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WHITEHEAD, BERKELEY, AND REALISM

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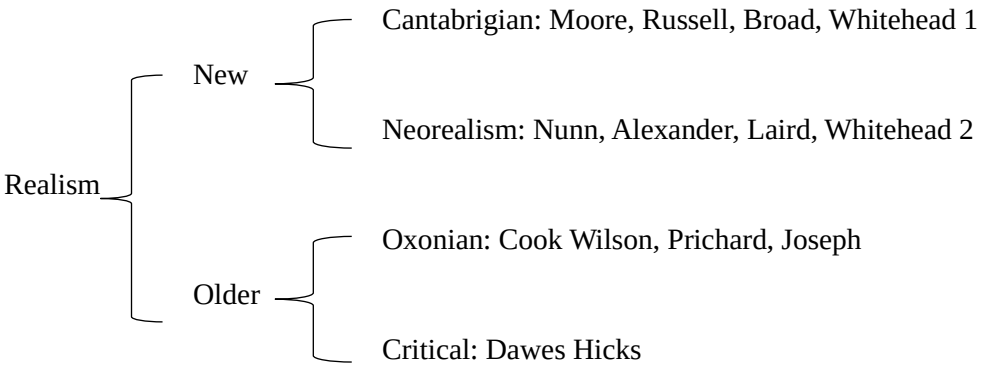
Abstract: This paper examines the shifting interpretations of George Berkeley's philosophy in early 20th-century British realism, contrasting the Cantabrigian reading of Moore and Russell with the more sympathetic neorealist readings of Alexander, Nunn, Laird, and Dawes Hicks. The Cantabrigians accused Berkeley of conflating act and object, confining perception to private mental entities, and equivocating on "being in the mind." Neorealists disputed these charges, arguing that Berkeley's ideas could be construed as public, objective constituents of reality, aligning him with direct realism. Whitehead initially adopted the Cantabrigian stereotype, portraying Berkeley as a subjective idealist. Over time, influenced by neorealist and critical realist reinterpretations, Whitehead reassessed Berkeley as rejecting both the sensationalist and subjectivist principles that underpinned representative realism. In his later works, especially Science and the Modern World and Process and Reality, Whitehead treated Berkeley as a philosophical ally against "simple location" and misplaced concreteness. Berkeley's immaterialism was thus reframed as epistemologically realist, though his metaphysics illustrated a sort of "extreme idealism". The paper shows how Whitehead's mature philosophy positioned Berkeley outside the main targets of his epistemological critique. This reinterpretation challenges the standard Cambridge reading and integrates Berkeley into the lineage of pre-Kantian, non-Cartesian realist thought.

Keywords: Berkeley, Whitehead, neorealism, Cantabrigian realism, critical realism.

In an interesting way, the development of realism in Britain is connected with the reception of Berkeley. G. E. Moore was considered the founder of a "new realism", and initially all those who followed Moore were called "new realists". Russell was a new realist, but so was Samuel Alexander. But it didn't take long before two divergent tendencies emerged among the new realists. Some of them, Moore, Russell, and Broad, defended indirect realism in various forms (sense-data theories). I will call this school "Cantabrigian realism". Others, notably T. P. Nunn and Alexander, defended direct realism. They were joined by the six American philosophers who jointly published *The New Realism*. Eventually, their brand of new realism was sometimes called "neorealism". Neorealism prospered only briefly. It survived longer in Britain than in America, where it succumbed quite early to the attacks of the critical realists. In Britain, neorealism reached its maximum glory in 1920, with the publication of Alexander's *Space, Time, and Deity*, and of Whitehead's *Concept of Nature*. As a natural philosopher, Whitehead was affiliated to the school of neorealists, next to Nunn, Alexander, and John Laird. In addition to these two schools of new realists, there were two schools of "older realists". There was the school of Oxonian realists, led by J. Cook Wilson, and including mainly H. A. Prichard and W. B. W. Joseph, and there was the school of critical realists (no relation to the American homonymous school), whose main representative was G. Dawes Hicks.



As it is well known, the "war-cry"[1] of the new realism was Moore's "The refutation of idealism" (1903). In this paper, Moore attacked (for it cannot be said that he successfully refuted anything) "idealism", construed as a general position resting on the cardinal principle that "*esse* is *percipi*". The main representatives of idealism Moore targeted in his paper were Berkeley and Bradley. While virtually no realist undertook to defend Bradley against Moore and his followers, his refutation of Berkeley encountered a more mitigated reaction. If Russell practically adopted the entirety of Moore's critique in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), and if Broad followed in their footsteps in his *Perception, Physics, and Reality* (1914), even if he laid stress on other shortcomings of the Bishop's philosophy, other realists endeavoured to show that Berkeley is not guilty of the cardinal error Moore imputes to him. We find more or less sympathetic readings of Berkeley in Alexander and Nunn, prominent neorealists, and in Dawes Hicks, the main critical realist and a respected Berkeley scholar.

Whitehead's own interpretation of Berkeley was initially in line with Moore's and Russell's. However, as his metaphysical interests developed, he changed his mind about Berkeley, possibly under the influence of the non-Cantabrigian realists which he read and met with at the Aristotelian Society.

