

Berkeley, Hobbes and the constitution of the self

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Introduction

Most comparisons between Berkeley and Hobbes begin by highlighting their differences in metaphysics. On the one hand, Berkeley argues that the concept of matter is unintelligible because matter is supposed by its adherents to exist apart from what we sense (i.e. our ideas); and, since we cannot think of anything (including matter) other than in terms we understand (i.e. as objects of thought), nothing that is truly independent of thought is intelligible. On the other hand, Hobbes assumes that only material objects are intelligible because they alone are sensible objects of experience; since we cannot think of anything (including minds and their acts) other than in terms of the material things we sensibly experience, nothing that is truly independent of matter is intelligible. The disagreement between Berkeley and Hobbes about the existence of matter thus depends on how they differ fundamentally on what they mean in saying that something is 'sensible' (i.e. meaningful).

It is surprising, then, to see how similar their descriptions are of what makes sense regarding the obligations of subjects in the body politic. Those similarities, as Peter Geach points out, indicate that 'the debt Berkeley owes to Hobbes is quite obvious.'¹ And as Arthur D. Ritchie remarks, at least in terms of his doctrine of passive obedience, 'Berkeley has to be careful not to invoke Hobbes in support.'² For, like Hobbes, Berkeley seems to subordinate acts of conscience so much to the will of the sovereign that individuality and natural self-interest appear to be challenges to rationality and the fulfilment of God's plan for the well-being of humanity.

1. Peter T. Geach, *God and the soul* (London, 1969), p.126.

2. Arthur D. Ritchie, *George Berkeley: a reappraisal* (Manchester, 1967), p.139.

Unlike Hobbes, though, Berkeley does not assume that a subject's individuality is dissolved when it merges with the individual wills of others in the formation of the state. Nor does he think that, in choosing to do God's will, subjects surrender their natural individuality in becoming one with God. To endorse either conclusion would assume that subjects are naturally individuals in the first place, and this is exactly what Berkeley denies. For him, passive obedience does not require the self to cede some supposed aboriginal right to pursue its own self-interests; for, apart from God's will and the will of the sovereign, there is no way to think of a self intelligibly as being an individual with natural rights.

This article is intended to show how, in their doctrines of political agency, Hobbes and Berkeley assume that submission to the laws of the sovereign is the basis not only for the forensic constitution of human subjectivity but also for the possibility of shared knowledge and moral responsibility. I suggest that, because the laws of the sovereign are formulated in linguistic terms – as the language of nature or as pronouncements of the supreme political power – they authorise not only what is proper for each human subject but also how each subject becomes a 'proper' (i.e. moral) individual in virtue of his or her participation in and endorsement of those linguistic structures.

Berkeley's and Hobbes' theories of political obligation are thus similar because they both assume that the identification of a self as capable of political (and thus moral) obligation depends on one's accepting the fact that God and the sovereign determine the contexts in which the subject is intelligible as a political or moral being. For both thinkers, to be a subject in a political sense means to be subject to the laws of the sovereign in exactly the same way as being a passive recipient of ideas from God means to be subject to divinely constituted laws of nature. For, just as perceiving something (including oneself) as intelligible for Berkeley means perceiving it in the context of the language of nature, so also for Hobbes being able to think of oneself as a subject means inscribing oneself in a network of sensible signs established by the supreme power. Where they differ is in how they think this appeal to a system of signs is intended to show how (as Hobbes claims) naturally individuated selves can be reconciled with one another or how (as Berkeley maintains) selves can be considered individ-

uals only in virtue of God's will that there be a harmonious variety of perspectives of the universe.

When Berkeley tells Samuel Johnson, then, that 'the soul of man is passive as well as active', he is referring not only to how we passively receive some ideas and actively imagine others but also to how we identify (or refuse to identify) ourselves as intelligible subjects in actively affirming (or refusing to affirm) the harmony of God's or the sovereign's will.³ In this way, Berkeley links the concepts of passive obedience and conscience in his political theory to his otherwise puzzling views of the passivity and activity of mind in his metaphysics. The purpose of my remarks is to show how this connection is made more explicit by highlighting Berkeley's relation to Hobbes.

