

Interpreting Berkeley's Twofold State of Things

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Abstract: Our paper considers Berkeley's reference to “a twofold state of things” and argues that only one of those two states can be understood to apply to Berkeley's system of metaphysics. We contend that for Berkeley we cannot have a “notion” of the supposed “archetypal state”, we can have a notion only of the “ectypal” state of things. We also suggest a possible reason as to why Berkeley is vague and not directly explicit with respect to this distinction.

I

The expression “a twofold state of things” is deployed by Berkeley exactly once throughout his principal philosophical works. It will be found though, that he does make a number of other references to the suggestion. In the *Dialogues* we witness Philonous, whom we know to represent Berkeley himself, ask of Hylas, whom we know to represent all possible opponents of Berkeley:

What would you have! do I not acknowledge a twofold state of things, the one ectypal or natural, the other archetypal and eternal? The former was created in time; the latter existed from everlasting in the mind of God. Is not this agreeable to the common notions of divines?¹

We observe that Philonous does not necessarily make the claim that he himself posits, maintains, contends, believes in or argues for a twofold state of things. His only claim is to “acknowledge” a twofold state, or perhaps to recognize it as a supposition or theory. After defining this twofold state Philonous explains that it is agreeable to, or reflects the common notions of divines. But Philonous does not appear to include himself in that number. Thus, based upon the wording of this passage a twofold state of things is acknowledged to exist as a tenet of divines, but it is not necessarily to be taken as a tenet of Berkeley's own

¹ *Dialogues*, Dialogue Three, page 254, Luce & Jessop.

system of metaphysics. We observe also that the distinction between the two states is made perfectly clear. What is termed the *ectypal* or natural state is created by God in time, while what is termed the *archetypal* and eternal state is said to have existed from everlasting in the mind of God. Thus, there is change taking place in the ectypal state, while there is no change taking place in an archetypal state. And it is divines of course, that specifically advocate the existence of an archetypal state of things. But whether or not Berkeley considers himself to be a divine in this context is another matter entirely. For Philonous makes no such obvious pronouncement. If advocating a twofold state of things had been Berkeley's intent, he could have had Philonous speak words considerably more exact in their meaning, he could have unequivocally included himself in that category. But the position of Berkeley is left somewhat vague. Our purpose herein shall be to address this question. We will ask, does Berkeley himself speak as a divine and advocate or suppose the existence of a twofold state of things, or might his position be in disagreement with divines and to the effect that only one of those two states, the ectypal state, actually exists?

As noted, there are other passages wherein Berkeley alludes to a twofold state of things while not naming it specifically as such. For example, Philonous suggests:

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, they are said to begin a relative existence, with respect to created minds.²

Philonous refers first to an archetypal state, and then to the ectypal state of things. But notice the exact wording that Berkeley chooses. He states that

² *Dialogues*, Dialogue Three, pages 251/2.

objects that exist in one sense as archetypal “are said to” exist in another sense as ectypal. Once more we observe that Philonous is not making an emphatic pronouncement or commitment. He appears simply to be pointing out a supposition or theory that is advanced by divines. Hence our original question. How are we to interpret this twofold state of things from the perspective of Berkeley's own system of metaphysics? An analysis of the following passage will prove to be helpful.

Hylas argues:

Well, but as to this decree of God's, for making things perceptible: what say you, Philonous, is it not plain, God did either execute that decree from all eternity, or at some certain time begin to will what he had not actually willed before, but only designed to will. If the former, then there could be no Creation or beginning of existence in finite things. If the latter, then we acknowledge something new to befall the Deity; which implies a sort of change: and all change argues imperfection.³

Because this passage is spoken by Hylas rather than by Philonous we must be especially careful when interpreting it, for the opinions expressed will be those of Berkeley only to the extent that Philonous agrees with them. And it will be discovered that Philonous has both agreements and disagreements with the proposals that Hylas introduces into the conversation. Hylas is speculating upon a definition of the term *God* and offers first something to the following effect. With respect to making things perceptible, God “either” creates from all eternity, “or” He creates at certain points in time. We observe that a twofold state of things is alluded to, but that it is alluded to as an either/or. There is no indication that both of the purported states are supposed to exist. On the contrary, Hylas appears to propose the opposite. He appears to be asking Philonous which of the two purported states of things is in reality the case and

