

Berkeley and the Separate State of the Soul: A Note¹

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According to Berkeley's published view, the human soul is a spiritual substance: "as it perceives ideas, it is called the *understanding*, and as it produces or otherwise operates about them, it is called the *will*" (PHK 27). The existence of the soul consists in *perceiving* and *willing/acting*. In other words, the existence of the soul consists in *thinking*, in a broad, more or less Cartesian, sense of the term. Berkeley claims, furthermore, that "the soul always thinks" (PHK 98). As long as the soul exists, first in this world and then in the next, it perceives some ideas and presumably "operates about them."² Put differently, no episodes of non-thinking occur, ever. For example, the soul cannot fall into, and wake up from, a *dreamless* sleep. Right before I fall asleep, I think, but the next moment I wake up, and the thinking goes on. If I have *no* perceptions "in the meantime," no time passes between these two moments. Each soul has its own time, as it were:

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. (PHK 98)

In short, there is no universal time or duration in which all finite spirits participate.

Berkeley's curious concept of time has implications for his view of the eternal, post-mortual existence of souls. These implications are evident in the beginning of *Notebook B* (NB 1-14), but also present in the *Principles*. In the latter work, Berkeley provides a metaphysical argument for the natural immortality of the soul (PHK 141), but he does not examine the nature of the post-mortual state of the soul. In other words, he aims to show *that* the soul is immortal, but does not explain *what* this post-mortual existence is *like* or how it is to be conceived. Nonetheless some conjectures about his views can be made if we read the argument for immortality in the light of his account of soul and time, that is, in connection with *Principles* 2, 27, 97-98, and 135-40.

Berkeley's argument may look like a standard argument for immortality, but it has certain distinctive features. When introducing the argument, in sect. 141 of the *Principles*, he

¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Berkeley conferences in Rennes (2003), Helsinki (2007) and Gaeta (2007). I would like to thank participants of these conferences, especially Geneviève Brykman, Talia Bettcher, Bertil Belfrage, Howard Robinson, George Pappas and Marc Hight, for helpful comments and constructive criticism.

² Cf. George Berkeley, *Philosophical Works Including the Works on Vision*, ed. Michael R. Ayers (London: Everyman, 1992), NB 357: "If uneasiness be necessary to set the will at work. Qu: How shall we will in Heaven."

already assumes that immaterial souls or minds—active and perceptive entities—are the only substances in the world. Bodies are mere collections of ideas, passive appearances in minds. Minds are wholly distinct from, and have nothing in common with, bodies. Thus Berkeley says:

the soul is indivisible, incorporeal, unextended, and it is consequently incorruptible. Nothing can be plainer, than that the motions, changes, decays, and dissolutions which we hourly see befall natural bodies . . . cannot possibly affect an active, simple, uncompounded substance: such a being therefore is indissoluble by the force of Nature, that is to say, *the soul of man is naturally immortal*. (PHK 141)

The soul is created such that it will survive the collapse of the body. Immortality thus follows from the nature of the soul.

Given Berkeley's notion of time and his account of the essential features of the soul, the argument seems to imply that the post-mortal state of the soul will be a state of perception and action, not a state of "insensibility" and "inactivity." To say that the soul will not cease to exist (or will not be annihilated) is to say that it will continue to *think*, for, according to Berkeley's theory, it cannot *exist* without *thinking*. So, when I die, my body collapses, but my soul will not die or fall into a "dreamless sleep." Rather, the soul, then separated from the body, will have some "new ideas" to perceive and "operate about." In fact, Berkeley acknowledges this in a letter to Samuel Johnson:

it seems very easy to conceive the soul to exist in *a separate state* (*i.e.* divested from those limits and laws of motion and perception with which she is embarrassed here), and to exercise herself on *new ideas*, without the intervention of these tangible things we call bodies. It is even very possible to apprehend how the soul may have ideas of colour without an eye, or of sounds without an ear.³