Berkeley's interest in the Hobbes–Descartes exchange

Not surprisingly, Berkeley rarely refers to Hobbes. In his published works, he associates Hobbes with those 'pantheists, materialists, and fatalists' whose ideas on freedom and immortality amount to 'little disguised' atheism.⁴ But his most extensive discussion of Hobbes occurs in a series of *Notebooks* entries on Hobbes' 1641 objections to Descartes's *Meditations*.⁵ There Hobbes agrees with Descartes that the activity of thinking or willing is distinct from the subject that thinks or wills; but he then adds, 'It seems to follow from this that a thinking thing is something corporeal.'⁶ Descartes is astonished by this, noting that it is

3. Berkeley to Johnson, 24 March 1730, in *Philosophical works*, ed. Michael R. Ayers (Rutland, VT, 1992), p.354.
4. See for instance *Notebooks* (henceforward *NB*), in *Philosophical works*, ed. Michael R. Ayers, p.252-336 (no.17, 824-25, 827); *A Treatise concerning the principles of human knowledge* (henceforward *PHK*), in *Philosophical works*, ed. Michael R. Ayers, p.61-127 (sections 93-94); *Three dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (henceforward *DHP*), in *Philosophical works*, ed. Michael R. Ayers, p.129-207 (213); *The Theory of vision vindicated and explained*, in *Philosophical works*, ed. Michael R. Ayers, p.229-50 (section 6).
5. From *NB*, no.795 to *NB*, no.837 Hobbes is mentioned twelve times.
6. Thomas Hobbes, 'Objections 3', in *The Philosophical writings of Descartes* (henceforward *CSM*), ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1984-1991), vol.2, p.122. Subsequent references to the Hobbes–Descartes exchange will be marked as *CSM II* with page number.

‘quite without any reason, and in violation of all usage and all logic’ (CSM, II, p.124) to insist that all substances are bodies. After all, he remarks, it is widely acknowledged that some substances are spiritual and some are corporeal. In the words of Robert Pasnau, ‘it is as if Hobbes has forgotten that he still needs to show that all things are bodies.’⁷ So Hobbes’ ‘utterly unsupported inference from an act’s needing a subject to that subject’s being corporeal’ seems to be based on an unjustified assumption that whatever exists has a spatial location and is thus an extended body.⁸

For Hobbes, of course, the assumption is far from unjustified, and the inference from the relation between a subject and its acts to the corporeality of the subject is obvious precisely because no subject can be understood apart from the perceived (and thus spatially located) acts that define it as that specific being. That is why, as he claims in his 1640 *Elements of law*, we cannot conceive of a thing unless we imagine it as a body with spatial dimensions.⁹ Apart from a thing’s engagement in some sensible activity of the imagination, ‘it’ cannot be identified and thus does not occupy a place in our mental discourse.¹⁰ For Hobbes, the activities of mind (e.g. thinking, willing) are intelligible only as things we do. Since what we do is intelligible only in terms of our acting in some perceivable way, any thought or volition is identifiable as that act specifically in virtue of its being a perceived corporeal activity, not in virtue (as Descartes would have it) of its being a mode of an immaterial substance (CSM, II, p.125).

Regarding Hobbes’ point, Berkeley says he is ‘of another mind’ (NB, no.797), for, as he makes clear elsewhere (PHK, §27; DHP, p.240), he objects to characterising the understanding and especially the will as faculties distinguishable from the mind. Without doubt, he objects to Hobbes’ depiction of mind as material, but he does not object to Hobbes’ view that the will should be understood in terms of discernible actions instead of in terms of

7. Robert Pasnau, *Metaphysical themes 1274-1671* (New York, 2011), p.327.

8. Pasnau, *Metaphysical themes*, p.326; also p.327-28, 332.

9. See Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of law: natural and politic* (henceforward *EL*), ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (New York, 1994), I.11.5, p.66.

10. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (henceforward *Lev*), ed. Michael Oakeshott (New York, 1962), 3.1, 7.2.

modes of some spiritual substance. On several occasions Berkeley reiterates Hobbes' points that (1) the will is always understood in terms of actions that are distinguished by their effects (*NB*, no.788), (2) these actions are realised in bodily movements,¹¹ and (3) an agent is known *qua agent* 'so far forth as he can do what he will'.¹² Apart from perceived actions, Berkeley insists, there is no publicly available way to speak about acts of will.