³ *Dialogues*, Dialogue Three, page 254.

which is not. Hylas also suggests that by the ectypal definition such a God has nonetheless designed from all eternity everything that He will in time eventually create. Hylas then continues by pointing out that by the archetypal definition there is no creation in the sense of things beginning, while by the ectypal definition God has changed and is therefore to be considered as imperfect. We see that Hylas poses interesting questions and problems that will require from Philonous proper answers and explanations. First, if God changes does He know from all eternity what changes He will in time eventually make, or undergo? In other words, with respect to the ectypal state of things, is God extemporally omniscient? And second, does God change or does He not? In other words, does an archetypal state of things exist or does it not?

Philonous begins his responses by asking, “Is it not evident, this objection concludes equally against a Creation in any sense...”⁴ This suggests that the contention that God cannot change is an objection to “any” God that creates, not only to the specific type of creating God proposed by Hylas. The changing God of Hylas, we recall, is defined as eternally knowing everything that He has designed to will and when He has designed to will it. He is defined as extemporally omniscient from the perspective of the ectypal state of things. But Philonous is proposing when he refers to creation in *any* sense that there is another type of changing God by definition. And this God must be supposed to be one *not* extemporally omniscient. Philonous continues, “None of which can we conceive, otherwise than as performed in time, and having a beginning.”⁵ We see that Philonous contends that we cannot conceive of creation except as taking place in time. Thus, for Berkeley the ectypal state of things is conceivable while an archetypal state is inconceivable. Philonous next claims in reference to an archetypal state that, “God is a being of transcendent and

⁴ *Dialogues*, Dialogue Three, page 254.

⁵ *Dialogues*, Dialogue Three, page 254.

unlimited perfection: his nature therefore is incomprehensible to finite spirits.”⁶ Berkeley makes it clear that an unchanging God that does not create in time is incomprehensible to finite spirits. Thus, finite spirits can neither conceive nor comprehend an archetypal state of things. However, no such difficulties are maintained with respect to the ectypal state, which for Berkeley is both conceivable and comprehensible. Philonous continues, “It is not therefore to be expected, that any man, whether *materialist* or *immaterialist*, should have exactly just notions of the Deity, his attributes, and ways of operation.”⁷ Berkeley contends that finite spirits cannot have exactly just “notions” of the Deity. But the point we shall argue is this. For Berkeley the word *notion* is not a casual reference but rather an important technical term. And if any terminology is both inconceivable and incomprehensible then we can have absolutely no notion of it whatsoever and cannot consider its existence to be even a possibility. The so-called words are in reality nothing more than empty sounds without conceptual referent, they are mere jargon, and nonsense. The divines in the opinion of Berkeley believe the impossible. We shall return to the question of notions in our next section, but let us first consider the following passage.

Further to our argument Berkeley opines that:

Whenever the course of Nature is interrupted by a miracle, men are ready to own the presence of a superior agent. But when we see things go on in the ordinary course, they do not excite in us any reflection; their order and concatenation, though it be an argument of the greatest wisdom, power, and goodness in their Creator, is yet so constant and familiar to us, that we do not think them the immediate effects of a *free spirit*...⁸

Berkeley points out that we often only recognize the immediate effects of a changing God when miracles take place, but that during normal times we

⁶ *Dialogues*, Dialogue Three, page 254.

⁷ *Dialogues*, Dialogue Three, page 254.

⁸ *Principles*, Part I, paragraph 57.

generally take no such notice of God. However, Berkeley believes that at all times we should recognize or define God as immediately effecting and changing. What Berkeley writes next is extremely important. He continues, "...especially since inconstancy and mutability in acting, though it be an imperfection, is looked on as a mark of *freedom*."⁹ In other words, God's inconstancy and mutability in acting represent in Him a mark of freedom, but also an imperfection. Berkeley contends that God, insofar as He is defined by divines, *is* to be considered as imperfect because He *is* a free spirit and *does* possess inconstancy and mutability in acting. Unless God is defined as imperfect from the perspective of an archetypal state of things, He cannot be defined as a free spirit capable of change from the perspective of the ectypal state. Berkeley of course, does not consider God to be imperfect.

