

František Špinka, Bakalářská práce: ‘Human Corporeality in the Philosophy of George Berkeley’

Posudek vedoucího práce

This bachelor's thesis is concerned with the place of the human body in the immaterialist system of George Berkeley. The question is an important one in the context of Berkeley's denial of material substance, and it invites us to investigate the general nature of the relation between finite spirits and the world constituted by ideas. In addition, the author puts our corporeality into the larger context of Berkeley's theism. It is argued that while embodiment is necessary for the perception and individuation of finite spirits, from the divine perspective corporeality is really the active influence on us by the infinite spirit according to the laws of nature.

The first and second chapters of the thesis outline the aims, the development, and the core tenets of Berkeley's immaterialist philosophy, stressing its peculiar form of dualism which posits two fundamental natures: ideas and spirits, and which seems to leave little room for the specific category of human corporeality. The author rightly notes that this fundamental ontological bifurcation is one between passivity and activity, which implies that all the different acts of the mind, including thinking, perceiving and willing, are *essentially* the same, and spirit is an active being, with will at its core (pp. 21-22).

In Chapter 3 the author begins to address the central theme of the thesis, Berkeley's account of the human body. First, though, he poses the question of how God knows the phenomenal world. His answer is that God has an archetypal knowledge of the objects that we perceive, and that the archetypes in question amount to an awareness of the active, 'causal structure' behind the ideas that we perceive. This interpretation is perhaps as adequate a conception as we can arrive at on the basis of Berkeley's slight and scattered remarks on the question. It might, however, suggest that God cannot know what it is like for us to passively receive ideas, and therefore it may undermine the ascription to God of omniscience. However, this problem is perhaps one for Berkeley rather than for the author.

The author then goes on to examine the fundamental part played by touch in our perception of the external, spatial qualities, drawing in particular on the *Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* as interpreted by Geneviève Brykman. He associates the proprioceptive component of touch—which includes our sensations of bodily pain and pleasure—with our sense of embodiment. This leads to a discussion of the often ignored thought-experiment at the end of the *Essay* in which Berkeley explores the

experience and cognitive abilities of a ‘pure intelligence’, by which he means a disembodied spirit with only the sense of sight. Here we find confirmation that perception, as such, would not be conceivable without a corporeal presence, and that therefore the body is essential to the perceiving subject and ‘it is primarily through touch that we exist in the world as perceiving ... beings’ (p. 42).

In chapter 4, the author tackles the vexed question of the relation between one’s finite will and the movement of one’s own body. Berkeley’s philosophy would seem to tend towards occasionalism, with the divine spirit being the single real causal power in nature and our wills being only ‘secondary causes’. However, as the author points out, Berkeley himself thinks that he can avoid Malebranche’s occasionalism and what he sees as its pernicious consequences. Several different approaches to this interpretational question are considered by the author, and ultimately a hybrid model is proposed according to which ‘our general causation seems to manifest itself in two different aspects: we can produce volitions that can become occasional causes of corporeal motions and we have power over our thoughts’ (p.54).

The author makes a strong case for this hybrid solution to the question of occasionalism, and this chapter is a useful contribution to the ongoing debate about the overall relation of Berkeley’s thought to Malebranche. With regard to the statement just quoted, however, it should be pointed out that the phrase ‘we can produce volitions’ is potentially problematic. It suggests that we have the causal power to produce volitions, a suggestion that seems to be confirmed later when the author talks of ‘the production of volition’ being ‘genuine causality’ (p. 57). A problem with such a view of volition is that it leads to an infinite regress because the causal power that ‘produces’ a volition could itself only be a volition. In other words, we would need a volition to produce a volition, and then a further volition to produce the first, and so on *ad infinitum*. To avoid a regress, volition should itself be seen as a determination of will that can then either have, or not have, productive causal power. The author’s clarification of his views on this question at the defence would be welcome.

The closing passages of chapter 4 make the interesting proposal that, on Berkeley’s view, the world *is* God. Such a position would not be fully pantheistic, as it would still recognise the independent existence of finite active spirits, but it is certainly closer to pantheism than most established interpretations. The author, building on his earlier remarks about the archetypes of perceived objects subsisting in God, goes on to suggest that the real nature of the world is, for Berkeley, of a very different character to the one perceived by limited finite spirits like us (p. 59). This position raises a number of questions, and I would welcome a fuller explanation at the defence. One problem is that it seems to reintroduce the appearance-reality distinction

for the immediate ideas of things, something that Berkeley, in his opposition to scepticism, had hoped to eliminate. The real nature of the things we perceive would not be fully knowable to us (but only to God through his archetypes), so that the obscurity of nature—an unwelcome characteristic of materialism in Berkeley's view—would now be reasserted in immaterialism. A second problem is whether the texts warrant such a reading. In the passage from the letter to Johnson, quoted on p.30, Berkeley may be side-stepping controversy ('I have no objection against calling the ideas in the mind of God archetypes of ours') rather than endorsing the view in question.

The author in Chapter 5 reinforces the reading just sketched, with the author urging for an active spiritual understanding of ideas themselves. They may be passive givens for us, but that is because we are limited beings. We finite, spiritual substances require ideas for our individuation, perception and communication. In reality, however, these ideas are the active expressions of God as he acts on us and, therefore, they too are *ultimately* spiritual acts. In essence, then, the whole world is constituted by active spiritual beings, with the divine will being the productive centre, and the inner nature of the world. The resulting picture, I would suggest, is that Berkeley's dualism of idea and active substance is only true from the human standpoint. From the perspective of God there are just spirits and their acts. Corporeality, then, may be essential for our perceptual worlds, but it would be seen as an illusion from a God's-eye view.

Overall, this is an ambitious and creative piece of philosophical interpretation which illuminates the part played by our corporeality in immaterialism, while also making stimulating claims about the extent to which the world is constituted by the divine will in Berkeley's immaterialism. The author's project is from the outset a challenging one, considering the relatively slight textual basis for a discussion of corporeality in Berkeley and, at times, the author must actively reconstruct Berkeley's position. As a result, the textual backing for his reading can sometimes be contested. However, the interpretation has been carefully thought through on the basis of an extensive knowledge of the secondary literature that goes well beyond what is to be expected at this level. This is much more than a mere recapitulation of Berkeley, or an exposition of an interpretation found in the secondary literature—instead we are offered an original view of Berkeley's thought with a rewarding reflection on the theological dimension of his idealism.

I recommend the thesis for defence. If the author adequately responds to the objections that I have offered in this report, this work certainly has the potential to achieve the grade 'Výborné'.