Berkeley thus sees the exchange between Hobbes and Descartes as a missed opportunity for Hobbes to have recognised how will is the principle of activity that defines a substance and that radically differentiates it from its objects (i.e. ideas). As Berkeley notes, 'not distinguishing twixt will and ideas is a grand mistake with Hobbes. He takes those things for nothing which are not ideas' (*NB*, no.806). In Berkeley's view, those things that are the causes of ideas (*viz.* volitions) are not themselves ideas but rather expressions of will or activities of mind that identify the objects of mind. As far as Berkeley is concerned, Hobbes is correct in insisting (contrary to Descartes) that there is no mental substance distinct from its activities. Hobbes' only mistake is that he presumes that, if activities are sensible, they must be material. The dispute between Berkeley and Hobbes thus ends up turning on how each identifies the mind's activities in terms of their sensible objects.

Hobbes and Berkeley on conscience

Both Berkeley and Hobbes realise that identification of the will with its acts is central in their accounts of political identity (especially regarding the role of conscience). For both, our will to engage in a certain activity is nothing other than our engaging in that activity. Of course, because of external constraints or ignorance of our abilities, we often will to do things we cannot do. But, even in those cases, we end up doing exactly what we will to do, namely, act in a way that is either intentionally or negligently uninformed about our place in the world. This leads Berkeley a

11. *De motu*, in *Philosophical works*, ed. Michael R. Ayers, p.209-27 (section 25).

12. *Alciphron, or the Minute philosopher* (henceforward *A*), in *Works*, vol.3, p.21-329, dialogue 7, section 19.

few *Notebooks* entries after his comments on the Hobbes–Descartes exchange to say, ‘the grand mistake is that we know not what we mean by *we ourselves, our mind*, etc.’ Tis most sure and certain that our ideas are distinct from the mind, i.e. the will, the spirit’ (*NB*, no.847). Specifically, Descartes’ grand mistake lies in not knowing what the mind is, that is, in mistaking it for a substance that is conceptually distinguishable from activities of will. In doing so – and this is what is important for our present purposes – he makes the mind inaccessible to political analysis. For his part, Hobbes’ grand mistake lies in thinking that the volitional activities of mental substance are themselves ideas (i.e. corporeal objects). But at least his identification of the mind in terms of its actions has the virtue of revealing how conscience cannot be understood apart from observable activity. It is this feature of Hobbes’ critique of Descartes that Berkeley appropriates in his own account of conscience.

Indeed, unlike some of his contemporaries (notably Locke), for Berkeley acts of conscience are not exemplary cases of politically significant acts unperceived by others. That is, to act conscientiously is not to rely on private moral insights, for to do so would ignore how universal laws of nature are themselves ‘suggested and inculcated by conscience’.¹³ Instead, Berkeley describes acting on conscience as acceding to the will of the supreme power. By means of such consent, individuals are integrated into the harmony of creation, and passive obedience to the sovereign becomes not only a moral law but also a law of nature that is obligating in a distinctly moral way – that is, as imposing a moral rather than merely prudential duty (*PO*, §33).

Berkeley’s point is that, in obeying the will of the sovereign, the individual accepts his role in God’s scheme. This consent, like the ‘union and consent of animals’ (*A*, I.16), is something we do in virtue of identifying ourselves as political and ethical beings, but it is not a distinct action we perform. Rather, it is simply how we think of the way our actions are related to one another and to God. So instead of thinking of conscience as something a person *has*, Berkeley portrays it as something a person *does* – namely,

13. *Passive obedience, or the Christian doctrine of not resisting the supreme power* (henceforward *PO*), in *Works*, vol.6, p.1-46, section 12.

acting in a way in which we share a sense of the propriety of something with others in a *con-science*. Accordingly, in perceiving the world conscientiously, we identify ourselves as distinctly moral beings.