The disembodied soul will perceive (and act as well) without eyes, ears, nerves and the brain. Thus, in accordance with Anglican Orthodoxy, Berkeley subscribes to the doctrine of the *separate* or *intermediate state* of the soul, as it was called. According to this doctrine, the disembodied souls of good Christians will perceive something extremely pleasant, they will feel the foretaste of heavenly rewards, whereas bad people will perceive something undesirable, they will feel the foretaste of hellish punishments. Exactly what faculties and capacities would the disembodied soul have, was a matter of debate in Berkeley's time.⁴

Berkeley was also committed to the doctrine of the general resurrection of the dead. He discusses resurrection in *Principles* 95, claiming that his immaterialist conception of the

³ Berkeley to Johnson, 25 November 1729, in *The Works of George Berkeley*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson, 1948-57), 2: 282; emphasis added. [Hereafter: W.]

⁴ See, for example, Samuel Colliber, *Free Thoughts Concerning Souls* [1734] (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1990), 24-36, 86-118.

body solves all difficulties pertaining to the notion of bodily resurrection.⁵ A natural reading of the relevant passages in the *Principles* suggests that the human soul survives bodily death and continues to perceive and act in a disembodied (separate) state until it is reunited to its resurrected body. More precisely, the soul will *perceive* its body again and live happily ever after, or will be punished in hellfire, as the case may be.

Berkeley's immaterialist account of the journey of the soul through time into eternity is carefully constructed, even if the parts of the story aren't explicitly tied together in the *Principles*. But why is he, in his published work, so reticent on the nature of the post-mortual state(s) of the soul? Why doesn't he extend his conception of time beyond this world (like he does in the *Notebooks*)?⁶ An obvious reason is that the treatise in question is concerned with metaphysics and natural religion, not revealed religion. The argument for immortality, Berkeley holds, is sufficient for his metaphysical and theological purposes in that treatise.

However, there may be another reason. The subjectivist conception of time led Berkeley to strange conclusions about the afterlife. In his letter to Johnson, from 24 March 1730, he says:

A succession of ideas I take to *constitute* Time, and not to be only the sensible measure thereof, as Mr. Locke and others think. But in these matters every man is to think for himself, and speak as he finds. One of my earliest inquiries was about Time, which led me into several paradoxes that I did not think fit or necessary to publish; particularly the notion that the Resurrection follows the next moment to death. (W 2: 293)

How is the "resurrection paradox" to be interpreted? Does he mean that no time passes between my bodily death and resurrection since no succession of ideas occurs between these two events? If so, then my time doesn't flow between my death and resurrection, even if, from a conventional public point of view, thousands of years go by. I die (like I fall asleep), but the very next moment I wake up (like from a dreamless sleep). The train of ideas that constitutes my time does not stop at my bodily death. For right after my death (say in the year 2007) I resurrect on the Last Day (say in the year 4007) and the train of ideas in my soul continues. So the concept of private time does not quite fit with the common conventional notion of public time.

What about the separate state of the soul, then? Did Berkeley secretly dismiss the doctrine of the separate state and, like Hobbes and perhaps Locke, adopt some form of mortalism? Or did he believe that the separated soul would perceive ideas but not in

⁵ For a detailed account of Berkeley's view on resurrection, see Marc A. Hight, "Berkeley and Bodily Resurrection," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45 (2007): 443-58.

⁶ NB 14 reads as follows: "Eternity is onely a train of innumerable ideas. hence the immortality of the Soul easily conceiv'd. or rather the immortality of the person, that of the soul not being necessary for ought we can see." Cf. NB 590: "No broken Intervals of Death or Annihilation. Those Intervals are nothing. Each Person's time being measured to him by his own Ideas."

succession? Or did he believe that the order and succession of ideas in the separate state is essentially different from the order and succession of ideas in this life and thus cannot be considered as a part of *a person's time*? Given the textual evidence we have, the latter position seems most likely.