1. THE CANTABRIGIAN STEREOTYPE

As it is well remembered, Moore's critique of Berkeley stands on a new analysis of experience, derived from the school of Brentano. This analysis distinguishes in any individual experience an *act* (subjective, mental) and an *object*. Thus, in any sensation we should distinguish the act, which we can call sensing, and which is an awareness of some species, from the object the sensation is an awareness of. We should distinguish the sens*ing* from the sens*ed*. In addition to these two elements, a third element must be reckoned, viz. "a perfectly different and unique relation" of the awareness to its object. This relation cannot be internal. Moore

[1] Rudolf Metz, *A Hundred Years of British Philosophy*, transl. by J. V. Harvey, T. E. Jessop, H. Sturt, London, George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1938, p. 532.

seems to offer an argument in support of the claim that "[the] awareness [involved in a sensation] is and must be in all cases of such a nature that its object, when we are aware of it, is precisely what it would be, if we were not aware"[2]. His argument may be the following: awareness of the blue is exactly of the same kind as awareness of my sensation of blue; only the object differs; my sensation of blue can exist without my being aware of it; hence, blue can exist without my being aware of it. This argument sustains the conclusion that the *nature* of the object does not depend on anybody's being aware of the object, which means precisely that the object does not stand in an internal relation to the mental act. Up to this point, we could say that Moore distinguishes, in a sensation, (1) the mental act, (2) the object, and (3) an external *sui generis* relation holding between the act and the object (later called "acquaintance"). This relation "is *not* that of a thing or substance to content, nor one part of content to another part of content"[3], that is, the relation is neither the relation of inherence, nor the relation of parthood. It is that specific relation which obtains by virtue of the intentionality of the mind. On this analysis, the object could be merely an intentional object. But Moore advances, without proof, that generally and normally the object has more than intentional inexistence, that it has real, or physical existence.

Based on what he considers "the true analysis of a sensation or idea"[4], Moore attributes to Berkeley the following errors:

(E1) The confusion of what is experienced with the experience of it (of the sensed with the sensing, or of sense-datum/sensum with the "awareness" of it)[5];

(E2) The claim that we are only "aware" of our own ideas and sensations (understood as mental representations, without relation to transcendent objects)[6].

A similar line of criticism can be found in Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*. The first thing to notice, is that he readily identifies Berkeley's "ideas" with "sense-data", but also with memory-data; with the class of all the objects of immediate apprehension. "All such immediate data he calls 'ideas'."[7] Berkeley's argument, stated in terms of sense-data, is the following:

(1) Sense-data are mind-dependent.

(2) Perceived physical things analyse as collections of sense-data.

(3) Hence physical things are mind-dependent.

(4) They do not depend on our finite minds, but on God's infinite mind.

Russell then discloses one major "fallacy" involved in Berkeley's argument, which is a fallacy of equivocation. There is a confusion engendered by the word 'idea'. The notion of 'being in the mind' is ambiguous. Things cannot be inside a mind, only thoughts can thus be. Of course, when you keep something in mind you

[2] G. E. Moore, "The Refutation of Idealism", in *Philosophical Studies*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co. Inc., 1922, pp. 1–30, p. 29.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 25.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 24.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 19.

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 39.

[7] B. Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 20.

continue to think of it, you make efforts not to forget it, that is, you maintain present the thought of the thing, not the thing itself. So thoughts are in the mind in a way things are not. But Berkeley made just this confusion, when he said that sensible things are in the mind like thoughts are supposed to be.

Berkeley wanted to prove, according to Russell, that "by being known, things are shown to be mental"[8]. In order to refute this claim, Russell follows Moore closely. When an idea is before our mind, two things must be distinguished: (1) "the thing of which we are aware", and (2) "the actual awareness itself, the mental act of apprehending the thing"[9]. The awareness is mental, but the object not necessarily. When saying that blue is mental, the mental character of the apprehension of blue is transferred to blue itself, by reason of the fact that both the awareness and blue are called "ideas" in Berkeley's language. This is Berkeley's chief fallacy.

Berkeley confuses, that is, he doesn't distinguish properly, act and object. Acquaintance with objects different from it is the mind's distinctive characteristic (this a statement of the intentional character of the mind). To say than an object is in the mind is either platitudinous, or nonsensical. If it is meant that the object is before the mind, this a truism. If it is meant that the object itself is existentially inside the mind (or mind-dependent), this is false. In conclusion, "when we realise the nature of knowledge, Berkeley's argument is seen to be wrong in substance as well in form, and his grounds for supposing that 'ideas' – i.e. the objects apprehended – must be mental, are fond to have no validity whatever. Hence his grounds in favour of idealism may be dismissed."[10]

Russell promotes the same stereotype as Moore and indeed voices almost the same critiques. Of importance to us is that he looks into the meaning of the phrase "being in the mind", in order to show its ambiguity, an ambiguity corresponding to the ambiguity of the term "idea". "Being in the mind" can mean (1) being mental, as thoughts are, or (2) being before the mind (i.e. targeted by the mind), as physical things are. If the distinction is properly made, it becomes impossible to hold that physical things are mental. There is then a third error of which Berkeley is supposed to be guilty:

(E3) The confusion of two distinct meanings of "being in the mind".

2. THE NEOREALIST DEFENCE OF BERKELEY

Reductive and inaccurate as it was, the Cantabrigian stereotype triggered the realist controversy over Berkeley and imposed to it a certain language and subject-matter. It became widely accepted that Berkeley meant by "ideas" the same thing as the moderns meant by "sense-data". So, the issue of the status of Berkeley's ideas was confounded with the issue of the status of sense-data, which was on the order of the day and heatedly debated between realists (Dawes Hicks 1912,

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 21.
[9] *Ibidem*.
[10] *Ibidem*, p. 22.

Moore 1913, Stout 1913, Russell 1913 etc.). The neorealists proposed a distinctive conception of sense-data, agreeing on the following claims:

(N1) Sense-data are the immediate objects of the mind.
(N2) Sense-data are not mind-dependent.
(N3) Sense-data are public entities.
(N4) Sense-data are real constituents of physical things.
(N5) Physical things reduce to complex structures of sense-data exhibiting spatial and temporal relations.

