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## Berkeley's *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* and His Immaterialism

### Introduction

Compare two following passages:

The magnitude of the object which exists without the mind, and is at distance, continues always invariably the same: But the visible object still changing as you approach to, or recede from, the tangible object, it hath no fixed and determinate greatness. Whenever, therefore, we speak of the magnitude of anything, for instance a tree or a house, we must mean the tangible magnitude; otherwise there can be nothing steady and free from ambiguity spoken of it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> George Berkeley, "An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision", in: *The Works of George Berkeley*, eds. Arthur Aston Luce, Thomas E. Jessop, vol. 1 (London–Edinburgh–Paris–Melbourne–Toronto–New York: Thomas Nelson, 1948–1985), 74–75. All of the following passages are taken from volumes 1 and 2 of the above publication. Considering the reader's comfort, we decided to provide further only the titles of works and numbers of paragraphs.

It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, that, houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding. But with how great an assurance and acquiescence soever this principle may be entertained in the world; yet whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question, may if I mistake not, perceive it to involve a manifest contradiction. For what are the forementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense, and what we do perceive besides our own ideas or sensations; and is it not plainly repugnant that any one of these or any combination of them should exist unperceived?

The former is taken from *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (§ 55) and openly states the existence of things without the mind. The latter, an excerpt from *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (§ 4), published approximately a year later, clearly negates such a possibility and accuses the opposite view of contradiction. One may thence ask why two passages taken from works by the same philosopher and published so closely in time are in such radical opposition? Perhaps the simplest explanation would be to recognize that ideas tend to evolve or even change significantly over time and assume that an example of such a change is what we observe here. However, consider the third passage:

Impossible any thing Besides that w<sup>ch</sup> thinks & is thought on should exist,

and, for an even stronger effect, the fourth:

But perhaps some man may say an inert thoughtless substance may exist tho' not extended, moved etc. but wth other properties whereof we have no idea. But even this I shall demonstrate to be Impossible (...).

Unfortunately for our working hypothesis concerning the evolution of ideas, both passages come from the *Philosophical Commentaries* (§§ 437, 597) written a few years before the *Essay* was published. Perhaps one could put forward yet another hypothesis and assume that Berkeley, so young at that time, had not yet reached his philosophical maturity and switched back and forth with regard to the existence of things without the mind. Or one

could instead ignore completely two preceding passages, for they are not taken from a work meant for publication, but from a personal diary, and in personal diaries, people tend to write various, not necessarily well-considered remarks. Thence, it is particularly easy to extract from the abundance of materialistic comments a few that seem to negate the existence of matter. Perhaps they were written at the spur of the moment and are not necessarily representative of contemporary views?

In section one, we try to show that it is not the case and that *Commentaries* are filled with notes making use of the immaterialistic thesis and hence endorse it *explicite* or *implicite*.

Section two focuses on *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*. There we try to present the role of the *Essay* in the mature immaterialistic philosophy of Berkeley and prove the insignificance of materialistic thesis superficially endorsed in the *Essay*, with respect to other, undoubtedly more important ideas therein expounded.

In section three, we make an attempt at solving the problem of inconsistency of the two opening passages in a manner quite different from the one already proposed. Then we concentrate on the notion of a thing: what might trees, houses, or carriages be if not independent things in the outside world, the substrates of qualities that ensure the stability of experience through their independent existence. In the opening passage from *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, one may notice the problem of instability of visual objects and visual experience. It seems justified to assume that after reducing the external objects to mental ideas, the same instability threatens tangible objects and tangible experience on the whole. Thus, where can a philosopher find the desired stability? We try to answer this question in the final part of section three and conclude the article with a summary.

## 1. Berkeley's *Philosophical Commentaries*

Berkeley's *Philosophical Commentaries* constitute a form of a personal, intellectual diary not meant for publication. Dated by some as far back as

1706–1708<sup>2</sup> (1707–1708<sup>3</sup> by others), *Commentaries* comprise 888 entries intended to be a form of preparation, a raw material for the first two works published not long afterwards: *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709) and *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710). The so-called “Notebook B” contains ideas mirrored particularly in the *Essay*, whereas older, as it turns out, “Notebook A” corresponds to the contents of the *Treatise*. *Commentaries*, written a couple of years before revealing the full-blown immaterialistic doctrine in the *Treatise*, and more importantly even before the publication of the *Essay*, already contain the most important theses of the mature Berkeley’s immaterialistic philosophy and some of its arguments. Some of the arguments were developed in later works. Some, although reused or “recycled”, seem to have lost their meanings *qua* positive philosophical arguments. For instance, an argument from perceptual relativity in later works seems to be destructive<sup>4,5</sup> rather than constructive – it is used as a weapon aimed at the proponents of the division of qualities into primary and secondary. Of course, it would be utterly false to state that all the pieces of the 1710 doctrine are there in the first pages of the *Commentaries*. An analysis reveals an undisputable evolution of ideas from the first to the last entries. Some alterations are of rather terminological nature, as is the case with the substitution of the term *person* with the terms *mind*, *spirit* or *soul*, perhaps due to the ecclesiastical associations of the former or the term *thought* with the term *idea*. Other changes are of more theoretical significance and concern the conception of the soul: at the beginning, the soul seems to be a congeries of perceptions, then a *purus actus* (§ 701), or a manner of existence of unperceived ideas: a counterfactual conception (§ 293a) is replaced with the idea of the actively perceiving God. At the same time,

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<sup>2</sup> Robert McKim, “Berkeley’s Notebooks”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 63.