There is hardly any reason to doubt that Berkeley believed the doctrine of the separate state of souls. It has to be considered that in the previous letter to Johnson he explicitly admits the existence of the separate state and gives some hints about how to think of it. Unlike some of his contemporaries (e.g., Samuel Colliber), Berkeley was not willing to go into detailed speculations about the cognitive capacities of the separated soul. He preferred to talk about afterlife by means of analogy and metaphor. Thus in the *Guardian* essay "The Future State" he speaks about the departure of the soul from its body by means of the following simile:

Let us suppose a person blind and deaf from his birth, who, being grown to man's estate, is, by the dead palsy or some other cause, deprived of his feeling, tasting, and smelling, and at the same time has the impediment of his hearing removed, and the film taken from his eyes. What the five senses are to us, that the touch, taste and smell were to him. And *any other ways of perception, of a more refined and extensive nature*, were to him as inconceivable as to us *those are which will one day be adapted to perceive those things* which "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive." And it would be just as reasonable in him to conclude, that *the loss of those three senses* could not possibly be succeeded by any *new inlets of perception*, as in a modern Free-thinker to imagine there can be no *state of life and perception without the senses he enjoys at present*. Let us further suppose the same person's eyes at their first opening, to be struck with a great variety of the most gay and pleasing objects, and his ears with a melodious consort of vocal and instrumental musick: Behold him amazed, ravished, transported; and you have *some distant representation, some faint and glimmering idea of the extatic state of the soul in that article in which she emerges from this sepulchre of flesh into Life and Immortality*. (W 7: 183-84, emphasis added.)

The senses we have in the present state will be lost at death; they are not suitable to receive those ideas that God will produce in the soul after its separation from the body. So the disembodied soul will perceive by means of some new faculties. These "new inlets of perception" as well as the objects to be perceived in that state are in fact inconceivable to us at present.

According to Berkeley, "all things, past and to come, are actually present to the mind of God, and . . . there is in Him no change, variation, or succession."⁷ God has a tenseless "vision" of the created, temporal world. God is not in time, but He knows each human soul and the succession of ideas that constitutes its time. He also knows the ideas He produces in disembodied souls.

⁷ Berkeley to Johnson, 24 March 1730 (W 2: 293).

On Berkeley's view, I would suggest, the soul in the separate state perceives and wills; it is separated not only from its body but also from the succession of ideas which constitutes its time.⁸ The ordering of ideas in the separate state is distinct from the ordering of ideas before death and after resurrection.⁹ The succession of ideas in the present state of the soul continues with the reunification of the soul and body at the resurrection: "the resurrection follows the next moment to death." In other words, the ordering of ideas in the disembodied soul is not the same as that in the embodied soul. The soul in the separate state has ideas, but these ideas, even if perceived in some sort of succession, are not elements in the succession of ideas that constitutes the time of the soul. The time of each soul is in fact endless since the succession of ideas in the soul does not stop at death: the succession continues with the resurrection and lasts for ever. In this way, time becomes eternity.

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⁸ For somewhat different interpretations, see H. Scott Hestevold, "Berkeley's Theory of Time," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7 (1990): 179-92, esp. 188-89, and David Berman, *George Berkeley. Idealism and the Man* (Oxford: Clarendon 1994): 61-70.

⁹ For this line of thought I owe thanks to Marc Hight and Howard Robinson.

No 18 (2007) PDF Contents Articles Stephen H. Daniel Senior Editor's Note George Caffentzis. Berkeley and the Separate State of the Soul: A Note. Reviews. Tom Jones. Review: David Berman. Berkeley and Irish Philosophy. Luc Peterschmitt. Review: Sbastien Charles, ed. Berkeley Studies:24-28 (2007). Authors. Roomet Jakapi. University of Tartu. Abstract. Berkeley: Philosophy of Religion, Misc in 17th/18th Century Philosophy. (categorize this paper). Options. Edit this record. Mark as duplicate. Export citation. Find it on Scholar. Separate Melee Actions. Have you ever tried to throw a knife at an approaching Screeb, only to instead lunge forward and slap the Screeb in its gross exploding face? Have you ever accidentally wasted your hard-earned melee charge on a sad, lone Dreg? If so, there's hope. Introducing separate melee actions! Spectral Blades not only allows its user to go invisible and vanish from radar, but also has one of the highest damage-reduction values in the game. As the fantasy of this ability is that of a stealthy assassin and not a stealthy raid boss, we've decided to tone down the damage reduction. Looking at the data, middle-tree Nightstalker is among the most successful subclasses in the Crucible, so this change feels warranted. Spectral Blades.