There was considerably less agreement over the positive ontological status of sense-data. Here are some "antinomies", if I may borrow Kant's term and use it in a loose sense:

(A1) Thesis: Sense-data are material. Antithesis: Sense data are immaterial but physical (Kemp Smith).
(A2) Thesis: Sense-data are physical. Antithesis: Sense-data are non-physical, but material (Stout).
(A3) Thesis: Sense-data are perceiver-independent. Antithesis: Sense-data depend upon the perceiver's physiology.
(A3) Thesis: Sense-data are objects. Antithesis: Sense-data are events.

Another point of controversy concerned the "sensible qualities" qualifying sense-data. One terminological remark imposes itself at this point: Whitehead used the terms "sense-data" or "sensa" or "sense-object" to refer to what was usually called "sensible qualities". When he meant what many others (Moore included) usually called "sense-data", he used the terms "sense-presentation" or "percept". Kemp Smith's language is somewhat similar, for he also identifies sense-data with sensible qualities (as does Russell occasionally). Now the antinomy concerning the sensible qualities was the following:

(A4) Thesis: Sensible qualities are universals. Antithesis: Sensible qualities are particulars.

Two other antinomies concerning the sensible qualities can be registered, although the neorealists agreed, on both cases, on the thesis (which is entailed by N4 and N5), and rejected the antithesis. They are of some importance to our story.

(A5) Thesis: Sensible qualities belong to physical things. Antithesis: Sensible qualities belong to sense-data.
(A6) Thesis: Sensible qualities are identical to the secondary qualities of things. Antithesis: Sensible qualities symbolize the secondary qualities of things.

Now the concept of sense-data proposed by Moore and Russell (at some stages of their philosophical development) was quite opposed to the neorealist concept. It is expressible as the conjunction of the following claims:

(C1) Sense-data are immediate objects of the mind.
(C2) Sense-data are mind-dependent.
(C3) Sense-data are private entities.
(C4) Sense-data are not constituents of physical things.
(C5) Sense-data symbolize physical things.
(C6) Sensible qualities belong to sense-data.

(C7) Sensible qualities symbolize secondary qualities of physical things.

One can see that there is no point of contact between the neorealist conception and the Cantabrigian conception, with the exception of the convention of calling "sense-data" the immediate objects of the mind in sense-perception, whatever their ontological nature and epistemological status.

What is, we may wonder, the status of Berkeley's ideas, when interpreted as sense-data? On the Cantabrigian stereotype, Berkeley's doctrine involves the following statements:

(B1) Sense-data are immediate objects of the mind.
(B2) Sense-data are mind-dependent.
(B3) Sense-data are private entities.
(B4) Sense-data are real constituents of physical things.
(B5) Physical things reduce to complex collections of sense-data exhibiting spatial and temporal relations.

We can see how Berkeley, on this interpretation, partly agrees with the Cantabrigians, and partly agrees with the neorealists. Berkeley's B2 and B3 are identical to C2 and C3, while B4 and B5 are identical to N4 and N5. Hence the Cantabrigians' attacks on B4 and B5. From the neorealists' standpoint, the problematic claims were B2 and B3. This is why they tried to argue that they are false, and that what Berkeley actually says, or at least what he means, in his best moments, is more akin to the neorealist position expressed in N2-N3. Thus, defending Berkeley implied an exegetical *tour de force*, by which apparently contradictory theses were to be reconciled. Berkeley could thus be vindicated as a philosophical ancestor of neorealism; neorealism could be presented as updated Berkeleyanism. Berkeley defended common sense, and so did the neorealists; Berkeley first critiqued the theory of representative perception, and the neorealists adopted his critical arguments. Berkeley fought scepticism, and the neorealists were fighting it also. Berkeley had set philosophy on the right track, correcting the errors of Descartes and Locke, and blocking the possibility of scepticism of the Humean kind. And Hume's philosophy made possible Kantian idealism, and Kant made possible Hegel, and they both made possible Bradley. Berkeley stands at a crossroad, but very few followed him on the right path. The rest walked the broad way opened by Locke. In some sense, the neorealists wanted to get back to the crossroad and take the path inaugurated by Berkeley, in order to avoid both Humean scepticism and idealism of the Kantian and post-Kantian kind. Neorealism was an overt return to pre-Kantian modes of thought, and even more: a return to pre-Kantian non-Lockean non-Cartesian modes of thought. Unsurprisingly, neorealism drew inspiration from Spinoza, from Leibniz, but also from Berkeley.

Dealing with B2 and B3 involved interpreting Berkeley's core intuition that things, as ideas, can only exist in a mind, or, otherwise stated, that "the absolute existence of sensible objects in themselves, or without the mind"[11] (*PHK*, 24) is

[11] G. Berkeley, *A Treatise on the Principles of Human Knowledge*, in *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, Ed. by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, Vol. 2, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1949, p. 24.

self-contradictory. As we have seen, according to Moore, Berkeley only could hold such a thesis because he was unable to distinguish, within a sensation, the act from the object (E1). But several realists agreed that Berkeley did not make such a confusion.

Dawes Hicks, the critical realist, affirmed that Berkeley recognized the difference between "the fact that I perceive from the percept"[12] and quoted in support from §49 of *PHK*: "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*". Sensible qualities are not modes or attributes of the mind, but ideas of the mind, which clearly entails that "ideas" are not modifications or adjectives of the individual minds.

