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ARTICLE

DESCARTES AND BERKELEY ON MIND: THE FOURTH DISTINCTION

Walter Ott

Historians of philosophy have long since noted the affinity between Berkeley's concept of mind and that of Descartes.¹ For example, Charles McCracken claims that, although they obviously disagree on the existence of material substance, their views about the mind 'were virtually the same': both hold that the mind is an incorporeal, indivisible substance that supports ideas.² I think this view elides some of the most interesting departures Berkeley effects from the Cartesian metaphysics of mind.

It would be silly to quibble over the precise degree to which their views resemble each other. My point instead is that this Cartesian reading of Berkeley's concept of mind mischaracterizes his views on such fundamental questions as the relation between a substance and its essence and the relation between an idea and the act of thought in which it figures. The core difference between the two figures can be located in the tripartite taxonomy of distinctions Descartes deploys in the *Principles of Philosophy*. In both of the above cases, Berkeley requires and makes use of a fourth distinction Descartes would have regarded as unintelligible. Berkeley does not directly address the traditional division of distinctions. My interpretive proposal is that his departure from Descartes is implicit in his claims about the mind and its relation to thought. What is more, my claim that Berkeley invokes a fourth distinction allows us to understand some of his most controversial and seemingly contradictory pronouncements about ideas and mental acts.

I shall begin by setting out a fundamental problem in Berkeley's view of the mind as a substance and offering a solution in terms of the fourth distinction. I shall then apply this solution to the question of ideas and mental acts. If I am right, Berkeley's position can be seen as a genuinely

¹The *locus classicus* is Charles McCracken, 'Berkeley's Cartesian Concept of Mind', *The Monist*, 71 (1988) No. 4: 596–611. For a much earlier and largely historical account, see T. A. Kantonen, 'The Influence of Descartes on Berkeley', *Philosophical Review*, 43 (1934) No. 5: 483–500.

²McCracken (1988: 609). Even McCracken, of course, recognizes that there are differences at the level of detail. For example, Descartes holds, as Berkeley does not, that we have an idea of the mind. As McCracken notes, this is a bit superficial, since Descartes and Berkeley agree that there can be no *image* of the mind, which is what Berkeley meant by 'idea'.

novel one in the history of philosophy: he is neither a simple follower of Descartes nor a mere half-way house on the road to Hume.

THE PROBLEM

As everyone knows, Descartes holds that the mind's essence is thought, which entails, *inter alia*, that the mind cannot exist except as thinking. In his *Treatise on the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley argues that the nature of time secures Descartes's conclusion:

Time, therefore, being nothing, abstracted from the succession of ideas in our minds, it follows that the duration of any finite spirit must be estimated by the number of ideas or actions succeeding each other in that same spirit or mind. Hence it is a plain consequence that the soul always thinks: and in truth whoever shall go about to divide in his thoughts, or abstract the *existence* of a spirit from its *cogitation*, will, I believe, find it no easy task.³

(P 98)

There is no way to conceive of a mind that is not thinking, as that would entail that there is some time at which the mind exists but is not thinking, which contradicts the nature of time itself. Just as it is impossible to abstract time from the succession of ideas, that is, to conceive time in exclusion from this succession, it is impossible to abstract the existence of a mind from its activity of thought. Therefore, Descartes and Berkeley agree, though for widely different reasons, that we cannot form what Descartes would have called a 'complete conception' of the mind apart from its thought.

Similarly, Descartes and Berkeley agree that the mind is utterly distinct from physical things, whether these are bits of extension or collections of ideas.⁴ It is tempting to conclude that Berkeley joins Descartes in the stronger claim that thought is the essence of any mind. I say this claim is stronger because, for Descartes at least, it means more than simply that thought is a necessary property of minds: it means that the mind *just is* thought. On Descartes's view, or so I shall argue, thought is not itself a property that requires a substratum to modify or in which to inhere; instead,

³*The Works of George Berkeley*, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 8 vols (London: Thomas Nelson, 1950) Vol. 8, p. 27. (All references to Berkeley are to Luce and Jessop.) When citing the *Principles* and *De Motu*, the numbers given refer to paragraphs; when citing the *Philosophical Commentaries*, the reference is to a numbered entry; when other works are cited, the reference is to the page number of the relevant volume in Luce and Jessop. The following abbreviations are convenient: P, *Principles*, Part I; PC, *Philosophical Commentaries*; PI, the published Introduction to the *Principles*; TD, *Three Dialogues*; TVV, *Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained*; DM, *De Motu*.

