, for Berkeley, inferring God's nature from his "language" (i.e., the created world) is in principle done in the same way we infer the attributes of other persons from the things they say. The inferrability of God's nature is suggested in various places in scripture. For instance, the psalmist proclaims that "the heavens declare the glory of God." And Paul writes: "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made..." Biblical texts such as these are perfectly consonant with a Berkeleyan metaphysic which suggests the sort of unmistakable nearness of God about which the psalmist and the apostle are so confident. This leads us to a further analogy.

The person who speaks controls and determines everything he or she says. In the case of the "divine speaker", this is known as "providence", the absolute and immediate control which the creator exercises over his creation. Berkeley was careful to point out that the doctrine of providence is implied by his metaphysics, specifically his conception of the world as a divine visual language. He explains:

This visual language proves, not a creator merely, but a provident governor, actually and intimately present, and attentive to all our interests and motions, who watches over our conduct, and takes care of our minutest actions and designs throughout the whole course of our lives, informing, admonishing, and directing incessantly, in a most evident and sensible manner.
By all biblical accounts God is intimately related to, though ontologically distinct from, the world. Furthermore, the creator is said to exercise complete dominion over his creation, a conviction evident in the words of Jeremiah: "Who can speak and have it happen if the Lord has not decreed it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?" (Note again the speech metaphor.) In the book of Isaiah this same conviction is echoed by God himself through the prophet: "I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things." And the apostle Paul proclaims that God "is before all things and in him all things hold together" again suggesting the determination of all things by God. Divine foreknowledge of future events, a concomitant of the deity's control over all things, also has its parallel in human experience. God's knowledge of future events is similar to a person's knowledge of the words he or she is prepared to speak. In both cases the agent has decided privately what he or she will do publicly.

A fourth parallel between human and divine "speech" is to be found in what Berkeley refers to as "divine conservation" or "constant creation." Since the world consists of God's public ideas, it must persist only because he continues to publicize his thoughts. That is, unlike the matterist who asserts that God can "step back" from his creation or even, at least in principle, stop thinking about the world without its ceasing to exist, since matter is mind independent, Berkeley must hold that were God to cease perceiving the world, it would vanish altogether. For apart from God there remains nothing, i.e. no material substratum, to sustain nature.

The analogue to be found in human experience of divine conservation of the world consists in the fact that if the interlocutor stops speaking, the conversation ceases, for there are no new public ideas to access. Of course previously accessed ideas may remain in the mind of the audience and these may continue to be accessible (in a sense) so long as they are recalled, but they are not public in the way they were formerly, for they are no longer accessible to new interlocutors, because there are no more "new" sensible signs for them to perceive. Note that even here the parallel with Berkeley's divine discourse is preserved, for were God to cease sustaining the sensible world, finite spirits might retain memories of the sensed ideas even upon its vanishing, though they would have no "new" sense impressions.

Another analogy between human and divine speech is pointed out by Colin Turbayne. Under Berkeleyan immaterialism, he observes, the laws of nature are analogous to rules of grammar. In verbal communication we humans are constrained to abide by certain grammatical conventions, rules of syntax, punctuation, etc. In short, we must be consistent if we are to be intelligible and meaningful. Similarly God's ideas (i.e., the phenomena of nature), if they are to be intelligible, must remain consistent, operating in accordance with certain general rules.

Berkeley defines the laws of nature as "the set rules or established methods wherein the mind we depend on excites in us the ideas of
What we call nature's "laws" then are in actuality the sovereign will of God which remains constant and uniform for the welfare of his creatures (except in the case of the miraculous where deviation from the rule works to our benefit). As in the case of syntactical rules, then, the laws of nature are conventional rather than necessary, being devised solely for the effective communication between speaker and hearer. Just as irregularity in linguistic forms would result in confusion among interlocutors, in the absence of uniformity in nature "we should be all in uncertainty and confusion, and a grown man no more know how to manage himself in the affairs of life than an infant just born."65

Sixthly, and finally, the immaterialist's linguistic metaphor provides an analogue in human experience to God's creation ex nihilo. When we speak we make our thoughts public which were themselves created out of nothing. This is probably Berkeley's thinking when he writes, "Why may we not conceive it possible for God to create out of Nothing. Certainly we ourselves create in some wise whenever we imagine."66 On Berkeley's principles, then, the verbal expression of our thoughts as well as thinking itself are some very familiar ways in which humans mirror God's creation of the world out of nothing.67

