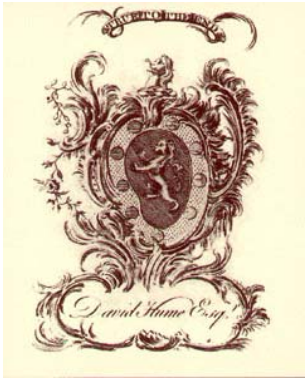

Berkeley and Scepticism: A Fatal Dalliance
Robert A. Imlay
Hume Studies Volume XVIII, Number 2 (November, 1992) 501-510.

Berkeley and Scepticism: A Fatal Dalliance

Robert A. Imlay

This article is divided into three sections. In the first section I try to show how Berkeley inadvertently commits himself to scepticism or subjectivism by employing against the representational realist an argument that seeks to identify all sensible qualities regardless of degree with pleasure or pain viewed as feeling states. An appeal to the act-object distinction as a way of avoiding this result is shown to be futile because of the purely grammatical nature of that distinction.

Berkeley must, if he can do so consistently, radically change course and attack the alleged identity head-on. In view of that I try to show more clearly in the second section why the sceptic or subjectivist—and Berkeley himself—are convinced that the identity forces itself upon us. At the same time I try to explain why even a representationalism that agrees to identify heat, for example, with felt heat but clings to something unfelt like heat qua heat to be found in the fire is no answer to these philosophers. If it were, admittedly, the identity would not have to be attacked head-on. Against this form of representational realism an appeal is once more made to the purely grammatical nature of the act-object distinction which in our view lies behind Berkeley's anti-representationalist likeness principle.

In the third section, attacking the identity head-on I try to show the identification of heat and pain, to continue with that example, assumes that all differences between the two would have to be transparent to consciousness. And that is already to assume what needs to be proved, namely, that there is no epistemologically opaque, mind-independent heat of the fire. Unfortunately, this line of attack is not open to Berkeley, because he has other arguments designed to show that there is, indeed, no mind-independent heat of the fire. If, on the other hand, he rejected the transparency of consciousness, he would run the risk—as he is fully aware—of allowing in scepticism or subjectivism through another door. Finally, Berkeley's attempt to avoid scepticism or subjectivism by making sensible qualities objects of perception is seen to run afoul of the purely grammatical nature of the act-object relation, the subject with which this paper more or less began.

I

One tried but perhaps not always true way of dealing with the philosophical sceptic or subjectivist is to give her all the rope that she requires in order to hang herself. This is the way of Descartes in the first and the beginning of the second *Meditation* where sceptical doubt, indeed denial, pushed to its limit, is supposed to demonstrate to the philosopher that he exists. It is, however, also the way of Berkeley at least to the extent that he is prepared to employ a sceptical or subjectivist argument to arrive at a position that is supposed to be in the final analysis incompatible with scepticism or subjectivism.

Such a strategy is, needless to say, not without its dangers. Indeed, it is because of them that just such a strategy, if it could succeed, would constitute a real epistemic *tour de force*. The most obvious and pressing danger is that by unabashedly employing a sceptical or subjectivist argument one inevitably becomes committed to scepticism or subjectivism oneself. Nor is that danger to be averted merely by qualifying the argument in question in such a way that it loses its sceptical or subjectivist bite. For at least in the case of Berkeley and the particular argument of his that we have in mind, it can lose that bite only by ceasing to be itself. By the same token it will leave intact or at least play no role in the dismantling of a position that on further analysis is supposed to be not only compatible with scepticism or subjectivism but, if Berkeley is right, ultimately vindicates it.