Dawes Hicks came back a number of times to Berkeley's proximity with the new realism. He argued, explicitly and implicitly, that Russell and Moore are in fact very close from the idealism they critique while misunderstanding it. In "The Basis of Critical Realism", for that matter, he emphasized Berkeley's underlying "conviction that the 'mental' is not exhausted in what he called the 'modes' or 'attributes' of mind, but that 'qualities' may be 'mental' in the sense that they *are* only as perceived by a mind."[13] In his later monograph on Berkeley, Dawes Hicks rejected Russell's claim that Berkeley made E3. He writes: "Were sensible things 'in the mind' after the manner in which an act of thinking is 'in the mind', it would follow that, just as the mind is a thinking being, so it must be an extended being (§49). But the truth is the mind is 'entirely distinct' from the extensions it perceives."[14] It follows that Berkeley does distinguish, according to Hicks, between the mode in which thoughts are in the mind, and the mode in which sensible things are in the mind. That sensible things are in the mind essentially means that they are objects of individual acts of perception.

Samuel Alexander, the leading neorealist, was also far from accepting that Berkeley made all the errors Moore and Russell accused him of. In his important paper "The Basis of Realism" he writes that "[t]he obvious distinction of the mental act from what it is about […] is implied by Berkeley himself when he declares that mountains and trees exist in the mind not by way of mode, but by way of idea."[15] So E1 is out of the question. However, Berkeley might be guilty of E2, on Alexander's interpretation. This is why, for him, physical things, as objects of mental acts, reduce to "mental content[s] or presentation[s]"[16]. But it seems that Alexander finds no reason for accusing Berkeley of E3. He synthetically formulates the relation between his realism and Berkeley's philosophy in his *magnum opus*:

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[12] George Dawes Hicks, "Symposium: The Time Difficulty in Realist Theories of Perception" in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1911–1912, New Series, Vol. 12 (1911–1912), pp. 124–187, p. 168.

[13] George Dawes Hicks, "The Basis of Critical Realism" in *Critical Realism. Studies in the Philosophy of Mind and Nature*, London: McMillan, 1938, pp. 1–47, p. 44.

[14] George Dawes Hicks, *Berkeley*, London, Ernest Benn Ltd., 1932, pp. 134–135.

[15] Samuel Alexander, "The Basis of Realism" (1914), in R. Chisholm (ed.), *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, Illinois, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960, pp. 186–222, p. 190.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 190

> Berkeley saw the truth that there is no idea to act as middleman between the mind and external things, no veil betwixt the mind and reality. He found the reality therefore in the ideas themselves. The other alternative is not to discard the supposed world of reality behind the ideas but to discard the ideas, regarded as objects dependent on the mind. Either way ideas and reality are one. But for Berkeley reality is ideas. For us ideas are reality. In so far as that reality enters into relation with the mind, it is ideas.[17]

We should recall at this point what Philonous replied to Hylas: "You mistake me. I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things"[18]. Alexander misunderstood Berkeley just like Hylas Philonous. But the fact remains that he couldn't find in Berkeley the cardinal error of confounding mental acts with the objects they are about.

The most thorough-going investigation of the relation between Berkeley's philosophy and neorealism belongs to John Laird. He also starts from §49 of *PHK* and he remarks that even Frazer, who was not exposed to the new analysis of mind, interpreted the passage after the manner of Dawes Hicks and Alexander, i.e., as showing "that Berkeley was not a subjective idealist, and that he did not regard sensible things as subjective modifications of the mind, but as presentations given to the individual mind, distinct from it, and accepted by it."[19] And he goes on to say:

> if presentations are "in the mind" only in the sense of being "before the mind", and if, as Berkeley certainly maintains, the whole choir of heaven and furniture of earth consist really and truly of nothing but presentations, then it would seem very hard to distinguish the main presuppositions of Berkeley's theory of physical reality from certain realistic accounts of the nature of the external world […].[20]

Laird holds that Berkeley was both a realist and an idealist, and that this position is not necessarily inconsistent, unless the terms "idealist" and "realist" receive much too narrow interpretations. "It would scarcely be possible to conceive of a system", he says, "which, in its intention, was more thoroughly realistic than Berkeley's"[21]. Berkeley is a realist mainly for two reasons: "because he affirmed and proved the full reality of what any sane man regards as real"[22]; and because "not merely does he defend the full reality of sensible things, but he is able to show that all other realms of reality are also, in essence, known as they really are"[23] (Laird refers here to the knowledge we have of our own minds).

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[17] Samuel Alexander, *Space, Time, and Deity*, New York, Dover Books, 1966, vol. I, p. 16.

[18] George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, in *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, Ed. by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, Vol 2, Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1949, p. 245.

[19] John Laird, "Berkeley's Realism" in *Mind*, vol. 25 (1916), no. 99, pp. 308–328, p. 309.

[20] *Ibidem.*

[21] *Ibidem*, pp. 309–310.

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 309.

[23] *Ibidem*, p. 310.