II

We have contended that for Berkeley, because we cannot have a notion of an archetypal state of things we cannot suppose it to exist. Let us now consider this contention more carefully. In the following passages Philonous is arguing specifically against the existence of matter, but the same arguments and the same epistemological principles will be shown to be applicable to the purported existence of an archetypal state of things:

It is to me a sufficient reason not to believe the existence of anything, if I see no reason for believing it. But not to insist on reasons for believing, you will not so much as let me know what it is you would have me believe, since you say you have no manner of notion of it. After all, let me entreat you to consider whether it be like a philosopher, or even like a man of common sense, to pretend to believe you know not what, and you know not why.¹⁰

We observe that for Berkeley if we have no notion of something then we do not have a sufficient reason to believe in it, or to pretend that it exists. Further, this

⁹ *Principles*, Part I, paragraph 57.

¹⁰ *Dialogues*, Dialogue Two, page 218.

is not only a philosophical requirement, but a requirement of common sense. Thus, if we have no notion of an archetypal state of things, then we have no reason to suppose that it exists. Belief in an archetypal state is to pretend to believe you know not what, and you know not why. It is to flout common sense.

Philonous also explains:

That from a cause, effect, operation, sign, or other circumstance, there may reasonably be inferred the existence of a thing not immediately perceived, and that it were absurd for any man to argue against the existence of that thing, from his having no direct and positive notion of it, I freely own. But where there is nothing of all this; where neither reason nor revelation induce us to believe the existence of a thing; where we have not even a relative notion of it; where an abstraction is made from perceiving and being perceived, from spirit and idea: lastly, where there is not so much as the most inadequate or faint idea pretended to: I will not indeed thence conclude against the reality of any notion, or existence of anything: but my inference shall be, that you mean nothing at all: that you employ words to no manner of purpose, without any design or signification whatsoever. And I leave it to you to consider how mere jargon should be treated.¹¹

In the initial sentence Berkeley makes two claims. First, there are times when something not immediately perceived may be reasonably inferred to exist, this being the case if there are factors such as cause, effect and others that lead to the inference being required as an explanation for the observation. In effect, Berkeley is maintaining the validity of what are termed *transcendental* arguments. And second, Berkeley states that it is absurd to argue against the existence of something simply because we have no direct and positive notion of it. We see that there are suggested two types, or classifications of notions, those that are direct and positive, and those that Berkeley will in the second sentence define as relative. And further, those that are defined as relative, those that are brought about by way of transcendental argument, are nonetheless sufficient

¹¹ *Dialogues*, Dialogue Two, page 223.

grounds for supposing the existence of something. Of importance is what Berkeley states next. His position is that if we cannot have even a relative notion of something (brought about by way of transcendental argument), or if an “abstraction” is made from perceiving and being perceived, or from spirit and idea, then not only must we conclude that such a thing does not exist, but we should infer that our words are without meaning. We can have no notion of an archetypal state of things insofar as there is no transcendental argument that leads to such a conclusion, and further, because this would involve precisely an abstraction from our notion of the archetypal state. Just as we cannot abstract from our particular ideas of sense to arrive at an abstract idea or notion of matter, we cannot abstract from our notion of a changing God to arrive at a notion of one not changing.

In the following passage Hylas begins to complain:

You admit nevertheless that there is spiritual substance, although you have no idea of it; while you deny there can be such a thing as material substance, because you have no notion or idea of it. Is this fair dealing? To act consistently, you must either admit matter or reject spirit. What say you to this?