The argument is the one in which Berkeley insists on the identity, regardless of degree, of all the sensible qualities—heat and cold, sweet and bitter, for example—with either pleasure or pain viewed as feeling states in order to put them in the mind along with the latter.[1] This argument is essentially a sceptical or subjectivist one and, if he were to abandon it, it would deprive Berkeley of one stick with which he intends to beat the representational realist. And representational realism, if thought through in a consistent manner—or so Berkeley would have it—must lead to scepticism or subjectivism. Indeed, that is why he wants to replace it with a kind of theological phenomenalism, a phenomenalism that has been well described by John Davis in a much cited article.[2]

But how can one genuinely make a sceptical or subjectivist argument one's own and still not be one of them? If one concludes that all sensible qualities are *Erlebnisse*—feeling states that one is in—then scepticism or subjectivism seems inevitable. And scepticism or subjectivism is clearly incompatible with any philosophy that would justifiably situate us in an objective world, be it representational realism or theological phenomenalism. One way of avoiding such a conclusion, it might be thought—Russell comes to mind here—is to divide the feeling state into two elements, the act and the object.[3] The

result would be that the act is, indeed, subjective, but the object, as the very word suggests, is not. The object, however, would not be the epistemologically remote one of representational realism, but one of which we are immediately and incorrigibly aware. So, a sceptical argument, when supplemented by a satisfactory analysis of what it is to be in a feeling state, generates a form of realism which is direct and so impervious to sceptical assault.

But this way of proceeding cannot be right. It is not that a sceptical argument cannot somehow be supplemented—obviously it can. It must, however, be done in a consistent manner. And any argument that would first have us identify sensible qualities with feeling states only later to have us identify them with objects and mind-independent objects to boot is not consistent. The concept of an object must in the first place be interpreted in this context in such a way that there is no implication of mind independence. Even that, however, is not enough to allow us to identify these objects with feeling states. For feeling states are not the sort of thing, at least in the first instance, that we contemplate like an object, but rather that we endure like a migraine. Indeed, it is for that very reason that we find Berkeley's identification of pain and heat, for example, initially so counter-intuitive; it seems at first blush that we can contemplate our pain only by enduring it, but that we do not need to be hot in order to contemplate something's heat, and not just *our* heat either.

In order to preserve consistency, then, we should require the concept of an object to be so emaciated that it is neutral between what we endure and what we contemplate. Is there such a concept? I think that not only is there such a concept but that it is the only one in the final analysis compatible with the much touted act-object distinction properly understood. For unless I am totally mistaken, the object on that distinction is purely grammatical in nature. It has, as a result, no implications for the kinds of objects that exist, let alone for their mind-independent status or otherwise.

What do we mean when we say that the object on the act-object distinction is purely grammatical in nature? We mean to refer to the fact that it is merely the internal accusative of the corresponding verb. It has as such no referring function over and above that performed by the verb itself. Just as when I dance a dance there exists in all its concreteness only my dancing, an occurrent event, and not something further and different, namely, the dance qua dance, so in the state of feeling hot, there exists in all its concreteness my feeling hot and not something further and different, namely, the heat qua heat. Berkeley could, then, contrary to what he seems to think, accept the act-object distinction without embracing direct realism or even real but unactualized possibilities.[4] The difficulty, however, is that his position,

at least as far as his identification of all the sensible qualities with either pleasure or pain and its immediate consequences is concerned, is still indiscernible from that of the sceptic or subjectivist.

II

I do not think that there is any way that Berkeley can accept the argument identifying sensible qualities regardless of degree with either pleasure or pain viewed as feeling states without committing himself to scepticism or subjectivism. And, since he would plainly find that to be an intellectual and moral disaster of the first order, he would be well advised not to employ it, indeed, to reject it, if the rest of his system will allow it. That does not mean that, as far as Berkeley is concerned, representative realism is left intact. He has other arguments, the argument from illusion, for example, designed to force us to identify sensible qualities with ideas, where the latter need not be interpreted as feeling states. It is the essential reference to pleasure and pain, not to an idea as such, even interpreted in the jejune, objectless way that we have suggested, that forces that interpretation upon us in the present instance. But there is no reference, essential or otherwise, to pleasure or pain in Berkeley's version of the argument from illusion.

It is, however, one thing to reject an argument and another, although related, thing to say what exactly is wrong with it. It seems incontrovertible that pleasure or pain is a feeling state. It seems, moreover, highly implausible that an intense heat, for example, should be identical with pain, while a less intense heat should be identical with neither pain nor pleasure nor some feeling state in between, but, on the contrary, be fully objective and mind-independent. How could a mere difference of degree allow us to jump ontological categories in this way? It looks, then, as though—this point will be reinforced later—the identification of sensible qualities, regardless of degree, with pain and pleasure, taken now as feeling states, must be attacked head-on.