⁴Thus Berkeley praises Descartes: 'Of the moderns Descartes has put the point [that the mind has nothing in common with bodies] most forcibly' (DM 30).

there is only a conceptual distinction between any substance and its 'principal attribute'. If this were Berkeley's view as well, he would avoid positing the mind as a propertyless substratum, a 'something-he-knows-not-what' that lies behind thought, for minds simply would be *thought* under a different description.⁵

Unfortunately, a passage from Berkeley's correspondence makes it impossible to attribute this Cartesian view to him. Although he shows little or no sign in the *Principles* and *Dialogues* that he is familiar with Descartes's views, in a letter to Molyneux (8 December 1709), Berkeley explicitly argues against this aspect of Descartes's position.

In Med.3 and in the Answer to the 3: Objection of Hobbes he [Descartes] plainly distinguishes betwixt himself & Cogitation, betwixt an extended Substance & Extension, and nevertheless throughout his Principles he confounds those Things as do likewise his Followers.⁶

The complaint, which I shall develop below, is roughly that Descartes, especially in the *Principles*, identifies the thinking thing and thought or cogitation. In spite of appearances, Berkeley does not in the end adopt a Cartesian philosophy of mind, unless he is either inconsistent or confused. What, then, *is* his position? As Kenneth Winkler has pointed out, Berkeley faces a dilemma: either the mind *just is* thought or it is in effect a propertyless substratum.⁷ The passage above shows that he does not wish to grasp the first horn; the texts from the *Principles*, the second. If these options are exhaustive, Berkeley simply does not have a consistent philosophy of mind.

I shall argue that this dilemma is a false one. Dissolving it will take us into the heart of Berkeley's view of the mind and its contents and the question of his relation to Descartes. I shall argue that Berkeley does indeed have good reason to be unhappy with at least one prominent strand in Descartes's thinking about the mind and its relation to its essential property, thought. Descartes's

⁵It would also help him answer what has come to be known as the parity objection: how can Berkeley reject material substance and retain mental substance? If Berkeley were one with Descartes in claiming that thoughts do not inhere in, and are not operations of, a substratum, then the mind would be relevantly different from matter. For the conception of matter Berkeley rejects is, of course, precisely the substratum in which the qualities of physical things were alleged to inhere (see P 49, discussed below); but I think there is a much simpler way to avoid the parity objection. See below, note 40.

⁶*Works*, Vol. 8, p. 27.

⁷Winkler poses this dilemma at the conclusion of his *Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). Commenting on the letter to Molyneux, Winkler writes,

if we call the substance the *subject* of properties as intimately related to it as thought and extension appear to be, how will we avoid thinking of it as something 'in addition' to those properties, something of which we have, as Malebranche argues, 'no other idea . . . than being or substance in general'?

(1989: 311)

The quotation is from Malebranche's *Search After Truth*, III.ii.8 §2.

division of distinctions into conceptual, modal, and real is not rich enough to accommodate Berkeley's position, not only on this issue, but also on the vexing question of the distinction between an idea and an act of thought.

Let me enter a caveat at this point. I do not wish to underestimate the complexity of Descartes's views on the mind and its ideas; Nicholas Jolley has persuasively argued that Descartes's position contains competing strands, which his successors took up and developed in various ways.⁸ What I must claim is only that Berkeley's objections find purchase on a natural construal of some Cartesian texts, particularly the *Principles*, which Berkeley explicitly refers to in his letter to Molyneux.

THOUGHTS AND THINKERS

We must begin by trying to isolate the element in Descartes's philosophy to which Berkeley takes exception in his letter to Molyneux.⁹ How can Berkeley claim that Descartes and his followers 'confound' the mind and thought, given Descartes's famous definition of the mind as a thinking thing? Although this feature of Descartes's view has received surprisingly little attention in the secondary literature, Berkeley is right: Descartes does indeed identify the mind and thought.¹⁰ To make this case, we must examine Descartes's taxonomy of distinctions.