Philonous defends:

I say in the first place, that I do not deny the existence of material substance, merely because I have no notion of it, but because the notion of it is inconsistent, or in other words, because it is repugnant that there should be a notion of it. Many things, for aught I know, may exist... But then those things must be possible, that is, nothing inconsistent must be included in their definition.¹²

Berkeley denies the existence of matter on the grounds that any notion of it is inconsistent or repugnant, while our notion of spirit is neither. Therefore, we cannot properly speaking be said to have any notion of matter at all. We can have a notion only of those things that may possibly be said to exist, only of

¹² *Dialogues*, Dialogue Three, pages 232/3.

those things that do not contain an inconsistency, or a logical contradiction, within their definition. The supposition of the existence of spirits contains within itself no logical contradiction and therefore we can have such a notion, but the supposition of the existence of matter contains a logical contradiction, therefore no such notion is possible and no such entity may be supposed to exist. The words refer to the impossible. We can have a notion of a unicorn, but not of a door that is both open and closed at the same time, for this involves a contradiction in terms. What conclusion is to be drawn from the contention of Berkeley that we can have no notion of an archetypal state of things insofar as it is both inconceivable and incomprehensible? We must conclude non-existence, meaninglessness and impossibility.

Finally, Philonous questions:

But how can any idea or sensation exist in, or be produced by, anything but a mind or spirit? This indeed is inconceivable; and to assert that which is inconceivable, is to talk nonsense: is it not?¹³

In our first section we observed Berkeley explain to us that an archetypal state of things which includes an unchanging God is inconceivable. We now witness Berkeley informing us that to assert that which is inconceivable is to talk nonsense. Thus, to make mention of an archetypal state of things or of an unchanging God is to talk nonsense. Is it not?

III

If our interpretation is correct, we should discover Berkeley defining God as a changing being whose nature is consistent with his description of the ectypal state of things, but inconsistent with that of an archetypal state. How does Berkeley define God? Here is one example of Berkeley's typical argument for His existence:

We perceive a continual succession of ideas, some are anew excited,

¹³ *Dialogues*, Dialogue Two, page 215.

others are changed or totally disappear. There is therefore some cause of these ideas wherein they depend, and which produces and changes them. That this cause cannot be any quality or idea or combination of ideas, is clear from the preceding section. It must therefore be a substance; but it has been shewn that there is no corporeal or material substance: it remains therefore that the cause of ideas is an incorporeal active substance or spirit.¹⁴

In order to explain the fact that we experience ideas of sense, Berkeley supposes an incorporeal active substance or spirit. He also states that the continual succession of ideas that we perceive, some of which are anew excited while others are changed or totally disappear, are all produced and changed by the active substance that is God. Clearly, this is a definition of God developed entirely from the perspective of the ectypal state of things. If we ask whether an unchanging God, a God considered from the perspective of an archetypal state, would be capable of such impressive metaphysical accomplishments, our only answer can be that the question is meaningless in the first place, for it refers to nothing that can be understood to exist, nothing of which or whom we can have a notion.

With respect to the changing God of Berkeley, one might suggest that He is unchanging in the sense that He is always changing. Or, the fact that God is always changing does never change. But this is not to contend that God Himself never changes, it is rather to contend that God Himself is always changing. It is only the definition of God that does not change. Philonous also states, “Those things which you say are present to God, without doubt He perceives.”¹⁵ Hylas responds, “Certainly; otherwise they could not be to Him an occasion of acting.”¹⁶ Philonous does not disagree. Thus, Berkeley is committed to the proposition that because finite spirits freely choose to change by exercising

14 *Principles*, Part I, paragraph 26.

15 *Dialogues*, Dialogue Two, page 220.

16 *Dialogues*, Dialogue Two, page 220.

