

Marek Tomeček, *Berkeley's Metaphysics and Epistemology between common sense and science*. PhD Dissertation. 2007.

Report of opponent, Dr James Hill.

Part I

In his introduction the candidate says that his plan is to offer a sympathetic interpretation of Berkeley's philosophy. He prefers the term "immaterialism" to describe the Berkeleyan system and he aims to show, by a "close-reading" of the early texts—particularly of the *New Theory*, *The Principles* and *The Three Dialogues*—how we might understand this system as an expression of common sense. This seems to me a good aim in a dissertation on Berkeley. One is tempted to treat Berkeley's talk of commonsense as a rhetorical device, so if it can be shown that Berkeley's position is indeed in basic agreement with common sense, then that would be an significant finding.

Brief comparisons with the attitudes of Descartes and Locke to common sense are made (9-14). Descartes' project, involving hyperbolic doubt, is described as "quite an elitist programme" (9) and his scientific work is treated as an attempt "to supplant the defects and prejudices of our common-sense view of the world". Tomeček even talks of a "contempt for common sense" on Descartes' part (12). Perhaps this discussion would have benefitted from attention to Descartes' concept of *le bon sens*, sometimes translated as common sense. The opening of the *Discourse* is relevant here, with its famous assertion that:

... the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false — which is what we properly call 'good sense' [*le bon sens*] or 'reason' — is naturally equal in all men...

Tomeček focuses on Descartes' definition of matter as *res extensa* so as to demonstrate the supposed opposition to common sense. In particular he objects to the thought-experiment of the *Principles* in which Descartes attempts to show that hardness is inessential to bodies by imagining a situation in which bodies always move away from us as we reach for them, preventing our perception of their hardness (13). I am not sure that Descartes here is trying to prove „the perception-independence of bodies“, as Tomeček has it (14), since presumably we still perceive the bodies in question by sight. Nor am I sure that Tomeček has shown that this thought-experiment is "quite unimaginable", indeed he mentions a couple of cases including free-fall (and we might add swimming) in which we do perceive things without any attendant sensation of hardness.

The candidate provides us with a very useful overview of how Berkeley deals with common sense in the *New Theory, Principles* and the *Three Dialogues* (14-22) and he finds that whereas the scientific work on vision involves important departures from common sense, the justification of immaterialism (most pronounced in the *Dialogues*) makes constant appeal to it. An important distinction between explicit and implicit commonsense is also made, drawing on the work of Austin and on Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. It is the implicit form of common sense that apparently Berkeley is interested in, setting him apart from more famous exponents of common sense philosophy, such as Thomas Reid and G.E. Moore, who tended towards the explicit.

At the end of the first part, however, the reader is left not really knowing what common sense means for Tomeček *when philosophically defined*. What criteria do we have for deciding whether a particular belief is common sense or not? Does common sense pertain to beliefs or, like Descartes' *bon sens*, to the faculty responsible for arriving at them? If the latter is the case, then there is no reason to suppose that all the beliefs of the plain man need be common sense, since education or social situation may stunt or pervert the faculty. Given that common sense is the central topic of the dissertation one would have hoped for a clear and detailed statement of what common sense *consists in*.

In addition, I find Tomeček's reading of the crucial passage at PHK 4 open to question. This passage states that there is „an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, that houses, mountains, rivers and in a word all sensible objects have an existence ... distinct from being perceived by the understanding“. Tomeček takes the „men“ referred to here as being a „learned elite“ (27). But Berkeley himself leaves the term „men“ quite unqualified. And it is not clear why the fact that the opinion is *strangely* prevailing means that it cannot be part of common sense (28). We are, after all, still owed an account of what makes a given belief a common sense one.

Part II

The second part focuses on Berkeley's equation of ideas with things and it contains an extended discussion of “realist” interpretations of Berkeley which treat ideas as public and therefore real in the fullest sense. Section 2.3 should be commended for its treatment of the tensions inherent in equating things and ideas and for its sensitivity to the difficulties and objections that Berkeley must face. The contrast with Collier (43), who gave up the view that different subjects see the same numerical object, is well made.

In Section 2.3.1 the candidate wishes to distinguish between Berkeley's approach to the heterogeneity thesis which demands that we do not take the language of identity (between tactile and visual qualities) literally, and his approach to the language of objects and ideas where the identity language is

literally meant. In Section 2.3.2. Ultimately, Tomeček rejects the interpretation of ideas that treats them as public, concluding that, like his materialist opponents, Berkeley „clearly took ideas to be private and peculiar to one mind only“ (50).

