BERKELEY'S OCCASIONALISM

Jo Ann Carson

It is commonly agreed that Berkeley's philosophical system is in the direct line of descent of the British empiricists. Although several writers have indeed noted certain similarities between Berkeley's views and those of the rationalist French monk Malebranche, who propounded the occasionalist thesis that God is the sole cause in the universe,[1] most have concurred with the assessment of Fischer, one of the earliest idealist commentators, who writes:

> . . . Berkeley is . . . the consistent Locke. . . . He rests upon Locke, as Hume rests upon him. Berkeley takes an historical and philosophical position between Locke and Hume, as the link in the series that marks a transition.[2]

In this paper I argue that the widely held view expressed by Fischer is a misleading oversimplification. Rather, despite superficial evidence to the contrary, Malebranchean themes pervade Berkeley's thought and are so deeply embedded as to commit him to an occasionalist metaphysical position. I attempt to establish this claim in two stages. I first compare some central features of their respective metaphysical systems to show that Berkeley's debt to Malebranche is more direct than is commonly supposed. I then argue that some key passages from Berkeley's works can plausibly be given an occasionalist reading and that other aspects of his metaphysics require that they be so interpreted.

Malebranchean Themes in Berkeley's Metaphysics

Malebranche, like Descartes, propounded a dualist metaphysics including both thinking substances (God and finite spirits) and material objects in its ontology. The most novel feature of his system is, of course, its occasionalism: while Descartes had great difficulty trying to explain the apparent causal relations between created minds and physical objects, Malebranche simply denied the existence of such causal relations. Physical objects have no power to produce mental states, for

> . . . the point through which our hand is pricked does not cause the pain through the hole which it makes in the body . . . [The pain] is produced assuredly by a superior power. It is God Himself, who through the feelings with which He affects us reveals to us all that takes place outside us, I mean in our body and in the bodies of our environment.[3]

Conversely, finite minds do not act on bodies, though

> . . . it is true that [our arms] are moved when we will it, and that thus we are the natural cause of the movement of our arms. But *natural* causes are not true causes; they are only *occasional* causes that act only through the force and efficacy of the will of God.[4]

An "occasional" cause is not a real metaphysical cause, for there is no necessary connection between it and then its effect in the world. For Malebranche, this means that on the occasion of any human willing, God in his omniscience knows the content of the particular volition, and, if the effect is to come about, it is God and God alone who causes it in the genuine sense, for "there is a necessary connection between the will of God and the thing He wills."[5]

Malebranche's occasionalism should not be viewed simply as a theory about the relationship between created minds or spirits and bodies, for it is much broader than that. He writes:

> There is no relation of causality between a body and a mind. What am I saying? That there is no relation between a mind and a body. I am saying more. That there is no real relation between one body and another, between one mind and another. In a word, no created thing can act upon another by an activity which is its own.[6]

It is clear from the above passages that Malebranche regards God as the sole true cause in the universe; what he terms occasional (natural, apparent, secondary) causes are causes only in a parasitic or metaphoric sense; in a way they are mere epiphenomena of God's will. When the universe is viewed as the totality of mental and physical entities and their states at any time *t*, none of these entities or their states is the cause of any other, either at *t* or at any previous or subsequent times.[7]

Malebranche does allow one exception to this otherwise unqualified occasionalism. In order to preserve the notion of "agent-causation" which he took to be a necessary condition for human responsibility, he maintained that created spirits do have the power to determine the content or object of their particular volitions. However, these volitions themselves have no power to cause their intended effects; no created entity has the further power of what may be called event-causation. Malebranche's religious and moral views prohibit him from taking a soft-determinist stance in spite of his insistence that God is the sole cause, for if God determined the content of particular volitions, even in the absence of constraint or compulsion, he would then be responsible for human misdeeds. To avoid this unwanted result Malebranche claims that God produces in each soul ". . . the impression or impulse toward the good in general. . . . [A]lthough it cannot arrest this impression, it can in a sense turn it in the direction which pleases it, and thus cause all the disorder found in its inclinations, and all the miseries that are the certain and necessary results of sin."[8]

In Malebranche's system, then, God has all the power; finite minds and material objects have none, except insofar as the former do act to determine the object (content) of particular volitions. But the effects, whether mental (ideas, thoughts) or physical (motion of bodies), of such volitions must be caused directly by God.

Let us now explore two points of contact between the metaphysics of Berkeley and that of Malebranche. The first point involves the role of matter; the second the notion of God as sole cause.