Caution is, nonetheless, required. A head-on attack, needless to say, is not to be confused with simply begging the question. Thus it is not permissible to reject the identity in question entirely or even partially on the grounds that it ignores, for example, the heat of the mind-independent object, say the fire.[5] For as counter-intuitive as it may appear—we have already noted that—the thrust of the identity is to get us to see that there is nothing there to ignore. On the other hand, however, if the process of getting us to see is to be a genuine one, the sceptic or subjectivist cannot assume at the outset that the goal has already been attained. That would be no more than to leave uncompleted an essential part of her task.

What exactly is the relation here between the process and its goal? How is pondering the alleged identity between intense heat and pain, for example, supposed to get us to see that the heat in question cancels out the heat of the mind-independent fire? The answer, I think, is to be found in the fact that we are confronted with two opposing explanations of how we come to feel heat. The one appeals to the heat that is supposed to exist outside of us in the fire, the other, whatever it is, does not. And naturally enough we seek to adduce considerations that will allow us in a reasonable manner to decide between them. One such consideration that would be decisive, if true, would be the identity of heat and pain. For the concept of pain, unlike that of heat, is not ambiguous between connoting a feeling state that we endure, on the one hand, and the property of an object, not necessarily ourself, that we contemplate, on the other hand. It connotes on the contrary, uniquely a feeling state. So, if heat is pain, it, too, is uniquely a feeling state. How one gets into such a state, needless to say, requires an explanation. Still, there is no reason to believe, short of rejecting the identity, that something literally called the heat of the fire—fire does not feel heat—would or could figure in it.

But even if one were to admit that heat was pain, might there not be something in the fire sufficiently like that heat to figure in an explanation of how we come to feel it? Admittedly, it would not be that heat but the feeling aspect might be subtractive. As a result, we could ascribe something analogous to felt heat—heat qua heat or the like—and at the same time avoid attacking the alleged identity between sensible qualities, on the one hand, and pleasure and pain, on the other, head-on. Our earlier contention that Berkeley's only hope of avoiding scepticism or subjectivism is to attack the identity, on which he in fact insists, head-on would turn out to be false.

Berkeley's reaction to the above proposal is well known. He in effect denies the possibility of the comparison in question on the ground *inter alia* that an idea can be like nothing but an idea.[6] For unless there was at least one property that heat, now properly regarded exclusively as something we feel, shared with the proposed analogon, there could be no genuine comparison. But why should Berkeley be so convinced that there is not and, indeed, could not be such a property? The answer takes us back to our earlier contention that feeling heat is like dancing a dance. In both cases the object in question is the internal accusative of the verb. It constitutes the limit, as it were, of the occurrent event described by the verb and, as such, is nothing over and above that event. Otherwise, we should have the paradox of a limit of x which *ipso facto* goes beyond X. If, however, we are dealing uniquely with the event itself and its properties, these are the only ones that could sustain a comparison with heat qua heat. The event in the case that happens to

interest us is that of feeling heat. There is no reason to believe that the properties of such an event—with the possible exception of perfectly general properties like identity—could also be those of an entity like heat qua heat.

The likeness principle—an idea can be like nothing but an idea—is grounded, then, whether Berkeley is fully aware of it or not, in an ontologically austere but at the same time very concrete conception of what it is to have an idea. It is of this conception that any form of representational realism, even one that renounces the actual heat of the fire in favour of heat qua heat, runs afoul.[7] At the same time, even or especially with this purely grammatical conception of an object, it permits a framework in which representational realism, however misguided, can at least be stated. And that is important in a dialectic where, as we have already had occasion to note, mutual charges of begging the question play such a large role.

To what extent, however, is this purely grammatical conception of an object one that Berkeley actually defended and to what extent is it one we think he ought to have held? We have left open the possibility that his grip on this purely grammatical conception of an object was not as firm as one might have liked, but not too much should be made of that. It is clear, at least from the relevant passage in *Principles*, that what inspires Berkeley's appeal to the likeness principle is his reasoned conviction that the ideas with which he identifies sensible properties must be or at least be conceived to be experienced, whether that means enduring them like pain or heat or contemplating them like colour.[8] There could be no such entity, as already indicated, as heat qua heat that could both be in the mind and link up with something identical with it in a mind-independent reality and form the basis of a comparison. Scholastic sensible species, cartesian objective realities and the like are no more than reifying verbal expressions with which we delude ourselves into believing that representative realism makes sense.