In the *Replies* and the *Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes introduces a classification of distinctions that is of fundamental importance to his metaphysics.¹¹ As, for Descartes, everything that exists is either a substance

⁸See *The Light of the Soul: Theories of Ideas in Leibniz, Malebranche, and Descartes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). Jolley argues that there is textual evidence to suppose that at different times Descartes thought of ideas as mental objects, events, and dispositions.

⁹By contrast, Winkler admits that he 'cannot be sure just what it is in Descartes's view that troubles Berkeley' (1989: 311) in his letter to Molyneux.

¹⁰The vast heap of literature on Descartes's philosophy of mind tends to focus, quite naturally, on the real distinction between mind and body, the claim that thought is the mind's essence, and the relation between minds and ideas. It is less often noticed that for Descartes there is only a conceptual distinction between a substance and its essence. A notable exception here is Jorge Secada's *Cartesian Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Charles McCracken's helpful paper 'Berkeley's Notion of Spirit' in *The Empiricists*, edited by Margaret Atherton (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 135–142, comes close to addressing the relevant portion of Descartes's view. For the Scholastic background to Descartes's theory of distinctions, see Secada op. cit. and Norman Wells, 'Descartes and the Modal Distinction', *The Modern Schoolman* 43 (1965): 1–22.

¹¹References to Descartes are to *Oeuvres de Descartes*, edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: J. Vrin, 1996) 11 vols ('AT'). Translations generally follow those in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, edited by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 3 vols (hereafter 'CSM'). See Descartes's replies to the First Objections (CSM II, 85f., AT VII 120f.) and his *Principles* §§60–2 (CSM I, 213–4; AT VIIIa, 28–30). In the *Principles*, Descartes admits that 'elsewhere [i.e. in the Replies] I did lump this type of distinction [the conceptual distinction] with the modal

or a mode of a substance, we can take these as exhaustive. A *real* distinction obtains between *a* and *b* only when *a* and *b* can exist independently of one another; according to Descartes, only substances can, strictly speaking, be said to be really distinct, for 'by substance we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way as to depend on no other thing for its existence'.¹² The epistemic criterion for the real distinction is simply our ability to clearly and distinctly understand one apart from the other.¹³ Descartes's claim that in the strict sense only God is a substance might cause unnecessary confusion. It is true that only God 'depends on nothing else' for his being, but there are two distinct senses of dependence at work. As God must re-create the world at every moment, every created being depends on God; but the sense in which modes depend on substance is quite different – modes inhere in or modify a substance, they are not created by that substance. A substance is that which needs nothing else in which to inhere, and in this sense, we can say that God and creatures are, alike, substances.

A *modal* distinction obtains (1) between *a* and *b* when *a* is a mode (i.e. a property of a substance other than its essence) and *b* the substance it modifies, or (2) when *a* and *b* are both modes of a substance. Unlike the real distinction, (1) does not imply a common capacity for independent existence. Although we can clearly and distinctly conceive of substances apart from their modes, we cannot so conceive of modes apart from their substances. A substance must have *some* determinate mode or other at any given time (thus a determinate quantity of extension will always have some determinate shape), but there is no one determinate mode the substance must possess. This makes it possible to clearly and distinctly conceive of the substance apart from the mode but not vice versa.¹⁴ Similarly, in the case of (2), the modes cannot exist apart from the substance in which they inhere and therefore cannot be clearly and distinctly conceived apart from this substance.

Finally, a *conceptual* distinction obtains between *a* and *b* where *a* is a substance and *b* an attribute 'without which the substance is unintelligible',¹⁵ or between two such attributes of a single substance.¹⁶ This is a distinction only by courtesy, as things that are merely conceptually distinct 'are in no way distinct'.¹⁷ The difference lies entirely in the realm of thought, even though it has an objective foundation.¹⁸ Conceptual distinctions arise from the fact that we can think of the same thing in two distinct ways, even

distinction . . . but that was not a suitable place for making a distinction between the two types; it was enough for my purposes to distinguish both from the real distinction' (CSM I, 215; AT VIIIa, 30). See also the Letter to ***, 1645 or 1646: CSM III 280, AT IV, 349–50.