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Aston Luce, Thomas E. Jessop, “Editor’s Introduction” to “Philosophical Commentaries”, in: *The Works of George Berkeley*, vol. 1, eds. Arthur Aston Luce, Thomas E. Jessop (London–Edinburgh–Paris–Melbourne–Toronto–New York: Thomas Nelson, 1948–1985), 4.

<sup>4</sup> See Robert G. Muehlmann, “The Role of Perceptual Relativity in Berkeley’s Philosophy”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 29 (1991): 397–425.

<sup>5</sup> In § 15 of the *Principles* Berkeley admits that argument from perceptual relativity does not prove “that there is no extension or colour in an outward object”; however, arguments introduced in previous paragraphs do so.

one is forced to admit that all these minor and major modifications occur on the permanent basis of immaterialism. Undoubtedly at the time of creating the *Commentaries*, and perhaps a few years before, as Luce claims, Berkeley was an immaterialist. Textual evidence is overwhelming – the reader finds immaterialistic hints in §§ 18–20, 26, 35, 55, 71, 74, 131, 128, 270, 288a, 289, 290, 342, 359, 391, 429, 429a, 437, 473a, 517, 597, 606, 874, 878. Some entries proclaim the non-existence of matter directly:

I wonder how men cannot see a truth so obvious, as that extension cannot exist without a thinking substance (§ 270),

others point to consequences of the materialistic thesis that are paradoxical or dangerous to religion:

The great danger of making extension exist without the mind. in y<sup>i</sup> if it does it must be acknowledg'd infinite immutable eternal etc. w<sup>ch</sup> will be to make either God extended (w<sup>ch</sup> I think dangerous) or an eternal, immutable, infinite, increate being beside God (§ 290),

or consider grave implications leading to scepticism:

The supposition that things are distinct from Ideas takes away all real truth & consequently brings in a Universal Scepticism, since all our knowledge & contemplation is confin'd barely to our own Ideas (§ 606).

All of the above entries are signed with three marginal letters: “M” for *matter* (§§ 19, 71, 74, 128, 131, 270, 288a, 289, 290, 359, 391, 517, 597, 874), “E” for *existence* (§§ 429, 429a, 437), and “X” (§§ 18, 26, 35, 55, 342, 359) the meaning of which Berkeley, unfortunately, did not reveal. R. McKim proposes to understand „X” as an abbreviation for *extension*,<sup>6</sup> and it seems to be a reasonable proposition. For us, an important fact is that the “X” sign is not, in general, recognized as a sign suggesting Berkeley’s second thoughts with regard to the value of a given entry, for instance is the case with “+” the sign. There is no clear agreement as to the exact interpretation of “+”. However,

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<sup>6</sup> McKim, “Berkeley’s Notebooks”: 65.

minimally, it tends to be understood as a signal of hesitation or doubt toward entries such marked, and maximally an eventual rejection thereof.<sup>7</sup>

Our selection of paragraphs is not complete; nonetheless, it seems to be sufficient to realize that immaterialism marks out the axis or the core of *Philosophical Commentaries*. The doctrine is more or less ready and deeply grounded in Berkeley's worldview. The only things left to specify, and partly specified in the last paragraphs, are the issue of psychology and the problem of the existence of the unperceived. As is well known, the complete Berkeley's psychological theory offering a thorough conception of the soul was never created or published. Berkeley purportedly had the second volume of the *Treatise* discussing the nature of the soul, ready, but unfortunately, he claimed to have lost the manuscript during his Italian voyage. Furthermore, he lacked patience or determination to write the same thing twice.<sup>8</sup>

As noted in the introduction, the problem of the existence of external objects in the *Essay* gains, in this light, a new meaning. Undoubtedly, Berkeley in 1706 was an immaterialist. From the first to last paragraphs of the *Commentaries*, he clearly negates the possibility of the existence of matter as well as things without the mind. He further points to the threats of the opposite view. And yet in 1709 he broadened the ontology by material objects, only to remove them anew in 1710.