The model for thinking this way is found in the ‘perfection, and order, and beauty of nature’, all of which are ‘worthy of the imitation of rational agents’ (A, I.16). In fact, ‘it is not possible for free intellectual agents to propose a nobler pattern for their imitation than nature, which is nothing else but a series of free actions produced by the best and wisest Agent’ (PO, §14). Through the laws of nature, God reveals how all things are coordinated and should not be considered in isolation from one another. That is why ‘man ought not to consider himself as an independent individual, whose happiness is not connected with that of other men; but rather as the part of a whole, to the common good of which he ought to conspire’ (A, I.16).¹⁴ To think of oneself as an individual first and only subsequently as a member of a moral community is to ignore how God initially creates all things as inherently related to one another. It is this insight that underlies Berkeley’s assumption that rational agents are justified in thinking that their actions should aim at being harmonised with the actions of others. But, as Berkeley himself notes in *Alciphron*, the fact that nature exhibits a universal harmony that could serve as a model for morality does not demonstrate how any individual’s well-being has ‘a necessary connexion with the general good of mankind’ (A, I.16). What is needed, he suggests, is an argument that shows how individuals become moral beings – and not merely different bodies – by considering themselves as intrinsically related to others.¹⁵

That is where returning to Hobbes helps us, for it is Hobbes who provides the explanation for why an ‘act’ of conscience is not really my act (even though it is something I do) when I acknowledge my relation to other actors as the communal context of the

14. See also Paul J. Olscamp, *The Moral philosophy of George Berkeley* (The Hague, 1970), p.118.

15. Olscamp hints at such a solution when he notes that the necessary connection between moral laws and our well-being depends on recognising how minds are related to one another and God in terms of how mental acts are linked to their effects. See his *Moral philosophy*, p.65.

action. Hobbes explains this point by noting that the word ‘conscience’ literally means an act of con-science. Conscience, he observes, originally referred to the mutual witnessing of something that bound someone to another in terms of shared knowledge (*Lev*, 7.4):

When two or more men know of one and the same fact, they are said to be conscious of it one to another; which is as much as to know it together [*con-sciousness*]. And because such are fittest witnesses of the facts of one another, or of a third, it was and ever will be reputed a very evil act for any man to speak against his conscience [*con-science*]; or to corrupt or force another so to do: insomuch that the plea of conscience has been always hearkened unto very diligently in all times. Afterwards, men made use of the same word metaphorically for the knowledge of their own secret facts and secret thoughts; and therefore it is rhetorically said that the conscience is a thousand witnesses. And last of all, men, vehemently in love with their own new opinions, though never so absurd, and obstinately bent to maintain them, gave those their opinions also that revered name of conscience, as if they would have it seem unlawful to change or speak against them; and so pretend to know they are true, when they know at most but that they think so.

To act against one’s conscience, Hobbes argues, is to deny what one communally knows is true – that is, to present a private opinion as if it is a publicly discernible judgement. But a ‘private judgement’ is an oxymoron, because a judgement by its very nature requires an appeal to the public context of a language. Accordingly, Hobbes refers to a judgement as the ‘resolute and final sentence of him that discourseth’ (*Lev*, 7.2). In identifying an opinion as an act of conscience, we acknowledge the public (discursive) character of our pronouncement as that which is regulated by laws we do not determine and cannot change at will by pretending they are of our own creation (*EL*, II.25.12).¹⁶ The idea that conscience could be understood as a private or personal criterion of meaning can therefore be taken only as a later perversion of the word’s original meaning.

16. See also S. A. Lloyd, *Morality in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Cambridge, 2009), p.284-85, 291.

For Hobbes, then, an individual in a commonwealth must submit to the ‘public reason’ of the sovereign (i.e. ‘the reason of God’s supreme lieutenant’, *Lev*, 37.13), because the sovereign establishes (by means of civil law) the rules for intelligible discourse and publicly defensible judgements. By identifying with the sovereign, we become identifiable as individuals with consciences. That is why ‘a man’s conscience and his judgment is the same thing’ (*Lev*, 29.7), for to act conscientiously is nothing else than to ‘settle’ one’s judgement in a way that adheres to the rules established by the sovereign (*EL*, II.25.12). We might imagine a ‘private conscience’ – that is, a judgement regarding something about which the sovereign has not made any pronouncement (*EL*, II.25.12). But because such a conscience would rely on no common discursive context, it could not provide any defensible moral guidance for an individual. Indeed, for Hobbes, the very concept of an individual’s moral duty, like the principle of individuation itself, is simultaneously ontological and semantic, for, as he says, ‘we must consider by what name anything is called, when we inquire concerning the *identity* of it.’¹⁷ We thus have to rely on the public reason of the sovereign to determine how concepts such as conscience and natural law are intelligible in the first place.

