

1-1-1997

## Berkeley On The Works Of The Six Days

Lynn Cates

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

---

### Recommended Citation

Cates, Lynn (1997) "Berkeley On The Works Of The Six Days," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol14/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

# BERKELEY ON THE WORK OF THE SIX DAYS

Lynn D. Cates

In the *Three Dialogues*, Hylas challenges Philonous to give a plausible account of the mosaic account of creation in subjective idealistic terms. Strangely, when faced with two alternative strategies, Berkeley chooses the less viable option and explicates the mosaic account of creation in terms of *perceptibility*. I shall show that Berkeley's account of creation trivializes the affair, if it does not fail outright.

## I.

In any account of creation, one must first consider whether orthodoxy is important. If retaining orthodoxy is important, then that account is faced with certain constraints. Two such constraints are the denial of the doctrine of eternal creation, and the strong immutability thesis.

The doctrine of eternal creation is perhaps best characterized by the following proposition:

- (1) The created universe has always been in the act of being created, is now being created, and shall always be in the act of being created.

Creation here is not to be confused with *conservation* or *preservation*. These refer to God's retaining in being that which came to be at a specific time. Creation on the orthodox view is regarded as both *ex nihilo* and as having a beginning in time. The orthodox Christian theist must either reject (1) or else abandon orthodoxy.

The strong immutability thesis is this:

- (2) There can be no change in God except in his relations to creatures.

Hence, accepting (2), one cannot hold, for example, that God changes his mind, or that there is a change in God's substance. One can, however, hold (2) and allow that God is related to some creature, *x*, at time *t*, as, say, judge-to-condemned-party; but, that at some  $t' > t$ , he is related to *x* as, say, judge-to-acquitted-party. Such a change in relationship indicates



no real change in God, substantial or mental.

(2) must not be confused with the weak immutability thesis:

(3) There can be no change in God except mental or in relations to creatures.

(3), then, would allow God to change his mind and still be counted as immutable, whereas (2) would not.

Does Berkeley deny (1) and accept (2)? Clearly he must insofar as he wishes to remain orthodox.<sup>1</sup> So, in that case, the denial of (1) and the acceptance of (2) shall serve as parameters for Berkeley's account of creation.

## II.

Berkeley, through Philonous, explains creation like this:

[I]f I had been present at the creation, I should have seen things produced into being—that is become perceptible—in the order prescribed by the sacred historian. . . .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 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. 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.<sup>2</sup>

On this account, creation is the perceptibility of the archetypal ideas in God's mind by finite spirits.

Given this account, Berkeley has two options. First, he can define 'perceptible' or 'perceivable' in this way:

Perceptible<sub>1</sub> =df. "Actually perceived by at least one finite spirit."

Here 'perceptible' collapses into 'perceived'. If Berkeley accepts this definition, his account of creation faces no extraordinary problems, and at one point, he suggests his accepting this definition as a possibility. When challenged by Hylas that his account of creation commits Philonous to hold that it is "impossible the creation of any inanimate creatures should precede that of man,"<sup>3</sup> Berkeley wisely has Philonous retort that, "created beings might begin to exist in the mind of other created intelligences, beside men."<sup>4</sup> So, on this definition, creation would amount to a sharing of the archetypal ideas in God's mind with created finite spirits—in this case, angels—and their simultaneously actually perceiving those ideas.

But Berkeley seems compelled to show that his creation account can

succeed, even without such finite spirits. His argument suggests a second possible definition for perceptible:

Perceptible<sub>2</sub> =df. "Able to be perceived by at least one finite spirit, even though there are no such existing."

The trouble with 'perceptible<sub>2</sub>' is this. Berkeley holds that the archetypal ideas in God's mind are eternal.<sup>5</sup> Hence, if these ideas are always perceptible, then, given that Berkeley is thinking of creation in terms of perceptibility, Berkeley must be committed to (1). But as we argued above, the orthodox Christian theist must deny (1). Therefore, Berkeley—if he wishes to be orthodox—cannot allow eternal perceptibility.

Berkeley's problem, then, is this. He must hold:

(4) There was a time before the six days creation in which the archetypal ideas were both unperceived and not perceptible.