What was the type of Berkeley's idealism? Not an absolute idealism, according to Laird, even if it had a lot in common with absolute idealism, presumably as incarnated by the strict monists, like Bradley. "Berkeley insisted on the full reality of every appearance as it appears, and just because it appears […] He maintained, again, that finite minds are fully real as they appear, and he neither asserted nor implied that reality is a perfect whole in the metaphysical (not the ethical) sense of perfection."[24] Berkeley's idealism, as characterized by Laird, lies between pluralistic personal idealism and absolute idealism, not unlike Lotze's idealism. Like Lotze's idealism, Berkeley's idealism involves axiologism ("value is essential to the constitution of *any* universe"[25]), immaterialism (of a specific kind), and theism. As Laird argues, none of these features necessarily contradicts "realism, as realism is now interpreted"[26]. The central presupposition of neorealism is the following:

> when an act refers to an object, the object is really and necessarily what it is directly for the act […] The object is revealed to the act as it actually is […] The act of knowing neither distorts nor infects the character of this object […] This theory, then, is realistic, in the end, because of its interpretation of the relation between act and object in cognition. The relation is one of direct acquaintance, and reality is always revealed in such acquaintance unless, of course, in the doubtful case of error.[27]

When Berkeley's argument is examined, "we find many striking resemblances to the spirit, and sometimes even to the letter, of these contentions"[28]. Here are a few of the most important, more or less superficial:

(R1) Distinction act-object. (However, "the new realist's analysis of act and object is very differently described in Berkeley's account of spirit"[29]).
(R2) Direct realism about sensible things.
(R3) The thesis that "sensible things are in the mind *only* in the sense that they are the direct objects of the mind"[30].
(R4) The replacement of the common sense concept of "thing" by the concept of a class of ideas/sensibles.

Obviously, that R3 is true cannot be accepted without arguments. It is here that Laird tries his *tour de force* in exegesis, by arguing for the full compatibility of a sensible thing's being "in the mind" with its being "independent of the mind". Laird's compatibilism involves a weakening of "independence", such as to mean exclusively that "the object of a cognitive act is distinct from that act, given to it and not made by it, appearing as it really is and not clothed upon by the cognitive act itself"[31]. What about the meaning of "in the mind"? As Whitehead said, any philosopher must be allowed a few slips of mind. The important thing is to know

[24] *Ibidem*, p. 311.
[25] *Ibidem*.
[26] *Ibidem*.
[27] *Ibidem*, pp. 312–313.
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 313.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 318.
[30] *Ibidem*, p. 314.
[31] *Ibidem*, p. 320.

what Berkeley constantly and regularly meant by "being in the mind", despite some slips of mind which can fuel an anti-realistic interpretation. According to Laird, the standard meaning of the phrase is to be gathered from the following quotation: "my meaning is only that the mind comprehends or perceives them; and that it is affected from without, or by some being distinct from itself"[32]. Laird comments: "ideas of sense […] are external to the individual mind in one way since they are caused by the will of the deity; but they are internal as they are perceived because, when they are perceived, they are the ideas of that particular mind, or belong to it."[33] However, even if the phrase "in the mind" can be interpreted as not to contradict "independence of the mind", Laird eventually admits that "Berkeley's intuitive certainty that every idea must be 'in mind' implies an interpretation of 'idea' which is foreign to neo-realism", which signifies that "there is an inconsistency between the two intuitions"[34].

Laird also emphasizes those aspects of Berkeley's philosophy which are not compatible with realism. The main points of incompatibility are the following:

(I1) Berkeley's nominalist theory of universals;

(I2) The doctrine that "our sense-presentations exist eternally in the mind of God and are imprinted on our minds by his will"[35];

(I3) Berkeley's philosophy of mind (or philosophical psychology), resting on a half-hearted substantialism and being at variance with §49.

To sum up, according to Laird, Berkeley's philosophy of natural knowledge is highly compatible with neorealism, in so far as it is not vitiated by a wrong metaphysics; for, clearly, at least Berkeley's ontology and psychology are to be rejected, on Laird's account. However, Berkeley cannot be refuted after the manner of Moore and Russell, because he simply does not make the errors of which they accused him.

3. WHITEHEAD'S EARLY INTERPRETATION OF BERKELEY

Seemingly unaware at the time of the neorealist reading of Berkeley, Whitehead initially interpreted the bishop's philosophy along Cantabrigian lines. Indeed, some of Whitehead's remarks imply that he considered Berkeley's ideas to be subjective modifications of the percipient. He sometimes seems to conflate Berkeley's notion of "ideas" with Locke's notion of "ideas of sensation", and with Hume's notion of "impressions of sensation". On this interpretation, ideas are subjective, mental, epistemically private entities. Accordingly, things, which are bundles of ideas, are also subjective, mental, and epistemically private. There are not located in a common, public world, but in the private world of the individual percipient. The common world, i.e., nature, is not a perceived world, but a world

[32] George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, III, p. 251.
[33] John Laird, "Berkeley's Realism", in *Mind*, vol. 25 (1916), no. 99, pp. 308–328, p. 322.
[34] *Ibidem*, p. 326.
[35] *Ibidem*, p. 314.

intersubjectively constructed by thought from the subjective perceptions of many percipients. This is subjective idealism.

Whitehead seems to endorse the most fully the Cantabrigian interpretation in *PNK* and in two papers on the relation between idealism and the theory of relativity from 1922.

In *PNK*, Whitehead raises, on behalf of Berkeley, a difficulty for the concept of a common nature constituting the object of science, "the concept of one universal nature embracing the fragmentary perceptions of events by one percipient and the many perceptions by diverse percipients"[36]. The difficulty is labelled "the Berkeleyan dilemma", and is phrased as follows: "Perceptions are in the mind and universal nature is out of the mind, and thus the conception of universal nature can have no relevance to our perceptual life"[37]. If perceptions are "in the mind", while nature is "out of the mind", then subjectivism inexorably follows. G. F. Stout characterized "sensational subjectivism" (as a form of subjective idealism) in the following terms:

> [A]ll views which may me properly called subjective […] are founded on the assumption that the course of our experience might be as such, whether a physical world exists or not […] The sensational form of subjectivism [rests] on the postulate that it can make no practical difference to us whether physical objects exist or not, provided that our sensations and the order of their occurrence remain the same as we now find them to be. […] The gist of subjective idealism properly so called, as distinct from sensationalism, is that even though the physical world did not really exist, our representations of it as a whole and in detail might be such as it now is; and that if this were so it would make no practical difference to us whether it exists or not.[38]