their powers of imagination and will, and because God perceives the changes that finite spirits produce in themselves, He Himself is changing insofar as the contents of His perceptions change. If this were not the case then God could not be defined as omniscient in any sense, for He would not perceive the occasions upon which archetypal ideas were required as ectypal and would thereby be reduced to the status of a mechanism, or blind agent. But Berkeley writes of God that, “He is no blind agent...”¹⁷ And we have already observed Philonous refer to a God defined as temporally omniscient as an alternative to Hylas' allusion to a God defined as extemporally omniscient. Further, Berkeley reasons that God does not create, “...beings that are entirely useless, and serve to no manner of purpose.”¹⁸ This argument is directed specifically against the existence of matter, but the same principle must apply to ideas. If God were to eternally sustain as archetypal all fleeting ectypal ideas, then these sustained archetypal ideas would be entirely useless and serve to no manner of purpose except when required as ectypal. Also, the possibility of human freedom would become problematic, for the entirety of our lives would exist from eternity in God as unchanging. But Berkeley writes, “That atheistical principles have taken deeper root, and are farther spread than most people are apt to imagine, will be plain to whoever considers that pantheism, materialism, fatalism, are nothing but atheism a little disguised...”¹⁹ Fatalism is the result if our lives cannot be changed or affected by free decisions. Based upon all of this, it seems clear that for Berkeley there can be no actively sustained yet unchanging archetypal state of things. No notion can be associated with words spoken to no manner of purpose and without any design or signification whatsoever.

What conclusions are to be drawn from our interpretation? Certainly any

17 *Early Notebooks*, Notebook A, Entry 812.

18 *Principles*, Part I, paragraph 19.

19 *The Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained*, paragraph 6.

attempt to analyse the metaphysics of Berkeley through the supposition of an unchanging God, or from the perspective of an archetypal state of things, would be a misinterpretation of the texts. Berkeley contends that a God that is unchanging is both inconceivable and incomprehensible, while a God that always changes is both conceivable and comprehensible. Berkeley also demonstrates that reference to an archetypal state of things is meaningless jargon and nonsense, while the ectypal state is perfectly understandable. We can have a notion of the ectypal state but not of an archetypal state. As a result, when interpreting Berkeley's metaphysical system our methodology demands that the changing God, the only God that can be conceived or comprehended, the only God of whom we can have a notion, the God of the ectypal state of things as opposed to the God of an archetypal state, must be supposed. Any method that attempts to interpret Berkeley through an archetypal state of things, or through the supposition of what he himself considers to be an inconceivable and incomprehensible God of whom we cannot have a notion, can be expected to lead only to philosophical muddles and quandaries beyond resolution, beyond common sense, and beyond logical possibility. Thus, questions such as the distinction between the ideas of finite spirits and the ideas of God, or an assessment of Berkeley's theory of cause and effect with respect to the agency of finite spirits, must be answered purely through the supposition of the changing God and the ectypal state of things. Otherwise, our words will refer to nothing.

Why does Berkeley present by way of Philonous the expression, “a twofold state of things”, and why does Berkeley allude to this twofold state in other texts, if he considers one of those two states, an archetypal state, to be both non-existent and impossible to begin with? Perhaps we cannot be certain, but the answer to this question may be as follows. Berkeley wants to carefully

argue in favour of a permanently changing God and against those who would contend that God is unchanging. But Berkeley is a product of his times living early in the 18th century when the collective memory of burnings at the stake for heresy is still a powerful social force. Further, his ambition is to become a cleric in the Anglican Church. Therefore, Berkeley wishes to express his philosophical position without offending what he contends to be mistaken philosophers and especially mistaken theologians whose faith he believes is in reality atheistic, materialistic, fatalistic, and one that commits them to pantheism. But he must tread lightly and as a result offers to theologians a concession of sorts while at the same time contending that it is nonsensical for philosophers, or even for men of common sense, to pretend to believe in what amounts to a logical impossibility.

To conclude, for Berkeley only the ectypal state of things exists. What is termed *ectypal* from the perspective of finite spirits is termed by Berkeley as *archetypal* from the perspective of God, but the allusion to an unchanging archetypal state of things represents for Berkeley nothing more than a theologically based tenet of divines that is fully inconsistent with his own philosophical principles. We can have no notion of an unchanging archetypal state of things, thus the expression is without meaning. God for Berkeley cannot be defined as omniscient or omnipresent in the extemporal sense. In the final analysis our interpretation contends that the God of Berkeley exists *inside* of time rather than outside of time. Or, perhaps more accurately expressed, the substance of God is for Berkeley an active principle, and that active principle is *Time* itself.