¹²CSM I, 210; AT VIIIa 24.

¹³CSM I, 213; AT VIIIa, 28.

¹⁴See CSM I, 213–4; AT VIIIa, 29.

¹⁵CSM I, 214–5; AT VIIIa, 30.

¹⁶For a detailed discussion of Descartes's theory of distinctions, see Secada (2000) 196 ff.

¹⁷AT IV, 350.

¹⁸AT IV, 349–50.

though the thing itself remains a unity. Descartes offers a helpful example in the French version of the *Principles*:

[I]n general all the attributes that make us have different thoughts about one and the same thing, such as the extension of the body and its property of being divided into many parts, do not differ from . . . each other, except in so far as we sometimes think confusedly of one without thinking of the other.¹⁹

Thus, in any given material substance there is no distinction between being extended and being divisible. Similarly, for a given mind to be a thinking thing and to be a substance is not for it to have two distinct properties but for it to be thought of in two different ways.²⁰

I shall now argue that these features of Descartes's position gave rise to the tension Berkeley detected between the confident pronouncements in the *Meditations* that 'I' refers to a thing that thinks and his claims in the *Principles* that there is only a conceptual distinction between thought and the mind.

The language of the *Meditations* suggests that the mind is that which acts, and thought, its action. The particular acts of thought performed by the mind are inessential to it; what is essential is only the activity itself. This suggests that the thinker is related to his thoughts in the way a speaker is related to his words: qua speaker, he must use some word or other, but there is no single word such that he must speak it. Thus, in the *Principles*, Descartes argues that thought and extension may be thought of as modes of a substance '*in so far as one and the same mind is capable of having many different thoughts; and one and the same body, with its quantity unchanged, may be extended in many different ways*' (emphasis mine).²¹ However, if we considered that the thinker was really distinct from the determinable quality thought (as opposed to any particular, determinate act of thought), we would be mistaken. In this respect the analogy with the speaker and his words is misleading:

Thought and extension can be regarded as constituting the natures of intelligent substance and corporeal substance; they must then be considered as nothing else but thinking substance itself and extended substance itself – that is, as mind and body (emphasis mine).²²

¹⁹AT IXb, 53; fn. to CSM I, 215.

²⁰As Jorge Secada puts it, the conceptual distinction applies between an existing real essence and its substantiality, existence, duration, order, and number. These are not different real properties, nor is any one a determinate mode of any other . . . Rather, as second-order or derivative properties, they are the objects of 'different thoughts' about 'one same' property.

(2000: 198)

²¹CSM I, 215; AT VIIIa, 31.

²²CSM I, 215; AT VIIIa 30–1.

No substance is really or modally distinct from its essence; this is signalled by the fact that, for example, thought stands to the thinking substance in such a way that without the former the latter is unintelligible.²³ By contrast, to construe thoughts as modes of a substance is simply to recognize that any given mind may have a variety of different thoughts. The relation between the thinking thing and the thought in this respect is not analogous to that between a speaker and his words in that the thinker *just is* the determinable quality, thought; no one would say this of the speaker and his words. There is nothing as it were lying behind the determinable quality, performing the action of thought. The distinction between thinking substance and the determinable quality *thought* is merely conceptual.^{24,25} The contrast here is not between an agent and its acts but between a determinable quality, thought, which *is* essential to the mind, and determinate modes of this determinable, each of which on its own is not. The same holds true of extension: its properties are modes or ways that substance has of being. This represents a departure from the Aristotelian model, according to which a property inheres in (rather than modifies) a subject.²⁶ It is also very distant from the view of substances as propertyless substrata. In his conversation with Burman, Descartes claims that ‘all the attributes taken together are identical with the substance’.²⁷ There is no need to posit a substratum for thought to inhere in if, as the passages quoted from the *Principles* clearly state, the *res cogitans* is simply *cogitatio ipsa*. Again, it is no part of my argument that Descartes consistently endorsed this position, only that it is clearly present in some of his central writings.

Even in the *Meditations*, this account seems to be adumbrated. Hobbes, at least, caught a whiff of it in these lines from the *Second Meditation*: ‘Which of all these activities [e.g. doubting, affirming, denying, willing, imagining,

²³CSM I, 214; AT VIII A 30.