## 2. Berkeley's *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*

### 2.1. Motivation

The three main sections of the *Essay* (1709), concerning the perception of distance, magnitude, and situation,<sup>9</sup> are Berkeley's original answers

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<sup>7</sup> See Mark High, Walter Ott, "The New Berkeley", in: *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 34 (2004): 9.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Aston Luce, Thomas E. Jessop, "Editor's Introduction" to "A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge", in: *The Works of George Berkeley*, vol. 2, eds. Arthur Aston Luce, Thomas E. Jessop (London–Edinburgh–Paris–Melbourne–Toronto–New York: Thomas Nelson, 1948–1985), 5.

<sup>9</sup> The problem of distance, magnitude and situation perception is present in the contemporary literature – see Gareth Evans, "Molyneux's Question", in: Gareth Evans, *Collected Papers*

to the three notorious problems in optics, to which, according to Berkeley, contemporary theories failed to give a satisfactory solution, namely: the “Barrovian case”, the horizontal moon and the inverted retinal image.<sup>10</sup> All three are mentioned for the first time in *Philosophical Commentaries* (§§ 170–172). The common flaw of criticized geometrical theories of perception (incl. Descartes’ *Optics*, Malebranche’s *The search after truth*, Molyneux’s *Treatise of dioptrics*, Newton’s *Optics*, and Barrow’s *The Geometrical lectures*) is the attempt at expounding the perception of distance through the laws of innate geometry. One can already find the criticism of such a solution in the *Commentaries*, i.a. in §§ 195, 196, 205, 206, 210, 229. In place of different variants of geometrical theory, *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* proposes a theory we would term today psychological. The negative act of criticism of existing theories and positive act of solving up to now unsolved problems make up together the core of the *local motivation* restricted to the scope of the treatise. However, if we step beyond the treatise and examine Berkeley’s work in a wider perspective, we might be able to perceive a particular hierarchy of motivations or projects, where some of lesser importance at the bottom are subjugated to the others of greater significance at the top. In his first period of life, Berkeley’s attention was mainly focused on immaterialism,<sup>11</sup> for which the *Essay* serves a preliminary function by introducing the most important elements of the mature theory, that is: (1) the heterogeneity of sight and touch, (2) the language of ideas, and (3) antiabstractionism (§§ 122–127 of the *Essay*). Immaterialistic project is, in turn, subjugated to antiscepticism and, most importantly – religion. One can distinctly see the significance of

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(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 364–399, or Alva Noë, “Précis of *Action in Perception: Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*”, in: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 76 (2008) and for short discussion of many theories: Robert Briscoe, Rick Grush, “Action-based Theories of Perception”, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2020 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur Aston Luce, Thomas E. Jessop, “Editor’s Introduction” to “An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision”, in: *The Works of George Berkeley*, vol. 1, eds. Arthur Aston Luce, Thomas E. Jessop (London–Edinburgh–Paris–Melbourne–Toronto–New York: Thomas Nelson, 1948–1985), 144–145. For a brief and clear presentation of the above problems see Przemysław Spryszak, *Filozofia percepcji George’a Berkeley’a* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2004), 27–28.

<sup>11</sup> David Berman, “Berkeley’s Life and Works”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. K. P. Winkler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13.

God in the conception of the language of ideas (§§ 140, 144, 147 in the *Essay*) – this is not a language created by people, but given from the outside, and hence presuming the Giver.<sup>12</sup> Threats posed to religion by the materialistic doctrine and its possible sceptical consequences the reader may find in §§ 824 and 825 of the *Commentaries*, and later in §§ 92, 93 of the *Principles*.

As already noted, we can classify the motivations for *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* into two groups: a) *local motivations*, i.e., discarding contemporary geometrical theories of perception and solving previously unsolved problems. Solving problems clearly shows the significance of the *Essay*, the beneficial consequences offered by the author's perspective. And then via the thesis of heterogeneity, conception of the language of ideas, and criticism of abstract ideas, we get to b) *global motivations* – grounding immaterialistic philosophy, overcoming scepticism, and finally consolidating religion.

## 2.2. Geometrical Theories (GT) According to the *Essay*

My design is to shew the manner wherein we perceive by sight the distance, magnitude, and situation of the objects. Also to consider the difference there is betwixt the ideas of sight and touch, and whether there be idea common to both senses.

These are the ends Berkeley invokes in the opening of the *Essay* (§1). Enclosed in the first sentence, three issues constitute the core of the positive, constructive part of the work and correspond to three contemporary optical problems mentioned above. In the following part, we will concentrate only on elements common to all three sections and, for the sake of demonstration, merely touch on the problem of distance perception – matters of perception of magnitude and situation will be of lesser importance for us.

In the 1710–1713 works and in the immaterialistic point of view, the negative end hidden in the first sentence of the quotation, namely refuting geometrical theories, is of greater significance. The positive end, i.e., constructing the theory, serves the negative one, fills the void left by it, constitutes a pretext to slowly introduce the broader project.

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<sup>12</sup> Arthur Aston Luce, Thomas E. Jessop, "Editor's Introduction" to "An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision", 152–153.