Representative realism, as we have already had occasion to indicate, must in Berkeley's view lead to scepticism or subjectivism. And, even if he should be wrong about that, it would be surprising to learn that the reverse is true, namely, that representative realism in any form constitutes a prophylactic against scepticism or subjectivism, dispensing Berkeley from attacking willy-nilly head-on the alleged identity between sensible qualities on the one hand and pleasure and pain as feeling states on the other.

III

At what point, if any, is the identity claim in question vulnerable? It seems to me that it is at that point where subjective evidence must be

adduced to support it. For the claim that intense heat and pain, for example, are identical, unless implausibly held to be self-evident, must be rooted in my inability to tell the difference between the two. But what would license an inference from my inability to tell the difference between intense heat and pain to the conclusion that there is no difference to tell? Such a licence would be at my disposal—and even that may be open to debate—only if I was *already* permitted to identify intense heat with the corresponding feeling, which I then go on unerringly to identify with pain.[9] To assume, in other words, that the license is already at my disposal is to beg the question against anyone who holds to an epistemologically opaque heat of the fire over and above the sensation of heat itself. And, if there is such a heat of the fire, it would, needless to say, be unacceptable to identify it with pain simply on the grounds that intensely felt heat is, at least, as far as the percipient is concerned, and, perhaps, therefore, in itself indiscernible from pain.

Recourse to the possibility—not the actuality—of mind-independent qualities like the heat of the fire in the present context is, nonetheless, of limited utility in our attempt to save Berkeley from the proscribed sceptical or subjectivist side of himself. For as already indicated, he has other arguments at his disposal designed to close off that possibility. And there would seem to be no reason at least from his point of view why he could not appeal to them in order to bolster another argument, even one of sceptical or subjectivist intent. It is for that reason that the albeit hesitant reservations expressed in the immediately preceding paragraph concerning even the identity of an intense feeling of heat—let alone a mind-independent heat of the fire—with pain on the grounds adduced take on a greater significance than they might otherwise possess.

But is it possible seriously to question an inference from my inability to discern a difference between an intensely felt heat and a pain to their identity *simpliciter*—assuming, as seems plausible, that there is such an inability? Or perhaps more to the point, would it be possible for Berkeley to question it without seriously distorting the general lines of his philosophy? For that surely would be too high a price to demand of him, even if it meant saving him from the scepticism or subjectivism to which by an excess of dialectal bravado he has exposed himself. It seems to me that the answer to this question must be a negative one. To reject the inference in question is tantamount to rejecting the transparency of consciousness to which Berkeley firmly adheres and which constitutes the driving force behind his previously mentioned theological phenomenalism.[10] Indeed, it is partly because the latter substitutes allegedly transparent ideas for opaque material objects—the former serving as a prophylactic against that very

scepticism or subjectivism with which we have been concerned—that Berkeley must have been attracted to theological phenomenalism in the first place.[11]

There is, needless to say, something very ironic in this way of proceeding. The transparency of consciousness that was supposed to be a prophylactic against scepticism or subjectivism is discovered on closer analysis to be essential to the soundness of an argument that would willy-nilly establish it. Moreover, it is not as though this argument, once it had imposed itself, could be, as it were, usefully quarantined off from those others of Berkeley already mentioned which are designed to establish the basis of his theological phenomenalism. They, on the contrary, are already infected by scepticism or subjectivism by virtue of the role they play in blocking off the appeal to mind-independent qualities. For this move, as already noted, is equally essential to the eventual soundness of the sceptical or subjectivist argument that would identify all sensible qualities with either pleasure or pain. Indeed, it would be not too much to say that the impossibility of mind-independent qualities would constitute a lemma necessary for the vindication of this sceptical or subjectivist argument itself.