Now what exactly is the Berkeleyan dilemma? It seems to be the following: either there is one physical world out of the mind, or there is no physical world out of the mind. If there is one physical world, it has no relevance for the course of our experience. If there is no physical world, then it cannot have any relevance for the course of our experience. Hence, whether the physical world exists or not, it doesn't make any difference to our experience. That means that no *knowledge* of nature is possible. Perception only provides us with information about what goes on in the minds. Thus science is ruined as an epistemological enterprise, in so far as it studies what is observed in perception through the senses. For it claims to teach us something about the physical world, but it speaks only of a mental world, a world of thoughts elaborated through the construal of our mental contents according to some logical principles.

But it now becomes clear that the Berkeleyan dilemma is not a dilemma Berkeley himself faces, but a dilemma which Berkeley raises before "any of the traditional types of 'mind-watching-things' philosophy"[39]. The Berkeleyan dilemma

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[36] A. N. Whitehead, *An Enquiriy Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1919, p. 8.

[37] *Ibidem*, pp. 8–9.

[38] G. F. Stout, *Mind and Matter*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1931, pp. 205–206.

[39] A. N. Whitehead, *An Enquiriy Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*, p. 9.

arises within any philosophy defining the physical as non-mental, that is, within any form of materialism or dualism. Ultimately, the very dichotomy between mental and non-mental, or material, must be rejected, and the nature must be thought with the help of different categories. Berkeley himself initiated a radically new way of thinking, when he conceptualized nature as physical, but immaterial. So the conception of "perceptions in the mind" is not Berkeley's: it is the conception of which Berkeley shows the absurdity.

As anybody knows, one can resist the conclusion of a dilemma either by seizing the dilemma by the horns, or by passing between its horns. Things are no different with the Berkeleyan dilemma. The second option seems blocked, because, on the principle of the excluded middle, a thing must be either in the mind, or out of the mind. So, in order to escape the dilemma, one must grab it by the horns. And the premiss which can be denied is that the existence of a physical world would make no practical difference to us. In other words, that if something went on out of the mind, it would be irrelevant to what goes on in the mind. But here the mind-body problem raises its ugly head. How could something not mental relate to something mental? How could what happens in the body have any relevance to what happens in the mind? Unless this residual Cartesianism is dropped, there is no answer to this question.

Bottom line, if a philosophy is such as to entail the Berkeleyan dilemma, it is doomed. There is no escaping the Berkeleyan dilemma. This philosophy must be abandoned to the profit of another, whose concepts do not allow the formulation of the dilemma. One possibility is to drop the mind and keep only the brain. It suddenly becomes a lot odder to say that nature is in the brain, while it is quite natural to say that the brain is a part of the nature and that perceptions are actually occurrences taking place in the brain. But how do you know there is any nature, apart from the brain which is supposed to account for your perceptions? The mind has gone; but nature is still not necessary to account for experience. For all I know, I could be a brain in a vat. The reference to Putnam is not anachronistic, Whitehead himself anticipates this kind of sceptical scenario: "We may not lightly abandon the [perceived things] and hope to retain the eye, its retina, and the brain"[40]. This philosophy, besides being "too simple-minded", has fatal flaws. If the physical things (including the bodies and brains of other persons) are disposed of, space and time go with them; but with space and time goes the brain; and so, complete scepticism – "which was not in Berkeley's own thought"[41] – is attained. It is the kind of scepticism Santayana later called "solipsism of the present moment" and which Whitehead describes in these words: "I am left solitary in the character of a void of experience without significance"[42]. The lack of significance of experience seems to be a problem for Whitehead. But why should the solipsist be bothered by the lack of significance (that is, of reference to something beyond itself) of his momentary experience, when this is exactly what he wants to hold? No answer is to be found in Whitehead, who simply resents this possibility and certainly finds scepticism extremely implausible.

[40] *Ibidem*, p. 10.
[41] *Ibidem*, p. 11.
[42] *Ibidem*.

So, from his perspective, dropping the mind won't do; one remaining possibility is to drop the physical things, and keep the minds. Thus, the physical things become "ideas" in the individual minds. Whitehead seems to attribute to Berkeley the following reasoning: if the physical world is to be relevant to the course of our experience, then physical things must not be out of the mind, but in the mind; physical world is obviously relevant to the course of our experience, hence physical things are in the mind. Physical things become "ideas", i.e., private, subjective, mental entities. Nature is "in the mind" like ideas are in the mind. The Berkeleyan dilemma is thus impossible to formulate in the framework of the subjective idealism Whitehead attributes to Berkeley.

On the whole, subjective idealism is superior to solipsism, because it does not rob experience of its significance. "Berkeley himself insists that experience is significant"[43]. However, for him the significance of experience is "God conversing with us"[44]. Whitehead sees here a typical *Deus ex machina* procedure, God is brought in to solve the philosophers' difficulties. Indifferently of this remark, Whitehead claims that, in Berkeley's system, significance is detachable from experience, and this leads directly to scepticism. Hume took advantage of Berkeley's disconnection of experience from significance, in order to reach scepticism: "He accepted Berkeley's assumption that experience is something given, an impression, without essential reference to significance, and exhibited it in its bare insignificance. Berkeley's conversation with God then becomes a fairy tale."[45] This is additional evidence that Whitehead, throughout the entire discussion, attributes to Berkeley a notion of "idea" akin to Hume's "impression", i.e., to Locke's "idea of sensation". The impression is strengthened when reading the papers from 1922 on relativity.