The conceptual framework for geometrical theories (henceforth: GT) is the thesis that we perceive distance through lines and angles forming between the eyes of the observer and the observed object; a geometrical model based on the innate, *a priori*, and necessary connections between ideas and objects should guarantee the certainty of cognition – inference from the idea to the object is, in fact, of mathematical sort.<sup>13</sup> The reader may find a precise account of GT in §§ 4–7 and 19.

Let us see to what conclusions can GT drive us. Consider the argument: if distance is perceived by means of lines standing between the eyes and the object and GT is correct, then there are objects without the mind of the observer, objects from which the reflected rays of light head towards the eyes. GT is then interlinked with a strong ontological declaration: there is a material world filled with material objects external to the mind. A big step towards immaterialism is then refuting the GT, that is a theory presupposing materialism and then proposing a theory as good as the old one, or even a better one, as the success in solving the problems unsolved by current theories shows.

The second sentence in the above quotation reveals the intention of an immaterialistic project. Together with the deconstruction of GT, it seems to have much greater value than the technicalities of perception. If visual and tangible ideas are utterly different and present us with two different extensions, shapes, and motions, then it is absurd, it seems, to postulate one object for them, which, according to the materialistic theories, would link diverse properties. According to materialism, it is the material object that has extension, shape and motion, and different modalities just introduce them to the mind in an idiosyncratic manner (§ 48). We then see, already in the first paragraph of the *Essay* aided by the interpretive apparatus set on later works, the above-mentioned complex of *local* and *global motivations*: refuting GT and introducing the heterogeneity of ideas lead to undermining the base of materialistic theories, theories of the external object. *Essay* thus prepares the ground for immaterialism – all the necessary tools will be ready to use no later than in 1709. The job of the *Treatise* will be to openly expel from the

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<sup>13</sup> Colin M. Turbayne, “Berkeley and Molyneux on Retinal Images”, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 16 (1955): 351, also see § 24 of the *Essay*.

world objects of tangible ideas – the move will attenuate yet not disclaim the heterogeneity thesis.

The criticism of GT begins in §§ 10–14. It is based on three related premises. The first one the reader finds in § 2:

It is, I think, agreed by all that distance, of itself, and immediately, cannot be seen. For distance being a line directed end-wise to the eye, it projects only one point in the fund of the eye, which point remains invariably the same, whether the distance be longer or shorter.

The second (§ 9) is the generalized version of the first: an idea not perceived directly must be perceived via another idea.<sup>14</sup> And the third: an idea perceived indirectly cannot serve as a means of perceiving another idea. And now, Berkeley notices, if lines and angles cannot be perceived directly, how can we perceive distance by means of lines and angles? Further, one can find objections based on a) the non-existence of lines and angles in nature (§ 14) – these are technical constructs of opticians; b) three unsolved optical problems: the “Barrovian case”, horizontal moon illusion, and inverted retinal image, and lastly c) the explanatory insufficiency of GT: for the sake of argument, assume real existence of lines and angles in nature and suppose that it is, in fact, by means of lines and angles that we judge distance. However, two different configurations of lines and angles may lead to two identical pictures on the retina (§ 35). In the case of divergent rays, the focus will fall behind the retina. In the case of convergent rays, before the retina. Yet, in either case, the rays will take up the same location and space on the retina, and thus, the picture will be equally vague.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> One finds the idea of founding knowledge upon the directly perceived in the contemporary literature in form of sense-data theory – see Alfred J. Ayer, “The Terminology of Sense-Data”, *Mind* 54 (1945): 289–312; George E. Moore, “Some Judgments of Perception”, in: *Proceedings of Aristotelian Society* (1918): 1–28; Henry H. Price, *Perception* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1964), 1–20; Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). For criticism of sense-data theory see Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality* (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1991), 127–196.

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that the ambiguity of data and relations between cause and effect in perception remains to be a theoretical problem – see e.g., Jakob Hohwy, *The Predictive Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 13.

### 2.3. Positive Part of the *Essay* – Berkeley's Theory

The outline of the positive conception of distance perception one can find as early as in § 3; however, for a more comprehensive discussion, consider § 20:

From all which it follows that the judgment we make of the distance of an object, viewed with both eyes, is entirely the result of experience. If we had not constantly found certain sensations arising from the various disposition of the eyes, attended with certain degrees of distance, we should never make those sudden judgments from them concerning the distance of the objects; no more than we would pretend to judge of a men's thoughts by his pronouncing words we had never hear before.