In Section 2.5 Tomeček embarks on what is perhaps the central topic of the thesis: *the problem of the continuous existence of unperceived objects*. The problem is simple. Our perceptions of objects are intermittent, but the existence of objects is meant to be continuous. If, as Berkeley claims, *esse est percipi*, then objects are in danger of disappearing every time we turn our heads.

Tomeček begins by analysing PHK §§45-48. The analysis makes a useful division of Berkeley's answer into three separate moves, the last of which is considered to contain the real answer. That “staggeringly simple” answer says that when I do not perceive a given object another person may be perceiving it, and since I am not perceiving it I cannot be sure that someone else is not doing so. This solution is then explained and supported by reflection on the „vital role“ that „verbs of perception play in the language game of Existence“ (67).

There is some lack of caution in Tomeček's wording here. He first couches the discussion in terms of *actual* perception: „Basically a thing which is capable of being seen, must be seen or must have been seen in order to exist“ (67). This is too narrow. Many things capable of being seen are never seen simply because there is no one around to see them (rainfall on Mars). Soon, however, Tomeček's analysis begins to sound more plausible (and phenomenalist) with talk of *possible* perception being introduced (68). God is then mentioned as the perceiver of every possible perception („what from human perspective is only a possible perception ... is actual perception for God due to his omniscience“). Tomeček seems to be sliding here between three different interpretations of the existence of objects. The first, in terms of actual human perception, leads to intermittent existence; the second, involving possible perception, is phenomenalist and leads to continuity; and the third in terms of the actual perception of God is theocentric and also leads to continuity. Commentators have typically offered two solutions to the intermittency problem — phenomenism and God's continuous perception — and, at this stage, Tomeček seems to be employing both.

The candidate, persuasively to my mind, clarifies the meaning of the verb „to perceive“ pointing out that it includes all „intentional verbs“ (i.e. verbs describing mental activities such as knowing, understanding etc). It is then argued, using this broader notion of perception, that Berkeley can perform a „marvellous shift“ by asserting that „we simply cannot say that something is not perceived for when we say it, we think of it and it is therefore perceived“. Tomeček argues that it is this argument that lies behind the statements of PHK §48 and he calls its tacit use „argument economy“.

I found this interpretation less than compelling. This is partly because I am not sure that this is really what the relevant passage is saying and I find „argument economy“ (used elsewhere in the dissertation) a slightly suspect hermeneutic device. More importantly, the argument itself seems to be unsuccessful. It hopes to make talk of unperceived things self-defeating (because in talking of them one entertains them in one's mind and thus perceives them). But this is to ignore time and tense. We may still say that *in the past or future* things existed/will exist unperceived, whether or not we perceive them *now* in saying so.

In the later sections of the second part attention is turned to the question of God's role in providing the continuity of unperceived objects. Two separate theses should be distinguished here: (i) That God continuously perceives the world, ensuring its continuity; and (ii) that *we can prove God's existence* on the basis that he continuously perceives the world, ensuring its continuity. Knox's limerick, which is used as a focus for the discussion, does not suggest that God's existence can be *proved* in this way— the first verse already assumes that God exists — and therefore the limerick is a statement only of thesis (i). The candidate seems most interested, however, in criticising the thesis (ii) that God's existence can be proved by the continuity argument.

Tomeček's arguments for the view that Berkeley does not seek to prove God's existence in this way are convincingly made. They go further than Jonathan Bennett by treating what Bennett conceded as a „momentary aberration“ in the *Dialogues* as really no aberration at all. DHP 230-1 is, in the candidate's view, not a proof of God's existence at all, but a part of orthodox theology, involving God's omnipresence (95). This is an original and interesting view.

At the end of Part II it is not absolutely clear to me what Tomeček's position on continuity, and God's role in it, is. He has persuasively argued that there is no argument for God's existence based on continuity. But does he still think that God continuously perceives the whole world? The answer seems to be clearly *yes* as we are told that this is part of Berkeley's theology. But then why does He not thereby secure the existence of unperceived objects? After all, if *esse est percipi*, and we know that God exists and is omnipresent, then His continuous perception entails, by definition, the world's continuous existence. I suppose that Tomeček thinks Berkeley does not draw on this theology in denying intermittent existence. Perhaps this could have been more spelt out with textual support being given.