If, however, the impossibility of mind-independent entities, were it to be established, were to play the logical role that we have just described, it could not at the same time continue to constitute a basis for Berkeley's theological phenomenalism. For the latter with its objectivist pretension is quite simply incompatible with any form of scepticism or subjectivism. Nor would it help matters if we followed Berkeley in combining the fateful identification of all sensible qualities with pleasure or pain with the stipulation that instead of modifying the mind—the mind is not hot or cold—the sensible qualities are objects of undefined and presumably undefinable perceivings.[12] That would, admittedly, put them outside of the mind in a way that is incompatible with scepticism or subjectivism. But that is just the problem. Pain and pleasure, with which all sensible qualities are supposed to be identified, are not, as we have already had occasion to note, at least in the first instance objects that we contemplate or—we might now add—perceive; they are, rather, feeling states that we endure. If, moreover, we further followed Berkeley in identifying the person with her mind, pleasure and pain and, therefore, all the sensible qualities would become feeling states that the mind endures. And how is that supposed to be different from identifying the whole lot of them with modifications of that same mind? What the mind endures must be integrated into the mind itself.

But now we have come full circle, or at least close to it. We started out, it may be recalled, entertaining the suggestion that we might be able to save Berkeley from scepticism or subjectivism—a scepticism or

subjectivism engendered by his insistence that all sensible qualities regardless of degree be identified with pleasure or pain viewed as feeling states—by appealing to the act-object distinction. That appeal turned out to be futile for the reasons adduced on two separate occasions. The perceiving relation, however, to which we have made mention above, could not even *appear* to save Berkeley from scepticism or subjectivism, unless it had been at least implicitly modelled on that same act-object relation. This state of affairs might have been hidden from Berkeley by his tendency to confuse acts, actualizations of dispositions, with actions. And, since perceptions are obviously not actions, he gratuitously concluded that they are not acts either.[13] They are, nonetheless, acts in the sense of actualizations. As a result, their objects are either as ontologically vacuous or as viciously abstract as any other objects of that kind implicitly recognized as such by Berkeley himself in his insistence on the likeness principle.

University of Toronto

1. George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, in vol. 2 of *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols. (Edinburgh, 1948-57), 175ff. (hereafter cited as *Dialogues*).
2. John Davis, "Berkeley's Phenomenalism," *Dialogue* 1 (1962-63): 67-80.
3. See *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912; New York, 1959), 38ff.
4. *Dialogues*, 194ff.
5. For this way of proceeding see George Pitcher, *Berkeley: The Arguments of the Philosophers* (London, Henley and Boston, 1977), 101. The charge of begging the question in the opposite direction, namely, simply assuming that there is no such quality of a mind-independent object will, as we shall see, constitute the basic thrust of our attack on the sceptical or subjectivist argument.
6. George Berkeley, *The Principles of Human Knowledge, Part 1*, in vol. 2 of *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne* (above, n. 1), secs. 8, 57 (hereafter cited as *Principles*); *Dialogues*, 189-90, 206. As we may conclude from what follows in the text, the contention that an idea can be nothing like an idea would be quite unconvincing if the analysis of an idea uncovered a genuine object. For then there would seem to be no reason why it could not have properties in common with a physical object. As for Berkeley's objection that felt heat, for example, could not resemble physical heat which is not felt, it would fall by the board, if even in the case of felt heat the feeling could, in thought at least, be separated from

the heat. Or, at least, nothing would seem then to stand in the way of drawing the comparison.

7. Heat qua heat puts one in mind, needless to say, of the scholastics' being qua being. And one knows what the anti-abstractionist Berkeley thinks of that.
8. See n. 5.
9. It is worth noting that Berkeley's appeal to immediate perception in this connection changes nothing of substance in this regard. For such an appeal assumes in the same way that intense heat just is the corresponding feeling. Otherwise the former might turn out to be an object of inference.
10. See *Principles*, sec. 25 for a vigorous statement of the transparency thesis.
11. For the relationship in Berkeley's view between materialism—the commitment to "unintelligible" things without the mind—and scepticism see, for example, *Principles*, sec. 86.
12. *Principles*, sec. 49; *Dialogues*, 212.
13. *Dialogues*, 194ff.