Before closing, I want to make a side observation about an additional point of interest in Berkeley's thought from the perspective of Christian orthodoxy. A.D. Ritchie has called the eighteenth century "the period of maximum substance idolatry" where the deity was demoted from the position of creator to a mere artificer of pre-existing material.68 Whether or not this estimation of the centrality of substance in the metaphysics of the age is overstated, Berkeley certainly seems to have sensed the urgency in eradicating the notion of corporeal substance from cosmology. In sections 92-96 of the Principles Berkeley asserts that the doctrine of matter has served as the principle support for atheists, skeptics, fatalists, the irreligious, and the impious. Moreover, he maintains,

...on the same principle does idolatry likewise in all its various forms depend. Did men but consider that the sun, moon, and stars, and every other object of the senses are only so many sensations in their minds, which have no other existence but barely being perceived, doubtless they would never fall down and worship their own ideas, but rather address their homage to that Eternal Invisible Mind which produces and sustains all things.69

This passage represents Berkeley's turn from defender of the mere theological consistency of immaterialism with scripture to the much stronger contention that his metaphysical system is actually superior to matterism theologically because of its avoidance of heretical implications. Berkeley may or may not be correct in his claim that matterism spawns idolatrous religious belief and practice, however the practical effects, harmful or beneficial, of a metaphysical doctrine are not properly a philosophical consideration in judging its truth. But surely Berkeley must have known this. So why does he bother to devote long sections of his Principles and the Dialogues to the project of explaining how his
immaterialism is amenable to scripture and how the practical effects of its acceptance would edify adherents to the Christian religion? The short answer is that he assumed his audience to be largely sympathetic, though not necessarily devotees, to the faith and therefore likely to be responsive to arguments based on points of primarily theological interest. This explanation accounts for the fact that Berkeley’s chief motivations in even constructing his philosophical system were theological in character.

Now to return to the issue at hand, does immaterialism really provide a defense against idolatry? Berkeley was convinced to the point of near dogma, and I believe part of the reason has already become evident in the explication of his metaphysics above. Everything in the universe, whatever its nature, is continually sustained by the deity, utterly dependent upon him for its existence. Therefore, to worship any created item would amount to worshipping the ideas of the creator rather than the creator himself. To understand this, Berkeley suggests, is sufficient to discourage one from succumbing to the temptation. To realize the omnipresence of God such that “in him we live and move and have our being” is to conceive at once the worthiness of this being to be worshipped and the foolishness of preferring to worship some infinitely inferior being. Substance ontology, on the other hand, allowing for the mind-independence of objects, in no such way demands that God be conceived as so intimately related to his creation and therefore permits the mind to stray from God in its meditation on physical objects. Something like this seems to be Berkeley’s thinking. Whether he is correct is a question which might as well be left to empirical testing as to philosophical disputation.

IV. Conclusion

To sum up, the linguistic metaphor plays a central role in Berkeley’s immaterialism and, as we have seen, its role is also significant in the scriptures. My defense of Berkeley’s “endorsement” thesis has consisted largely in showing how his metaphysics acknowledges and exploits this biblical convention. One of the objectives of this paper has been to argue that Berkeylean immaterialism enjoys at least as much and perhaps more explanatory power than matterism when approaching key biblical passages such as the Genesis account of creation. For the former is much better prepared than the latter to attach a substantive, concrete meaning to the speech imagery pervading the Old and New Testaments. It seems to me the matterist’s sole explanation for these expressions is that they are entirely metaphorical. A Berkeylean, on the other hand, while acknowledging their metaphorical dimension, may also take these expressions to some extent literally, counting them as veritable insights into the nature of God as well as humans who on the Mosaic account are made in his image.