Part III

This part investigates Berkeley's proof of God's existence, centring on the passivity argument. In 3.1 Tomeček makes some rather brisk comments dismissing the spiritual account of causality as belonging to „the Philosophical Museum“. Yet he also seems to acknowledge an internal

relation between a spiritual concept of causality and immaterialism. Thus the implausibility of the account of causality comes dangerously close to entailing the implausibility of immaterialism itself. Mention is made of a different, instrumentalist, account of causal relations that might be applied in natural science (104). At this point I think that an exposition of what this instrumentalist account involves would have been helpful. This would require discussion of *De motu*, a very important source for Berkeley's conception of causation that is generally rather overlooked (although DM is used later in 3.2.3 in a discussion of Berkeley's metaphysics).

The bulk of Part III is taken up with a discussion of the role of the Berkeley's theory of vision in proving the existence and attributes of God. Tomeček here usefully argues (against Anthony Grayling in particular) that Berkeley can bridge the gap between God's existence and his attributes, without presupposing theology (114-20). He also notes that while Descartes must draw on theology to attribute goodness to God, Berkeley's divine language argument gives us a scientific-metaphysical route to that same attribute. This is a well informed and fairly persuasive discussion.

General Comments

Tomeček writes in a style that is clear and unpretentious. There is a human voice to the work which draws the reader into the subject matter, and the work is thoroughly engaging (not something one can say of all dissertations).

Sometimes one detects a certain dismissive tone when it comes to philosophical language not used by Berkeley himself. In one context we are told that numerical and qualitative identity are unnecessarily „heavy concepts“ (41), although Tomeček needs to talk of numerical identity to make the contrast with Collier clear (43, note). And the semantic and modal language that Winkler introduces to distinguish between phenomenalism and idealism are said to bring with them the danger of „distortion“ and „anachronism“ (57). Many philosophers would think it perfectly legitimate to use language (and distinctions) different from the author's own in explicating his thought (though I have some lingering sympathy with the candidate's conservatism in this respect).

There is a good use of the secondary literature. Tomeček shows he is very well-informed about the texts relevant to his thesis, going back as far as the classic work of A.A. Luce. He also shows that he has independent critical judgement, not being thrall to any single interpretation or interpreter.

In summary, I think there are two particular problems that need to be addressed in the viva:

- (1) The first is the lack of a thorough explanation of what the term common sense means in the present discussion. Perhaps the reader might be able to piece together a view of common sense from

different comments in the course of the dissertation. But we need to know, right from the beginning, what this concept — the central concept of the dissertation — is referring to. It is not enough to take the view that common sense is always implicit rather explicit and therefore unstateable. We need to know what kind of thing is implicit: An opinion? A principle of action? A faculty? And among opinions, principles of action and faculties what would make one common sense and another not?

- (2) The central part of the thesis dealing with intermittent existence and unperceived parts of the world contains a fundamental unclarity as to what the continued existence of unperceived objects consists in. There is tension between different statements at different points in the dissertation that needs to be resolved. In addition to the example I have pointed to above, in the final section we read that, according to Berkeley, „the books do not exist when they are not perceived“. We then read that we can still say they exist „meaning thereby merely that when we open the closet we will see them again, *not* that they exist in the dark unperceived“ (123). But this leaves the reader unclear about whether existence, in the case of objects, means only *percipi* but also *posse percipi*. If it means only *percipi* then it is not true that the books existed prior to my opening the closet. A further complication is the role of God who, we are told, perceives everything due to his omnipresence. What influence does this have on the continuity question? Sometimes the author seems to bite the bullet and endorse the intermittent view of objects, at other times he seems to have a dispositional, phenomenalist account of existence, and at still other times he seems to allow for continued actual existence thanks to God.

There is much that is positive in this dissertation, but I take these last two criticisms to be significant. Ideally, perhaps, the work would benefit from a re-write in order to properly clarify these two issues. If, however, the candidate is able to adequately explain his position on these points (along with the others raised in the course of this report) at the viva, he may still make a satisfactory defence of the dissertation.

I therefore recommend that the dissertation go forward for the viva examination.



James Hill PhD, 27.9.07