To put this in terms of Berkeley’s language of nature: acts of conscience (properly understood) are acts of will that affirm God’s will that we perceive objects as useful for our communal well-being. To follow one’s conscience is not to act in a way that contrasts the will of the subject with that of the supreme power. Instead, in consenting to the will of the sovereign, the conscientious subject acknowledges that the will of the self is ultimately God’s will as it is enacted in a publicly observable (localisable) way. To accept one’s place in God’s scheme is to act with an awareness of how all things are united in God. That is why Berkeley says that ‘conscience always supposeth the being of a God’ (*A*, I.12). By contrast, in a ‘specious’ character, ‘there is nothing of conscience or religion underneath, to give it life and substance’ (*A*, III.2). So

17. English translation of *De corpore*, in *The English works of Thomas Hobbes*, ed. William Molesworth, 12 vols (London, 1839-1845), vol.1, 11.7. See also Yves-Charles Zarka, ‘First philosophy and the foundation of knowledge’, in *The Cambridge companion to Hobbes*, ed. Tom Sorell (Cambridge, 1996), p.62-85 (72).

no one who ‘acts’ out of a bad conscience truly acts or is really a person ‘under the law’. For that matter, someone who acts out of a bad conscience is not even a substance.

I thus reject Stephen Darwall’s view that by ‘conscience’ Berkeley means ‘an awareness that the act is contrary to God’s will, together with a knowledge of the sanctions God will apply’.¹⁸ For even if God’s will and sanctions are involved in morality, that does not explain how God’s will is necessarily linked to an individual’s conscience. For that we have to explain how moral principles and habits include not only conscience but also ‘affection, passion, education, reason, custom, [and] religion’ (A, III.6). Darwall concedes that Berkeley’s account of normativity or oughtness is based ultimately on being motivated by non-moral goods (i.e. pleasure and pain).¹⁹ But, as Darwall concludes, a theory of motivation provides no real theory of moral obligation.²⁰ That is why he claims that *Passive obedience* sends ‘mixed signals’ about how we would agree on which rules to accept or upon which consciences to rely.²¹ He says that is also why Berkeley conflates truly moral obligation with prudential obligation: ‘the normativity of the moral “ought” – its power to obligate – derives from the very same source as that of prudential obligation. It is because we inescapably see our own greatest good (and because conforming to God’s rules is necessary to realize that), that morality obligates.’²² So Darwall is right in saying that, for Berkeley, our actions are not morally obligating *because* they promote universal happiness, and that God wills that we follow laws which, ‘if universally practiced’ (*PO*, §8), will promote the happiness of all.²³ For, as Berkeley insists, ‘nothing is a law merely because it conduceth to the public good, but because it is decreed by the will of God, which alone can give the sanction of a law of nature to any precept’ (*PO*, §31). What Darwall leaves out, how-

18. Stephen Darwall, ‘Berkeley’s moral and political philosophy’, in *The Cambridge companion to Berkeley*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Cambridge, 2005), p.311-38 (317).

19. Darwall, ‘Berkeley’s moral and political philosophy’, p.321-23.

20. Darwall, ‘Berkeley’s moral and political philosophy’, p.323.

21. Darwall, ‘Berkeley’s moral and political philosophy’, p.332.

22. Darwall, ‘Berkeley’s moral and political philosophy’, p.326.

23. Darwall, ‘Berkeley’s moral and political philosophy’, p.325, 332.

ever, is Berkeley's point that what makes our actions obligating is the fact that God wills that they be universally practised, that is, that we 'concur' in following them (*PO*, §10). As long as conscience is understood as the prerogative of the individual, there will be 'no politeness, no order, no peace among men, but the world is one great heap of misery and confusion' (*PO*, §16). When we realise, though, that by definition acting conscientiously means consenting to God's will that all things be known in common, then we will see how moral obligations are essentially linked to the possibility of moral agency.