Notably "The Philosophical Aspects of the Principle of Relativity" contains a discussion of "Berkeley's argument in favour of his central position of idealism"[46]. Berkeley's central argument rests on the doctrine that "the objects of sense-perception […] are essentially personal to the observer"[47]; or, expressed differently, that "appearances in space and through time are personal to the observer"[48]. What does that mean? That "there is nothing left when you have torn the observer from the observation"[49]. The implication is that "appearances", "objects of sense-perception", in short, sense-data are dependent upon the observer's observation. "Personal", then, means both *private* and *subjective*. This is confirmed by Whitehead's saying that "Berkeley's argument is that it stands in the essential nature of the case that different observers perceive different things"[50]. I submit the term "personal" has also the connotation of being *mental*, in the sense of being *mind-dependent*. Whitehead speaks of the dependence of the observed from the observer ("there is

[43] *Ibidem*, p. 12.
[44] *Ibidem*.
[45] *Ibidem*.
[46] A. N. Whitehead, "The Philosophical Aspects of the Principle of Relativity", in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, Vol. 22 (1921–1922), pp. 215–223, p. 215.
[47] *Ibidem*.
[48] *Ibidem*, p. 216.
[49] *Ibidem*, p. 215.
[50] *Ibidem*, p. 217.

no common realm of things observed, whose interactions can be expressed apart from reference to observers"[51]), and later adds that, "for Berkeley the observer is mind" and for this reason, he adds, "Berkeley is an idealist"[52].

It would seem, then, that Whitehead conspicuously considered Berkeley a subjective idealist in his writings on natural philosophy, and attributed him the doctrine that nature is a construct from abstract ideas, derived from "personal" experiences, "nothing else than a common expression for diverse processes of mentality"[53], which do not possess the slightest objectivity, "other than that of being phases in the process of self-development of the observer"[54]. I believe, however, that this much too conventional and stereotypical image of Berkeley does not capture Whitehead's genuine understanding of the Irish philosopher's doctrine. Just like Whitehead distinguished in Locke's *Essays* two different doctrines, he saw in Berkeley two different conceptions of experience. He saw that Berkeley adopted an argumentative strategy in which eventually he got trapped. His strategy was to begin with a notion of experience he didn't believe. It was Locke's ultimately Cartesian notion. Berkeley's argument in *PHK* begins with a Lockean trichotomy of the objects of knowledge, which clashes later with Berkeley's claim that we do not have any *idea* of mind. Also, the assumption that experience could be intrinsically meaningless is not Berkeleyan, but Cartesian. In truth, Berkeley knew what Kant put forth later, that "'significance' is an essential element in concrete experience"[55], that "significance is experience"[56], for else he couldn't have "*tacitly ignore[d]* this aspect of experience"[57]. In turn, Berkeley "put[s] forward, as expressing experience, conceptions of it which have no relevance to fact"[58]. Berkeley's mistake, then, was to start from a false conception of experience, borrowed from Locke: he wanted to criticize his opponent on his own premisses.

4. WHITEHEAD'S LATER INTERPRETATION OF BERKELEY

In *Science and the Modern World*, Whitehead appears to absolve Berkeley of the charge of subjective idealism. Although he notes that such idealism "has been derived from him"[59], this is not the same as attributing it to Berkeley – just as Marxism may have been derived from Marx against his own intent. Whitehead rejects the Cantabrigian reading of Berkeley's "ideas" as merely private, subjective and mental entities, instead implying a view of them as both subjective and objective, mental and physical, private and public.

[51] *Ibidem*.
[52] *Ibidem*, p. 218.
[53] *Ibidem*, p. 216.
[54] *Ibidem*, p. 217.
[55] A. N. Whitehead, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*, p. 11.
[56] *Ibidem*, p. 12.
[57] *Ibidem*, p. 11, emphasis mine.
[58] *Ibidem*.
[59] A. N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (1925), New York, The Free Press, 1997, p. 67

Whitehead aligns Berkeley with epistemological realism, opposing the representative theory of perception held by Locke and Hume, and scientific materialism. Berkeley's key critique targets "simple location"[60], avoiding the fallacy of misplaced concreteness. He emerges as the first modern proponent of objective/absolute idealism on a realistic basis (epistemological), providing Whitehead with a philosophical model. Whitehead attributes explicitly to Berkeley an "extreme idealist" view: mind as absolute reality, nature as ideas in God's mind[61]. God and finite minds are the only substances[62], with "ideas" as their content – a stance akin to absolute idealism, transformed along realistic lines after Lotze's manner.

That Whitehead did not ultimately consider Berkeley as an epistemological idealist can also be argued from the absence of Berkeley from the critical discussion in Part II of *Process and Reality*, his *magnum opus*, which concerns Descartes, Locke, Hume, and Kant. One common mistake all these philosophers made, was the entertainment of the "traditional subjectivist sensationalism", inherited from the Middle Ages. Whitehead alternatively speaks of the "sensationalist doctrine", resting on two principles: the subjectivist principle and the sensationalist principle. The sensationalist principle, or "dogma"[63] is consistently upheld by Hume, inconsistently by Locke (in the first two books of his *Essay*), and rejected by Kant. The subjectivist principle, in exchange, is entertained by all three philosophers. Both principles are rejected by Whitehead, but he accepts a reformed subjectivist doctrine. Now I believe that Whitehead considered that Berkeley didn't endorse any of the two principles, in the form they are discussed and rejected in *Process and Reality*:

> The subjectivist principle is, that the datum in the act of experience can be adequately analysed purely in terms of universals.
> The sensationalist principle is, that the primary activity in the act of experience is the bare subjective entertainment of the datum, devoid of any subjective form of reception. This is the doctrine of *mere* sensation.[64]

If Whitehead does not attribute subjectivism to Berkeley, it is certainly because, firstly, Berkeley is a nominalist (which Whitehead could not ignore), and, secondly, because Berkeley's philosophy entails the rejection of the premisses from which the subjectivist principle follows:

> (i) The acceptance of the "substance-quality" concept as expressing the ultimate ontological principle. (ii) The acceptance of Aristotle's definition of a primary

[60] *Ibidem*.
[61] *Ibidem*, p. 68.
[62] A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (1926), New York, Fordham University Press, 1996, p. 107.
[63] A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (1929), corrected edition by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, New York, The Free Press, 1978, p. 146.
[64] *Ibidem*, p. 157.