Most of the philosophical problems facing the Christian theist, such as the problems of evil and free will, the logic of the nature of God, and the authority of the Old and New Testaments, do still confront Berkeley.
This paper ought not to be construed as claiming otherwise. What I have tried to show here is that commitment to Berkeleyan immaterialism does not entail theological heterodoxy or heresy (at least concerning the issues discussed in this paper). On the contrary, I have argued that Berkeley's principles are perfectly compatible with orthodox Christian theology and, furthermore, that they afford the believer conceptual tools practical for deepening rather than distorting the "salutary truths of the Gospel", a conclusion which would undoubtedly please a theologically conservative Anglican so sensitive to heresy.

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NOTES

12. Isaiah 57:15.
13. Ibid.
16. Ibid., p. 36.
17. Ibid., p. 66.
18. This unusual reticence on Berkeley's part has led Charles McCracken to suggest that his negligence was willful rather than a mere oversight, owing to Berkeley's recognition of the problems inherent in his account of notions. See "Berkeley's Notion of Spirit," The History of European Ideas, Vol. 7, No. 6, 1986, pp. 597-602.
20. This discussion leads to the further question "How does a Berkeleyan account for the acquisition of notional knowledge of attributes of spirits?" With regard to attributes of minds other than one's own, Berkeley asserts that we know them "by means of our own soul" (Principles, p. 94). Here his appeal is to the sort of analogical reasoning he expounds upon in Alciphron IV and which would gain preeminence at the hands of Mill a century later.

As for knowledge of one's own spirit, I see nothing in Berkeley's doctrine
preventing him from affirming a direct grasp of one's own mind and its attributes.


22. Ibid.

23. From Berkeley's letter to Johnson, November 25, 1729 in Berkeley's Philosophical Writings, p. 237.

24. Note that in the last quoted passage he is content to point out that the separate existence of the soul is conceivable. Keeping in mind that for Berkeley and many of his contemporaries conceivability is tantamount to (logical) possibility, we can see why Berkeley did not feel compelled to engage in much elaboration on this point. This case provides a clear example of the tone pervading Berkeley's replies to critics, including Johnson, that there is at the start a presumption in favor of his immaterialism, in particular that esse est percipi aut percipere (because he thinks he has demonstrated its truth) so that when it comes to comparatively peripheral matters, such as the metaphysics of death and resurrection, he need only reveal the possibility of an explanation showing their consistency with his views or give the contours of such an explanation in order to preserve this presumption. Of course, it was often the case that Berkeley did do more than this and in fact went to great lengths to show how with regard to explanatory power his immaterialism was not merely as good as matterist metaphysics but was in fact superior in explaining certain phenomena and providing solutions to problems hitherto unsolved. We shall discuss examples arising in the context of Christian theology when we turn to an examination of Berkeley's "endorsement" thesis below.


26. By "theologically orthodox" I intend traditional, conservative Christian doctrine such as is advanced in common by all or most mainstream theological traditions and is articulated in such ecumenical creeds as the Apostles' creed and the Nicene creed. As a devout Anglican Berkeley undoubtedly acknowledged the authority of these confessions of faith and recognized the constraints implicit in them for both scholarly and practical pursuits.

27. Philosophical Commentaries, 405 in Works, p. 51. See also sections 368, 408 and 751.

28. Three Dialogues, p. 96. See also pp. 70, 90, 100, 110, and 136.

29. For an excellent defense of this position see George Pappas' "Berkeley, Perception, and Common Sense" in Berkeley: Critical and Interpretive Essays, Colin Turbayne, ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982).


33. Dialogues, p. 100.

34. Acts 17:28. Berkeley might just as readily have chosen any of a number of passages as his text of choice, including Ephesians 4:6 here Paul asserts that there is "one God and father of all, who is over all and through all and in all," Colossians 1:17 where he writes that Christ "is before all things and in him all things hold together," and Hebrews 2:10 which states that it is God "for whom and through whom everything exists."

35. In the third Meditation Descartes suggests that there is no real difference between divine conservation and creation. He argues that because of the in-
nite divisibility of the duration of his life into independent parts "it does not follow from the fact that I have existed a short while before that I should exist now, unless at this very moment some cause produces and creates me, as it were, anew...." Philosophical Essays (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1964), p. 105.

36. Letter to Johnson, November 25, 1729, in Berkeley's Philosophical Writings, p. 236. Of course Berkeley does deny that "things are every moment annihilated and created anew" (Principles, section 45), but this is because, he maintains, for any object which exists there is always some mind perceiving it.