²⁴It has been suggested to me that, as there is also a conceptual distinction between a substance and its duration, my reading has the absurd consequence that there is nothing ‘lying behind’ the duration that endures through time. However, this objection neglects the fact that, as second-order properties (to use Secada’s language), substantiality, like duration and number, is simply another way of thinking about what is in reality a single thing. Duration in any actual substance is simply a way of thinking *of* that substance.

²⁵Malebranche develops this position in his *Recherche de la Vérité*. After declaring that the mind’s essence is thought, Malebranche adds:

I warn only that by the word *thought*, I do not mean the soul’s particular modifications, i.e., this or that thought, but rather substantial thought, thought capable of all sorts of modifications or thoughts, just as extension does not mean this or that extension, but extension capable of all sorts of modifications or figures.

The Search After Truth, translated by T. M. Lennon and P. J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 198.

²⁶For a sustained defense of reading Cartesian substances as highest-order determinables, see Secada (2000).

²⁷AT V, 155.

etc.] is distinct from my thinking? Which of them can be said to be separate from myself?²⁸ To which Hobbes objects:

If M. Descartes is suggesting that he who understands is the same as the understanding, we shall be going back to the scholastic way of talking: the understanding understands, the sight sees, the will wills, and, by a very close analogy, the walking (or at least the faculty of walking) walks.²⁹

Descartes has, on Hobbes's view, reified a faculty, and so committed himself to a view as absurd as one that would identify a walker and his walk. Descartes replies with characteristic brusqueness: 'I do not see how one can pretend that there is any doubt or obscurity here'. In suggesting that his modes of thought cannot be said to be distinct from him, Descartes 'simply mean[t] that all these modes of thinking inhere in me'.³⁰ This need not be at variance with the view presented in the *Principles*, for in Descartes's mouth it amounts to the claim that the modes of thought are determinate qualities of a determinable substance. Hobbes of course would not be satisfied, as, once given its proper Cartesian analysis, the claim no longer encapsulates or even accommodates the commonsensical intuition that the thinker is an active substance that has or performs its thoughts.

In the letter to Molyneux quoted above, Berkeley takes up Hobbes's point. In spite of Descartes's protestations, Berkeley evidently does think Hobbes has good reason to be puzzled by the *Third Meditation* passage. Berkeley finds Descartes's position on the relation between substance and essence unintelligible. In particular, he thinks it is absurd to say that there is only a conceptual distinction between the two. The passages discussed from the *Principles* allow us to see why Berkeley might claim that in that work at least, Descartes 'confounds' mental substance and thought.

Berkeley's suggestion that Descartes is inconsistent seems unfounded, because, as I have argued, we can interpret the claims in the *Meditations* and *Replies* to the effect that thinking substance is distinct from its modes in a way that does not conflict with the claim that thinking substance *just is* thought. Berkeley's difficulty with Descartes is nevertheless a genuine one.

We have found an answer to our first question: to what feature of Descartes's view did Berkeley object? Our original problem, however, remains: how can Berkeley renounce a Cartesian concept of mind without impaling himself on the second horn of the dilemma? That is, how can he claim that the mind is distinct from thought without committing himself to mental substance as propertyless substratum?

²⁸CSM II, 19; AT VII 29.

²⁹CSM II, 125; AT VII 177.

³⁰Ibid.

THE FOURTH DISTINCTION

Berkeley clearly holds that the mind is a substance, distinct from its ideas and acts:³¹

besides all that endless variety of objects of knowledge, there is likewise something which knows or perceives them, and exercises divers operations, as willing, imaging, remembering about them. This perceiving, active being is what I call mind, spirit, soul or myself. By which words I do not denote any one of my ideas, but a thing entirely distinct from them, wherein they exist, or, which is the same thing, whereby they are perceived; for the existence of an idea consists in its being perceived.