According to Berkeley, experience is a necessary condition for distance perception. Like the GT authors, Berkeley adopts an inferential model of distance perception, yet the role played in GT by the innate geometry is here played by experience. Consequently, that entails a different model of inference. As a reminder: according to GT, inference from the ideas to the object was to be of mathematical sort, based on the necessary links between the former and the latter. In Berkeley's world, there is no place for such necessary links – interrelations between the ideas are merely accidental, and solely experience instructs us that an idea Y is connected to an idea X: every time we saw the idea X, the idea Y followed or accompanied it. Thus, whenever we experienced the vague idea of object X, object X was close, but there is no reason to assume a distinct visual idea cannot be connected with a short distance. Forged in experience, the association of ideas causes the prediction of the idea Y whenever the idea X is experienced. Over time the link becomes so strong and the inference mechanism so quick and automatic that we erroneously begin to identify one idea with the other. Does such a model of perception, based on the associations of unnecessary relations, impose any restrictions on reality? Yes, it does.

The regularity of patterns of ideas seems to be a necessary condition for forming generalizations of experiences and psychological consolidations of relations between particular ideas, leading finally to automatic, unintentional inferences. In other words: the idea X must sufficiently often precede the

idea Y for it to be possible to observe the link and, so to say, trust it, rely on it. However, if ideas are not interlinked by necessity, whence is the regularity? Trying to answer the question, we finally reach elements of fundamental meaning, such as the conception of the natural law governing the succession and concomitance of ideas in grand, ceaselessly flowing and time-measuring progression of ideas – a conception already hinted in § 45, yet fully developed later, in *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*.

Still, the temporal relations between ideas are not necessary – God, the supreme lawgiver, arranged ideas into particular sequences according to His will, yet he could have arranged them quite differently, into alternative sequences, which to us would seem as natural and self-evident as the present ones (§§ 63–64). Real patterns of ideas constitute a kind of nomological or statistical law, not the logical or mathematical necessity as opticians postulate – God is free. The second element, tightly linked with the already sketched voluntaristic conception of the God-lawgiver, is the aforementioned conception of the language of ideas most clearly expressed in § 147:

Upon the whole, I think we may fairly conclude that the proper objects of vision constitute a universal language of the Author of nature, whereby we are instructed how to regulate our actions in order to attain those things that are necessary to the preservation and well-being of our bodies, as also to avoid whatever may be hurtful and destructive of them. It is by their information that we are principally guided in all the transactions and concerns of life. And the manner wherein they signify and mark unto us the objects which are at a distance is the same with that of languages and signs of human appointment, which do not suggest the things signified by any likeness or identity of nature, but only by a habitual connexion that experience had made us to observe between them.

According to the conception of the language of visual ideas, visual ideas are signs of appropriate tangible ideas as words are signs of concepts (§ 51), or face redness is a sign of shame (§§ 23, 65). A visual idea or a collection of visual ideas, on the grounds of prior experience of constant coexistence with particular tangible ideas, automatically induces in the subject a chain of tangible ideas related to covering the appropriate distance (kinesthetic sensations) and to the particular tangible feel of the object on the other (§ 45).

However, just as the physical form of the sign in a natural language is not its meaning, the visual ideas are not tangible – the thesis of heterogeneity of ideas one can spot in § 49 (and further in §§ 121–146):

But if we take a close and accurate view of things, it must be acknowledged that we never see and feel one and the same object. That which is seen is one thing, and that which is felt is another. If the visible figure and extension be not the same with tangible figure and extension, we are not to infer that one and the same thing has divers extensions. The true consequence is that the objects of sight and touch are two distinct things. It may perhaps require some thought rightly to conceive this distinction (...).

Because of the automatism of association, or rather, the automatism of sign interpretation,<sup>16</sup> realizing the difference requires effort. The sign, for the person thoroughly familiar with the code vanishes, becomes transparent, does not attract attention, and immediately refers one to the proper meaning.<sup>17</sup> The same goes for visual ideas: a visual idea refers immediately to the sequence of tangible ideas and leads the perceiver to false conclusions, namely, identifying visual ideas with tangible ones. The next step is only to believe in the existence of material objects in the external world (§ 145). In § 59, one can find the explanation of the transparency of visual ideas along with the harbinger of ideas of embodiment and enactivism, popular in modern cognitive science:

We regard the objects that environ us in proportion as they are adapted to benefit or injure our own bodies, and thereby produce in our minds the sensations of pleasure or pain. Now bodies operating on our organs, by an immediate application, and the hurt or advantage arising there-from, depending altogether on the tangible, and not at all on the visible, qualities of any object.

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<sup>16</sup> See Margaret Atherton, “Berkeley’s theory of vision and its reception”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 109.

<sup>17</sup> See Kenneth P. Winkler, “Berkeley and the doctrine of signs”, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 140–141.

According to Berkeley, the most significant phenomena in perception are those that may bring beneficial or harmful consequences – perception is set on action, maximization of benefits and minimization of harms. Perception is not a passive reception, nor a passive mirroring of the external world for the sake of pure cognition, but an active process of constructing the reality, conjoining ideas into sequences, and predicting the most probable sets of ideas in the light of the perceiver's experience and a particular stimulus. The structure of reality is such that only tangible ideas can act on our bodies and cause pleasure or distress; visual ideas, on the other hand, can only inform us about possible bodily sensations. And the value visual ideas undoubtedly have is derived from the fact that they do so in advance – a visual idea of fire, along with my experience of many encounters with fire, is all I need to keep myself in a proper distance.