37. Dialogues, p. 120.

38. It should be noted that some matterists might hold that it is impossible for the world to exist without being perceived by God, given that God exists necessarily, is essentially omniscient, and all created being is essentially dependent upon him. However, the key point here is that a matterist need not affirm all (or any) of these attributes of God which are needed to lead one to the conclusion that the existence of the world hinges on God's perception. One may (as did the deists in Berkeley's day and many physicalists do today) affirm the world's existence and deny the existence of God.

39. Ibid., p. 119.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., p. 121.
43. Dancy, p. 50.
44. Genesis 1:27.

45. And, Berkeley maintains, God continues to do so, as all of nature is properly to be conceived as a "divine visual language". For Berkeley's full elucidation of this doctrine, see Towards a New Theory of Vision, sections 147-152; Principles, sections 44, 65-66, 106-109; Alciphron part IV, sections 7-15; and The Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained, sections 38-40.

46. It might be objected that the matterist could accept this analogy with human discourse and maintain that God's ideas are conveyed via material substance as the sounds and marks of discourse convey our own ideas. Such an analogy has a basic flaw however. Sounds and marks are perceived, while material substance ex hypothesi, is never perceived. For further discussion on this point, and some elaboration on the parallel between divine and human discourse, see "Berkeley's Metaphysical Grammar" by Colin Turbayne in Berkeley: Principles of Human Knowledge, Text and Critical Essays, edited by Colin Turbayne (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 3-36.


48. Someone might object that Berkeley's account seems unbiblical because there is no scriptural reference to God's "private ideas". I know of at least one passage which suggests otherwise. In 1 Corinthians 2:11 Paul writes "no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God".


50. Dialogues, p. 123.
51. Ibid., p. 121.
52. McCracken, p. 288.
53. Dialogues, p. 69.
55. Romans 1:20.
Among orthodox Christian theologians this intimate relation between God and his creation is perhaps expressed most emphatically by John Calvin who, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, writes “I confess, of course, that it can be said reverently, provided that it proceeds from a reverent mind, that nature is God; but because it is a harsh and improper saying, since nature is rather the order prescribed by God, it is harmful in such weighty matters, in which special devotion is due, to involve God confusedly in the inferior course of his works” (Book 1, chapter 6). Notice that Calvin’s position here makes much better theological sense under a Berkeleyan conception of nature as God’s thoughts (since God, like we humans, is, in a sense, his thoughts) than from the perspective of a theologically orthodox matterist, for whom the notion of identifying God with corporeal substance would be heretical.

Lamentations 3:37-38.

Isaiah 45:7.

Colossians 1:17.

The determinism implicit in Berkeley’s immaterialism leads him headlong into the problem of the freedom of the will, a problem which he never saw fit to address directly except for some short passages in *Siris* and his notebooks. This lacuna, however, does not present a difficulty peculiar to Berkeley’s metaphysics, but is shared by all proponents of theological determinism. On this matter J.O. Urmson notes that “Berkeley himself would have admitted that he had no clear answer to [the problem of freedom] but that it, too, was one which was common to all and in no way a special problem for him.” See Urmson’s *Berkeley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 64-66.

See, for example, *Alciphron* IV, 14 where he remarks that the language of the deity “is equivalent to a constant creation, betokening an immediate act of power and providence.”


*Principles*, p. 37.

Ibid.


A.D. Ritchie illustrates Berkeley’s doctrine of perpetual creation with the analogy of a symphony conductor. He writes, “for Berkeley God is now and everywhere actively creating. The harmony which a conductor can produce by means of his orchestra and their instruments is not produced instantaneously nor once only, nor once and for all, but is being produced anew during each performance.... [This analogy] could be slightly improved if we assumed that the conductor was also a composer and also could leave the players to improvise occasionally. Thus no performance would be a repetition but each one a new work.” *Berkeley: A Reappraisal* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), p. 126. Ritchie’s analogy surely provides an accurate and instructive simile for Berkeley’s metaphysics, but like Turbayne I prefer the metaphor of speech, for it affords less strained parallels and it is Berkeley’s own metaphor of choice.

Ritchie, p. 128-129.

*Principles*, p. 69.