(P 2)

Minds thus function as the metaphysical ‘support’ of ideas; but in what sense of ‘support’? At P 49, Berkeley mounts an attack on “the philosophers’” views of substance and mode, which seem to him groundless and unintelligible. ‘It may perhaps be objected’, Berkeley writes, ‘that if extension and figure exist only in the mind, it follows that the mind is extended and figured’ (P 49). Berkeley replies: ‘those qualities are in the mind only as they are perceived by it, that is, not by way of mode or attribute, but only by way of idea’. Here he is concerned to show that he is not adopting one possible Cartesian picture of the relation between the mind and its thoughts. Descartes sometimes suggests that ideas are mental objects (rather than acts or aspects of acts or dispositions); to say that ideas in this sense are modes of the mind seems to imply that the mind itself takes on the qualities of the idea qua object. The parallel with shape and an extended substance implies that thoughts (here, mental objects) modify the thinking substance in the same way shape modifies a material substance. Berkeley’s imaginary objector suggests that on Berkeley’s view the qualities represented by the idea are themselves possessed by the mind. Malebranche seems to have accepted this view as applied to sensations (as opposed to ‘ideas’ in his technical sense); thus, he is led to suppose that the soul, in sensing a rainbow, actually takes on all of its colours.³² I do not wish to claim that the objection is devastating to the Cartesian view, especially in light of the fact that Descartes’s own view is far from unambiguous. My point is that Berkeley chooses to defend himself from the objection by disavowing this conception of the relation between mind and idea rather than attempting to

³¹Not every commentator would agree. Among the dissenters are Stephen H. Daniel, ‘Berkeley’s Christian Neoplatonism, Archetypes, and Divine Ideas’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 39 (2001) No. 2: 239–58, and Robert Muehlmann, *Berkeley’s Ontology* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992). I shall not discuss their views here, as Marc Hight and I have dealt with them at length in our ‘The New Berkeley’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 34 (2004) No. 1: 1–24.

³²See Malebranche, eleventh Elucidation (1997: 634).

revise or reinterpret the objector's talk of modes.³³ Perception replaces modification or inherence.

The difficulty comes when we try to square this view of the mind with the objections to Descartes's view in the letter to Molyneux. If we are to remove the apparent contradiction between these passages, we must reconcile the claim that the mind cannot exist or be conceived apart from its thinking with the claim that the mind is not to be identified with its thinking, whether this refers to mental acts or objects. In other words, we must find a way to acknowledge that thought is the essence of the mind (in the sense that the mind cannot exist without thinking) without simply identifying the two.

IDEAS AND MENTAL ACTS

Berkeley's readers face an exactly parallel difficulty in reconciling his claims about ideas and acts of thought. The reduction of ordinary physical objects to ideas strongly suggests that ideas are objects that exist in minds: '[t]he ideas imprinted on the senses by the Author of Nature', Berkeley writes, 'are called *real things* . . .' (P 33). Moreover, Berkeley frequently claims that ideas are objects of knowledge (P 1, P 2); but it is hard to see how Berkeley can also claim that the existence of ideas cannot be separated from their being perceived:

[C]an there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive of them existing unperceived? Light and colours, heat and cold, extension and figures, in a word the things we see and feel, what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas or impressions on the sense; and is it possible to separate, even in thought, any of these from perception? For my part I might as easily divide a thing from itself.

(P 5; cf. P 23–4)

S. A. Grave argues that passages such as these seem to commit Berkeley to two irreconcilable principles: the 'distinction principle', according to which a mind and its ideas are entirely distinct, and the 'identity principle', according to which an idea just is an act of perception. Grave reads Berkeley as ultimately committed only to the identity principle.³⁴ Similarly, George Pitcher attributes to Berkeley an adverbial account of perception, holding

³³In PC, Berkeley seems initially to have accepted that there is a modal distinction between a mind and its thoughts (PC 24), only to reject it later. On this issue, see McCracken (1999: 146–7). The classic discussion of Berkeley on the relation between a mind and its ideas is probably Michael Ayers's 'Substance, Reality, and the Great Dead Philosophers', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 7 (1970): 38–49.

³⁴'The Mind and Its Ideas', in *Locke and Berkeley*, edited by C. B. Martin and D. M. Armstrong (Notre Dame, 1968) 296–313, quoted in Winkler (1989: 290).

that the identity principle is what Berkeley is, or should be, committed to.³⁵ However, as we have seen, there is considerable evidence that Berkeley endorses the objectual conception of ideas. How can Berkeley consistently claim that ideas are objects and that they are necessarily dependent upon being perceived?