To recall, the existence of language generates the question of its origins – the problem closely related to the above-discussed natural law guaranteeing the stability of reference. The language of ideas, i.e., the language expressing relations between ideas, is, according to Berkeley, like the natural law, arbitrary, conventional. However, because people are not responsible for forging this universal convention, common for the whole world, there must be another creator who kindly assigned the visual ideas to appropriate tangible ideas, the former constituting the signs for the latter. Thus, we begin with language and end with its author – God.<sup>18</sup>

In subsequent sections, we come across various mechanisms of distance perception – the sensations caused by the convergent or divergent position of the eyeballs, where position depends on the distance between the subject and the object, with yet another sensation of straining one's eyes in case of near objects playing an additional role (§ 24). The second mechanism of estimating distance is using the degree of the object's fuzziness – an object close to the observer appears vague, becoming more and more distinct with increasing distance (§§ 21–22, 35, 36–38). With the help of the second mechanism, Berkeley solves Barrow's problem introduced in § 24.

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<sup>18</sup> Atherton, "Berkeley's theory of vision and its reception", 96, 98.

For us, the general theses making up the base of a full-blown immaterialistic system are more important than matters of purely technical sort. To recap: we saw how, step by step, Berkeley introduced pieces we can find in his later works. Starting with a thesis of non-direct distance perception widely accepted in contemporary philosophy, through the role of experience in cognition, moving on to the conception of the natural law and complementary conception of the language of ideas fully expressed in the *Principles*, and finally reaching the thesis of heterogeneity and anti-abstractionism (§§ 123–127).

Notice that the above-mentioned theses of greatest philosophical significance do not, in any way, implicate material objects – to have them in one's ontology one needs to introduce them in a separate supposition. Furthermore, Berkeley does precisely that in § 55. However, to stress it adequately: assuming the existence of material objects is not necessary for the remaining theses. It strengthens them in a way, but they can and, in fact, do manage without it. In the next step, in the *Principles*, Berkeley eliminates the material objects and sets forth a purely immaterialistic system.

### 3. Berkeley's Tactics – The Problem of Objects Without the Mind

Having already discussed the three most important works for our cause, to wit: *Philosophical Commentaries*, *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, and *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, and having recognized 1707–1708 Berkeley as an immaterialist, a philosopher, apart from minor details, rather mature and consistent in building a philosophical system, one concept still requires a closer look: the existence of things in the external world, without the mind of the observer – an idea endorsed in the *Essay*. In the beginning, we turned down the evolution of the views hypothesis, but we did not offer anything in its stead. We will do that now.

### 3.1. Berkeley, the Tactician

The strongest hypothesis widely accepted in contemporary literature<sup>19</sup> is the hypothesis expressed for the first time in full form by Arthur A. Luce: Berkeley, at least since 1706, was an immaterialist. Accepting the existence of external objects in the *Essay* constitutes a manifestation of the strategy used by the author, who, considering the delicacy of matters, decided to introduce the doctrine of immaterialism slowly, step by step, first convincing a potential reader of the validity of series of premises, and then, obtaining a strong foothold of the validity of the key thesis. Consider the evidence for Luce's interpretation. Undoubtedly, the doctrine of immaterialism was not (and would not have been) popular in contemporary philosophy. Although the ground was partly prepared by the *Essay, Principles'* immaterialism was not received well<sup>20</sup> – contrary to the ideas of a secondary or ancillary role. The same is true for other key components of Berkeley's philosophy. The conceptions of heterogeneity of ideas, the language of nature, and finally, the continuous creation of sequences of ideas by the omnipotent God were ignored or criticized<sup>21</sup> in contemporary philosophy. Berkeley, esteemed as the author of the psychological theory of visual perception (yet understood in terms of association of ideas, not the language of ideas), was, on the other hand, condemned as the author of a new wild ontology, epistemology, and radical theology. In § 406 of the *Commentaries*, we can notice that Berkeley was indeed expecting criticism: "I know there is a mighty sect of Men will oppose me". Because of that, the author camouflaged strongly controversial claims in the *Essay*.

David Berman mentions three areas of Berkeley's strategic dissembling. The most important for us is the second one – regarding the existence of the external, tangible objects. The third one concerns the Author of the language of nature: in the first edition of the *Essay* (1709), Berkeley writes about the language of nature, not about the language of the Author of nature – such a version the reader finds in subsequent editions of the work and *Theory of*

<sup>19</sup> See Berman, "Berkeley's life and works", 25–26.

<sup>20</sup> See Luce, Jessop, "Editor's Introduction" to "An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision", 150; Atherton, "Berkeley's theory of vision and its reception", 95; Harry M. Bracken, *The Early Reception of Berkeley's Immaterialism 1710–1733* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), 2–22.