(4), of course, must be understood in reference to finite spirits, not God. Moreover, Berkeley must hold:

(5) After the work of the first day of creation, but before the work of the sixth day (when finite spirits were created), the archetypal ideas were unperceived but perceptible.

Finally he must hold:

(6) After the work of the sixth day of creation, archetypal ideas were both perceived and perceptible.

Clearly, Berkeley must propose some criterion to account for the difference in the relationship of possible finite spirits to the archetypal ideas at the points reflected in (5) and (6). (He cannot, however, propose a change in the ideas themselves since to do so would entail a denial of (2) and consequently an abandonment of orthodoxy.) It is easy to account for the change reflected in (6)—finite spirits came to be. It is not easy to account for the change reflected in (5).

A try which fails is to claim that (5) is reducible to:

(7) On the first day of creation, God began to think of the archetypal ideas.

(7) fails because it entails a denial of (2). It cannot be repaired by claiming that this "beginning to think" is the result of an eternal willing, because even if that were to allow (2) to be saved, yet it would undermine the empiricist claim, made by Locke against the cartesian account of innate ideas, that one cannot make sense of unthought ideas. Since Berkeley wishes to defend empiricism, this will not do.

Another try that fails is to explicate (5) in terms of:

(8) God, on the first day of creation, became willing to share the archetypal ideas with finite spirits.

because, again, such would entail a denial of (2). Hence we must emend (8) to:

(8') God eternally willed that, on the first day of creation, the archetypal ideas should be shared with finite spirits.

(8') obviously fails since, by hypothesis, there were no finite spirits. So we are driven to emend (8') to an account of the creation as:

(8'') God eternally willed that, on the first day of creation, the archetypal ideas should be *shareable* with finite spirits.

Clearly, to explicate creation in terms of (8'') is to trivialize the whole account of creation. To see why this is so, compare this account to both the realist account of creation and the subjective idealist account of creation with finite spirits existing. On the realist account, God created material objects. By hypothesis, such items require no perceivers in order to exist. Hence, with or without finite spirits the mosaic narrative, replete with the cataclysmic upheavals entailed by ex nihilo creation, is preserved.

Similarly, the subjective idealist account of creation, with finite spirits existing, preserves the profundity of the mosaic account, for finite spirits are perceiving stars, trees, and rocks coming into existence.

On the other hand, creation in terms of (8'') amounts to God's eternally willing that the archetypal ideas begin to have the property of standing in a possible but not actual relation (if, indeed, *shareable* can thus be reasonably explicated—it is not clear to me that it can). But surely unpacking creation in terms of a possible but unactual relation trivializes the mosaic account.

But worse follows if, as I suspect, *shareable* cannot thus be reasonably explicated. In that case, Berkeley's account fails. His dilemma comes to this. On the hypothesis that there were no finite spirits until day six, he cannot hold that creation is a change in the relationship of the archetypal ideas to finite spirits, because the other relatum is missing until day six. Nor can Berkeley posit any real change in the archetypal ideas since to do so entails denial of (2). Finally, Berkeley cannot allow for a change on the part of non-existent perceivers. Yet there must be some characteristic of the archetypal ideas whereby one distinguishes a shareable idea from an idea which is not shareable. Unfortunately for Berkeley, it is not clear what this characteristic might be.

Berkeley therefore must accept 'perceptible' in terms of perceptible, and argue for finite spirits preceding the six days creation. But this is easily done and poses no special problems.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

1. An interesting question is Why would Berkeley wish to be orthodox? Although the question is beyond the scope of this paper, I can say he *was* orthodox. Indeed, his denominational preference—Church of Ireland, in the Anglo-Catholic tradition—indicates his wish to be orthodox. Add to this his concern in writing the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, namely to combat atheism, and his care in answering metaphysical questions about the mosaic account of creation in such a way as to attempt to preserve the traditional account, and Berkeley comes off looking extremely orthodox indeed.

2. George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* in *Berkeley's philosophical writings* ed. David M. Armstrong. (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1965) p. 214.

3. Loc. cit.

4. Ibid., pp. 214 & 15.

5. Ibid., p. 217.

6. I would like to thank Dr. William Wainwright and two anonymous referees for valuable suggestions on this paper.