> substance, as always a subject and never a predicate. (iii) The assumption that the experient subject is a primary substance.[65]

In 1922 Whitehead accused Berkeley of "tacitly presupposing the Aristotelian logical forms"[66], i.e., of the subject-predicate analysis of propositions, which cannot be contested. Even if the logical doctrine of subject and predicate is derived from the ontological doctrine of substance and quality, Whitehead could not ignore that Berkeley rejected the ontological doctrine, even if he was still clinging to the logical doctrine. Whitehead's interpretation connects Berkeley's doctrine that ideas must be in the mind with the logical doctrine of subject and predicate. However, for Berkeley ideas do not inhere in minds, they are not said of minds, they are not predicates, adjectives, or modes of minds, and Berkeley never lets the reader understand such a thing. Whitehead, who knew Berkeley well, could not have accused him, in good faith, of endorsing the three premisses above.

Let me now go back to the discussion in *PR*. Whitehead continues:

> The [first] two premises together are the foundation of the traditional distinction between universals and particulars. The philosophy of organism denies the premises on which this distinction is founded. It admits two ultimate classes of entities, mutually exclusive. One class consists of "actual entities", which in the philosophical tradition are mis-described as "particulars"; and the other class consists of forms of definiteness, here named "eternal objects", which in comparison with actual entities are mis-described as "universals".[67]

Berkeley also admitted only two ultimate classes of entities, minds (finite and infinite) and ideas (simple and complex). The analogy, however superficial, holds so far and can be developed. Berkeley rejected substantialism about physical things, construing them as collections of ideas. This rejection lies at the core of his immaterialism, which denies the existence of any "material substance". It follows immediately that the "substance-quality concept" is equally discarded. Indifferently whether Berkeleyan minds can be considered or not Aristotelian "primary substances", ideas are not qualities of minds, so the traditional concept of quality has no denotation whatsoever. But one can wonder whether Berkeley's substantialist categorization of the mind was not a mere terminological concession to his environment. Laird, for that matter, seems to doubt that Berkeley was in thinking as substantialist as his way of expressing himself suggests; for once, Berkeley made perhaps the error of speaking with the learned, while not thinking with them. More recently, revisionary interpretations have been proposed, absolving Berkeley's philosophy of mind of the endorsement of the traditional substance-mode scheme of thought[68]. My belief is that Whitehead knew Berkeley sufficiently well and was sympathetic enough not to make of him an Aristotelian substantialist.

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[65] *Ibidem*.

[66] A. N. Whitehead, "The Philosophical Aspects of the Principle of Relativity", p. 217.

[67] A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, p. 158.

[68] T.M. Bettcher, *Berkeley's Philosophy of Spirit: Consciousness, Ontology and the Elusive Subject*, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007.

Coming now to the sensationalist doctrine, it seems difficult to attribute it consistently to Berkeley. There are *loci* where Berkeley says that the apprehension of ideas is an active, not a purely passive process (e.g. *Principles of Human Knowledge*, §139); of course, there are other *loci* where Berkeley expresses the thesis that the mind is passively entertaining sensations, the only activity belonging to God, who imprints ideas on the purely receptive finite mind. What is the true belief of Berkeley, was and remains to this day subject to controversy, but there are grounds for absolving him of sensationalism, in Whitehead's sense.

This brief examination may suffice to exhibit the ground of compatibility between Berkeley's philosophy of perception and the philosophy of organism, and may explain why there is no critique of Berkeley in *Process and Reality* (and in none of Whitehead's subsequent books, for that matter). If epistemological idealism entails either subjectivism, or sensationalism, or the conjunction of both, then it follows that Berkeley cannot, from a Whiteheadian standpoint, be an epistemological idealist.

5. CONCLUSION

In sum, the trajectory of Whitehead's engagement with Berkeley reveals a shift from an early acceptance of the Cantabrigian stereotype to a more nuanced appreciation of Berkeley's philosophical position. The neorealist reinterpretations of Berkeley by Alexander, Nunn, Laird, and Dawes Hicks provided a framework in which the Bishop could be seen as a precursor to a form of direct realism, rather than a mere proponent of subjective idealism. Whitehead's mature philosophy, especially as articulated in *Science and the Modern World* and *Process and Reality*, aligns Berkeley with a rejection of both the sensationalist and the subjectivist principles, placing him outside the primary targets of Whitehead's epistemological critique. Far from being the originator of the errors attributed to him by Moore and Russell, Berkeley emerges as a thinker whose anti-representationalist stance and denial of material substance anticipate key features of the philosophy of organism. In this light, Berkeley's immaterialism can be read not as an evasion of reality into the privacy of the mind, but as an early and prescient attempt to reconceive the relation between perception, objectivity, and the structure of the world – a project that Whitehead, in his own metaphysical scheme, would carry forward.