<sup>21</sup> Atherton, "Berkeley's theory of vision and its reception", 102–106, 120.



*Vision Vindicated and Explained*. Perhaps Berkeley was concerned about the reception of such a radical theistic view postulating constant communication between God and man. The first area of dissembling regarding immediate objects of perception we simply skip, as Berman did not elaborate on the subject satisfactorily.<sup>22</sup>

Let us turn to records now. In § 185 of the *Commentaries*, we find the following note:

Tis prudent to correct men's mistakes without altering their language. This makes truth glide into their souls insensibly.

Here, we can clearly spot the tactical design to slowly “glide” or slip the truth into the readers’ minds, probably by beginning the reasoning with widely accepted, general truths, continuing with slightly more contentious, and ending finally with highly controversial ones. Berkeley’s indubitable strategic genius manifests itself in juggling widely accepted, philosophically uncontroversial or insignificantly controversial ideas, omitting some of their aspects, making numerous appeals to experience, common sense and conceivability, and in slowly and carefully treading via successive trivial premises towards a radical conclusion. The argument steps are not always philosophically or logically valid, but they are surely appealing to the imagination and intellect. Berkeley is methodical and precise. He discusses every element of the reasoning and continuously repeats the truths he believes he already proved. The reader instructed or admonished yet again about one or another idea nods wearily and repeats with the feeling of obviousness: “Yes, yes! I know, it is the automatism of inference that is responsible for identifying visual and tangible ideas!” Following the reasoning, we finally reach a strongly controversial conclusion. However, as the poor Hylas from the dialogues, we have already accepted all the steps, and it seems impossible and irrational to withdraw now and negate the conclusion (allegedly) implicated by the premises.

To present the discussed strategy, we will now consider the argumentation in §§ 41 to 43 of the *Essay*. First, to attack GT Berkeley uses a distance version of the Molyneux problem: could a congenitally blind man perceive the

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<sup>22</sup> Berman, “Berkeley’s life and works”, 22.

distance immediately after recovering his sight? Remember: for the original version Molyneux and Locke gave negative answers. And so does Berkeley for his version. Thus, no controversy here. No optic axes and laws of innate geometry can help. Further, the reader comes across the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. Along with the anti-abstractionism argument and appeal to the reader's imagination, the distinction negates the external existence of primary qualities perceived by sight. From the classical version of the Molyneux problem, Berkeley derives the heterogeneity of ideas strengthened by temporary acceptance of the external existence of objects of touch – no doubt ideas are heterogeneous since one kind exists in mind and another without the mind. Later, in the *Principles*, Berkeley withdraws from the existence of external objects; however, the heterogeneity of ideas remains, except in an ontologically weaker variant – both sets of ideas exist in the mind of the observer, and the difference is derived only from the idiosyncrasy of modalities. And if we have already accepted the heterogeneity of ideas and the fact that only tangible ideas have real and direct meaning for us and for our wellness because only those affect our body, it is much easier to endorse the thesis of the language of visual ideas.

In later works, Berkeley owns up to strategic procedures. In § 44 of the *Principles*, the reader finds the following confession:

That the proper objects of sight neither exist without the mind, nor are the images of external things, was shewn even in that treatise [*in the Essay* – J. C.]. Thought throughout the same, the contrary be supposed true of tangible objects: not that to suppose that vulgar error, was necessary for establishing the notion therein laid down; but because it was beside my purpose to examine and refute it in a discourse concerning vision,

and in § 35 of *The Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained*, the author openly admits:

It seemed proper, if not unavoidable, to begin in the accustomed style of optic writers, admitting diverse things as true, which in a rigorous sense are not such, but only received by the vulgar and admitted for such. (...) And, as this work is the work of time, and done by degrees, it is extremely difficult, if at all possible, to escape the snares of popular language, and the being betrayed thereby to say things strictly speaking neither true or consistent.

The reader finds here a significant feature of the language, namely, how strongly it determines a user's ontology and how hard it is to verbally express truths incompatible with it – the problem faced by Berkeley and anyone who tries to expound his doctrine in a consistent way. Thus, when interpreting the text, we need to accept or ignore minor inconsistencies, examine it kindly, perhaps as if from the author's perspective.

In Berman's work, we find two more citations from Berkeley's concerning strategic thinking:<sup>23</sup>

He that would win another over to his opinion must seem to harmonize with him at first and humour him in his own way of talking. From my childhood, I had an unaccountable turn of thought that way.

Whatever doctrine contradicts vulgar and settled opinion had need be introduced with great caution into the world. For this reason [he says] I omitted all mention of the non-existence of matter in the title-page, dedication, preface and introduction, that so the notion might steal unawares on the reader.

Taking all the above citations into account, it seems proper to conclude the following: When publishing the *Essay*, Berkeley had already been a devoted immaterialist for at least a few years, and endorsing the existence of the external, material objects had merely been a strategic move undertaken to evade or mitigate anticipated criticism.