When the difficulty is put thus baldly, it should be obvious that there is in fact no difficulty here at all. What these passages claim is not that ideas and acts of perception are one and the same, but rather that they are mutually dependent. There is no problem selectively attending to objects of perception and their being perceived. What is impossible, and so inconceivable, is an object of perception *that is not* perceived. The two are necessarily connected, but that, of course, does not mean that they are identical. Berkeley can consistently endorse the act–object analysis *and* claim that neither the act nor the object is intelligible in abstraction from the other. Ideas can be distinct from acts even if they lack a capacity for existing independently of those acts.

It is precisely this kind of distinction for which Descartes's tripartite framework has no room. Let us consider each in turn. Mental acts and objects are clearly not separated by a real distinction. A modal distinction cannot capture the distinction between ideas and mental acts. A more likely candidate is the conceptual distinction, which, as we have seen, obtains between *a* and *b* just in case they cannot exist independently of one another. However, on my reading, Berkeley rejects this. He wants to claim that ideas can be distinct from the acts of thought in which they figure, even though they are necessarily connected.³⁶

THE MIND AND ITS ESSENCE

Just as Berkeley declares the existence of an idea to be inseparable from its being perceived, so he claims that the existence of a mind is inseparable from its cogitation, a claim that seems in tension with his commitment to the mind as a distinct substance. It is natural to suspect that the solution to one of these difficulties will also be the solution to the other.

Nothing could be clearer than that for Berkeley the mind is a substance, an active, thinking being 'entirely distinct' from its ideas (P 2). Thus, he needs once again to invoke a kind of distinction unavailable in Descartes's scheme. For reasons parallel to those above, neither a conceptual, modal

³⁵*Berkeley* (London: Routledge, 1977) 199. Margaret Atherton argues for roughly the same basic position; for her, Berkeley's ideas are 'ways of perceiving' rather than 'discriminable mental objects' ('The Coherence of Berkeley's Theory of Mental Substance' in *Critical and Interpretive Essays on Berkeley*, edited by Walter Creery (London: Croom and Helm, 1991). For further criticism of the adverbial account, see George Pappas's *Berkeley's Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2000) 124–8.

³⁶I suspect that this is what Winkler means by calling mental objects and acts 'weakly distinct'.

nor real distinction, as conceived by Descartes, captures Berkeley's position. If a substance and an attribute are necessarily connected in such a way that the former cannot be conceived without the latter, Descartes can allow only that they are conceptually distinct. So if a is the essence of x , then $a = x$; what we have are two 'modes of presentation', not two things. Berkeley holds that a mind cannot be conceived apart from its thought, but denies that this entails that the thinker and his thought, whether construed as a determinate or as a determinable, are identical. The modal distinction cannot serve, because, as P 49 shows, Berkeley wishes to capture the relation between mind and idea in terms of perception, not inherence or modification. Lastly, it should be clear that a real distinction is not what is wanted either. Instead, Berkeley's position is that the thinker is a real substance that perceives its ideas and performs other mental actions, even though we cannot conceive of the thinker except as thinking.

We should not exaggerate the difference between Berkeley and Descartes, however. For example, it is tempting to say that Berkeley's claim that minds and ideas are mutually dependent requires him to introduce a new means of distinguishing between substances and the objects that depend on them for existence. When Descartes calls substances 'independent' entities, as we have seen, he attributes to them a capacity for existing independently of modes.³⁷ Berkeley, one might think, rejects this, as on his view it is impossible for a mind to exist independently of its thoughts, and so conclude that Berkeley cannot draw the contrast between the mind and its ideas in Cartesian terms. This conclusion, however, is unwarranted, because Cartesian claims of independence can be analysed as I have suggested above. On that account, the claim that created substances are independent entities amounts to this: first, substances, unlike modes, do not require a further substance to modify; second, although a substance must have *some* mode or other at any given time (some determinate thought or shape, for example), there is no single mode such that that substance must at that time have it. By contrast, any determinate mode requires a substance for its support. These asymmetries sufficiently explain Descartes's language of independence, and we need not suppose that he was confused enough to believe that a substance could exist without *any* modes whatsoever. Descartes is free to agree with Berkeley's claim that it is 'no less absurd to suppose a substance without accidents, than it is to suppose accidents without substance' (P 67).