This means that 'it is absolutely necessary several independent powers be combined together, under the direction (if I may so speak) of one and the same will' (*PO*, §16). For in acknowledging that the will of God or the sovereign is the source of my ability to be a moral being, I indicate how my volitions are intelligible only in a context that is not of my own creation. Berkeley does not shy away from this seeming subsumption of the individual's will into a universal will, even though he recognises such pronouncements warrant the caution 'if I may so speak'. For in *NB* he notes, 'The Spirit, the Active thing, that which is Soul and God, is the will alone' (no.712). What prevents Berkeley from becoming a full-blown Hobbesian or even Spinozist is the fact that, due to differences in how we perceive things – that is, how we 'consent' to the universe – we are necessarily and universally obligated to think of ourselves as moral and political beings (i.e. as having consciences).

To be a good citizen, then, means to be loyal to the supreme power of the state (*PO*, §3). Such loyalty requires that we submit to the will of the ruler, which means acting according to precepts that have 'a necessary tendency' to promote the well-being of all human beings (*PO*, §10). If precepts were morally obligatory only if they promoted our well-being, then observing moral rules (including passive obedience) would merely be contingently obligatory. By framing that relation as necessary, Berkeley links moral actions intrinsically to conscientious behaviour (*PO*, §3, 7).²⁴

24. See *An Essay towards a new theory of vision*, in *Philosophical works*, ed. Michael R. Ayers, p.3-59 (section 147): by means of the language of nature 'we are instructed how to regulate our actions in order to attain those things that

To show how such a linkage can be made, Berkeley argues that certain ways of behaving (e.g. truthfully, justly) are necessarily connected with our universal well-being in virtue of the ‘general frame and circumstances of human nature’ (*PO*, §15). Our moral obligations are necessary because we become moral agents only by ‘consenting’ (i.e. con-senting) to our experience as a harmony. For Hobbes, our sinful condition leaves the sovereign as the only real prospect for such consent. But, by focusing on the immanent cause of experience (viz. will), Berkeley keeps agency at the heart of morality.

Concluding remarks

Berkeley’s moral and political philosophy is thus not a version of natural-law theory or theological rule utilitarianism.²⁵ Unlike natural-law theorists, he does not describe ethics in terms of values (e.g. sociability) that apply generally to the human species; rather he bases moral obligation on how each individual expresses a promise of perceiving the harmony of all experience in a unique way. Unlike utilitarians, he does not assume that we are individuals with competing interests; rather he portrays moral perfection as an effort to enhance and coordinate the variety of our perceptions. By identifying moral agents in terms of how they apprehend things as ordered according to laws, Berkeley provides a way to frame his theory as a theologically inflected version of deontological ethics by relating moral laws directly to the constitution of the self. This insight, I have suggested, is more notable when we compare his view of conscientious activity to that of Hobbes.

One final point: it is not surprising that Berkeley is often thought to espouse a form of utilitarianism. After all, he does remark, ‘It is not therefore the private good of this or that man,

are necessary to the preservation and well-being of our bodies’; and *PHK*, §151: ‘operating according to general and stated laws is [...] necessary for our guidance in the affairs of life.’

25. See Darwall, ‘Berkeley’s moral and political philosophy’, p.314, 326-33; and Matti Häyry, ‘Passive obedience and Berkeley’s moral philosophy’, *Berkeley studies* 23 (2012), p.3-14.

nation, or age, but the general well-being of all men, of all nations, or all ages of the world, which God designs should be procured by the concurring actions of each individual' (*PO*, §7). Instead of focusing on the utilitarian-sounding first half of this sentence, however, I want to emphasise the final phrase, namely, that God designs that this general well-being 'should be procured by the concurring actions of each individual'. It is not God's design that each of us should promote the general good, for that would only validate a way of thinking of moral agents as isolated ('Hobbesian') individuals. Rather, it is God's design that the general good be procured by thinking of our distinctly moral actions as necessarily concurrent. As Hobbes notes, that requires that we not think of ourselves as agents with private consciences, for to do so only subverts God's (or the sovereign's) design and undermines the possibility of truly moral (versus merely prudential) behaviour. Instead, according to Berkeley, we need to learn how to think of even the most passive of our experiences as opportunities for recognising the intricacy of their relations. In this sense, he does not differ much from Hobbes.