### 3.2. External Objects According to the *Essay* and the *Treatise*

One thing already signalled in the introduction remains to be discussed. In § 55 of the *Principles*, we saw a specific function of tangible objects: they were a kind of rigidifiers – things independent of the cognizing subject, stabilizing its experiences, things to hang all fluid, constantly changing chains of visual ideas on. Due to the ontological cut performed in the *Principles*, we got rid of said rigidifiers; however, if a purposeful, rational action in the world is to be possible, we need to fill the blank space we left behind. But what, indeed, Berkeley uses to fill it? From § 55, we know these cannot be

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<sup>23</sup> Berman "Berkeley's life and works", 21–22.

visual ideas. Perhaps tangible ideas, as it previously was, and the change is rather superficial – what changes is only the substance tangible ideas exist in. Consider, however, § 1 of the *Principles*:

By sight I have the ideas of light and colours with their several degrees and variations. By touch I perceive, for example, hard and soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance, and of all these more and less either as to quantity or degree.

Visual and tangible ideas do not seem to differ much. Naturally, they do belong to two different modalities and have features idiosyncratic for corresponding modalities, yet there is no reason to presume one over another to be the source of stability.

Consider the following: I see a chair being either one idea or a set of different ideas joined in one due to experience. There is no stability, for I can move slightly to the left or right, deforming the shape of the initial visual chair. Similarly, if I take a few steps away or towards the chair, it becomes smaller or bigger. Now I touch the chair, but I cannot touch all its parts simultaneously – on a single occasion, I touch merely a tiny part of it. Then I move my hand, and another sensation appears, and then another. You might say: in this manner, the representation of the chair built from the consecutive sensations is created in your mind. Nevertheless, I can change the sequence of movements and feel the chair's surface quite differently, creating a different sequence and hence a different representation of the chair. Is it not the way the sight functions? I see a chair, move to the left, and then back to my former position, and now I already know what will appear before my eyes if I move again, as before, to the left. Thus, blank space after discarding external objects of tangible ideas cannot be filled with tangible ideas transferred into mind.

The solution we can find further ahead, in the same paragraph:

And as several of these are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one thing.

Stability is guaranteed through sequences of ideas creating, on the grounds of experience, the object of which we think and speak as existing in the external world. Let us see how significant a change occurs in experience. Visual, tactile, olfactory, auditory ideas – all separately constitute subject-oriented

experience. The subject, as an innately blind man upon recovering his sight, initially localizes all of the above perceptions in his mind, and sole experience enables merging temporally parallel or consecutive sets of ideas into a particular object. The coordinate grid displaces from the subject to the object, and we begin to think about it as external, existing independently. Yet, strictly speaking, it is no more than a set of separate ideas co-occurring in experience sufficiently often to make generalizations, associations and predictions possible. When I perceive a particular visual idea, a vast associationist experience-derived and object-oriented network of ideas turns on. Sequences of ideas appear in my mind and, depending on my decision, said sequences conjoin in different possible interactions with the object that constitutes, in some sense, a hook to hang different chains of ideas on. Creating the chains, making particular predictions, and learning is possible due to the natural law bringing the element of stability and regularity to reality. Without it, experience gaining would not be possible.

## Conclusions

While wandering through the successive sections, we faced the problem of reconciling two contradictory views of one philosopher regarding the existence of matter or objects without the mind. We have discussed the psychological conception of perception, which turned out to be a way of smuggling ideas much more relevant for the immaterialistic project: the heterogeneity thesis and the conception of the language of nature. The immaterialistic project, in turn, proved to perform an ancillary function to the main end of consolidating faith in the creator of the said language of nature. In section three, we defused the tension between the *Essay* and other works by exposing the “Berkeley, the tactician” picture, and subsequently, we filled the blank space left by discarded external objects. To do this, we appealed to the natural law, experience, and prediction, arriving eventually at the conception of an object as a cluster of ideas comprising features of the postulated object and sets of possible interactions.

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## Abstract

The article discusses George Berkeley's *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* with respect to his immaterialism. The author concentrates on works written by Berkeley circa 1709: *Philosophical Commentaries*, *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, and *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. The end of the article is to show, firstly, that it is beyond doubt that in 1709 Berkeley was a mature immaterialist; secondly, that the shape of the *Essay*, problematic for interpretation considering his later philosophy, derives in fact from the strategy adopted by Berkeley to prepare his readers for immaterialism. The author offers an interpretation, according to which technical parts of the *Essay* are subsidiary to Berkeley's immaterialistic project and, in the end, consolidating religion. Moreover, the author notices that all notions essential for Berkeley's 1710 philosophy are already there in *Essay* and finally discusses Berkeley's conception of the object as well as the problem of stability of experience, which arises after the exclusion of external objects from the world.

**Keywords:** George Berkeley, *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, psychology of vision, philosophy of vision, philosophical commentaries, immaterialism