Nevertheless, having rejected the language of modification, Berkeley owes us an account of just how minds and ideas are distinct. Berkeley thinks that the challenge can be met simply by adverting to the familiar relation of perceiving: it should be obvious, he thinks, that there is a difference between the perceiver and the perceived, even if no perceiver can exist without perceiving. Although this move might seem question-begging, it seems

³⁷See, for example, CSM I, 210; AT VIIIa 24.

plausible for an immaterialist such as Berkeley to take perception as a fundamental and irreducible notion.³⁸

Thus, faced with our dilemma between positing the mind as a propertyless substratum and simply identifying it with its essential property, Berkeley will simply insist that there is a third option. Kenneth Winkler claims that '[i]t is disappointing that Berkeley makes no attempt to deal' with this dilemma. On my reading, Berkeley does not deal with it simply because it does not arise within Berkeley's own system. As we have seen, Berkeley grants that, as the mind's essence is to think, it cannot be understood apart from this activity. To say this is not to say that thinking *just is* the mind. It is not to say that thinking is the essence of the mind in Descartes's sense.

Some will harbor doubts about the intelligibility of the position I am attributing to Berkeley. It is crucial to note that I am not claiming that the mind can be abstracted (conceived in total separation) from its acts. Berkeley's considerations about the nature of time and of abstraction rule this out. As it is impossible for a mind to exist without thinking, it is also inconceivable; this is simply an application of Berkeley's principle that impossibility entails inconceivability (see, for example, PI 10, P5). This does not rule out our selectively attending to the mind.³⁹ An example might make this clear. For Malebranche, God's act of will and its effects are necessarily connected: whatever God wills necessarily comes about. No one takes this to mean that for Malebranche God's will just is its effects. Alternatively, consider the case of properties. Triangularity and trilaterality are necessarily co-extensive; nevertheless, they are arguably distinct properties. (At least one cannot claim they are identical simply by adverting to the fact that any triangle is trilateral.)⁴⁰

³⁸Here I disagree with A. C. Lloyd, who argues that the 'object and act of perception are indistinguishable, and to describe the relation as "by way of *idea*" is simply to make it unique and indefinable' ('The Self in Berkeley's Philosophy', in *Essays on Berkeley*, edited by J. Foster and H. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) 191). On Berkeley's view, as I read him, act and object are distinguishable but not capable of independent existence. Perception *is* analysable, in the sense that it requires a perceiver and something perceived; if Lloyd's demand is that perception be reducible in some stronger sense, I do not see that Berkeley should be concerned to meet it.

³⁹In his *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction* (Westview, 1989) 95, D. M. Armstrong makes a parallel move in defending his conception of particulars. On his view, although propertyless substrata are indeed impossible, we can conceive of 'thin particulars':

the thin particular is *a*, taken apart from its properties (substratum). It is linked to its properties by instantiation, but is not identical with them.

⁴⁰A further objection might be raised. I conceded above (note 5) that one advantage of reading Berkeley as a Cartesian is that it enables him to parry the well-known parity objection, according to which it is inconsistent for him to endorse mental substance while rejecting its material counterpart; but on my interpretation, the objection finds no purchase, as the mind is necessarily conceived of as thinking; nothing could be further from Locke's 'something I know not what'. Berkeley does know 'what'. The concept of matter, by contrast, has, on Berkeley's view, no genuine content at all, since it is self-contradictory (see TD 233–4). Berkeley's doctrine of notions explains how we can comprehend our own minds in a way that is in principle

If my interpretation is correct, Berkeley's metaphysics of mind depends on a rejection of Descartes's traditional framework of distinctions. He did not differ with Descartes merely on points of detail, but on a fundamental metaphysical issue that shaped both thinkers' philosophies of mind.

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unavailable to us when trying to understand matter, which is supposed to underlie all perceivable qualities. For a fuller answer to the parity objection, see Winkler (1989) and Atherton (1991).