Loeb has argued that by introducing a few modifications into Malebranche's system Berkeley produced a "trivial variant" of it. The most obvious modification is, of course, the elimination of matter.[9] Berkeley's denial of material substance and the immaterialist metaphysics resulting from it are usually viewed as a reaction against the theoretical difficulties besetting representative theories of perception such as those advanced by Descartes and Locke. Although his attack against representative theories is commonly thought to be directed against Locke, Berkeley does not in fact single out any particular philosopher for criticism in this regard, in contrast to his polemic against abstract ideas directed specifically at Locke.[10]

In spite of Berkeley's criticism of representative theories, several considerations suggest that it was Malebranche, not Locke, who provided the springboard for Berkeley's immaterialist views. Berkeley was very familiar with Malebranche's system. In *Philosophical Commentaries*, Berkeley's notebooks in which he recorded his thought prior to writing his major theoretical works, there are many references to Malebranche. Many of these remark on the pointlessness of matter, as when he declares "the sillyness of the Currant Doctrine. . . they commonly suppose a material world, figures, motions, bulks of various sizes etc according to their own confession to no purpose. . . ."[11] And later, in the *Principles*, he wrote:

> As to the opinion that there are no corporeal causes, this has been heretofore maintained by some of the Schoolmen, as it is of late by others among the modern philosophers, who though they allow matter to exist, yet will have God alone to be the immediate efficient cause of all things. . . . But then, that they should suppose an innumerable multitude of created beings, which they acknowledge are not capable of producing any one effect in Nature, and which therefore are made to no manner of purpose . . . this I say, though we should allow it possible, must yet be a very unaccountable and extravagant supposition.[12]

The otiose role of material objects in Malebranche's system obviously rankled Berkeley; at least in representative theories their existence could be justified on the grounds that they played a causal role in explaining the "ideas of sense." No such explanatory hypothesis was available to Malebranche the occasionalist, and he is reduced to appealing to Divine revelation for a justification of his materialism, a move which left Berkeley unimpressed.[13] Berkeley seemed to notice, as Malebranche either did not or was not willing to notice, that the latter's occasionalist thesis itself provided an original and seemingly cogent explanatory hypothesis for both ideas of sense and reflection on the basis of God's unlimited causality. It is quite reasonable to suppose that it was the possibility of Occamizing Malebranche's metaphysics that provided the major impetus for Berkeley's immaterialism, a move that at one emphasized God's power and provided an alternative to representative theories of perception.[14]

Although Berkeley wanted to dispense with Malebranche's material objects on grounds of parsimony, he was concerned to preserve the other main feature of Malebranche's program—his emphasis on an all-powerful and continuously active God. Several entries in the *Commentaries* suggest that early on Berkeley subscribed to an uncompromised occasionalism. Typical of these is the following:

> \+ Strange impotence of men. Man without God. Wretcheder than a stone or tree, he having onely the power to be miserable by his unperformed wills, these having no power at all.[15]

As Luce points out, most of these early occasionalist passages are marked with an obelus, Berkeley's symbol for indicating views he had come to modify or abandon.[16] Berkeley certainly never abandoned the notion that humans are impotent in contrast to God, but as his thought matured he saw fit to alter this view. There seem to be two main reasons for

this change. In the first place Berkeley, like Malebranche, wanted to allow for human moral responsibility. In the third of the *Three Dialogues* he has Philonous remark:

> . . . I have no where said that God is the only agent who produces all the motions in bodies. It is true, I have denied there are any other agents besides spirits; but this is very consistent with allowing to thinking rational beings, in the production of motions, the use of limited powers, ultimately indeed derived from God, but immediately under the direction of their own wills, which is sufficient to entitle them to all the guilt of their actions.[17]

We have seen above that the same motive led Malebranche to qualify his version of occasionalism as well. Berkeley's adjustment seems a more radical one, however, for, unlike Malebranche, he claims that human beings actually have some power of event-causation, the power to actually bring about the *effects* of certain volitions in the natural world. In regard to this deviation Luce has written:

> Now here we have a main point at issue between Berkeley and Malebranche. . . . Leaving matter out of account . . . , there is little else to separate the two systems, as philosophies of ideas. This difference is no slight one. It is grave and far-reaching. Berkeley, loyal as ever to empirical fact, recognized the reality of finite activity. He comes to terms with it, makes it indeed one of the poles on which his system turns. For if we move our legs ourselves, we make ideas ourselves. We make and unmake ideas (Prin. 28), as readily as we stretch and relax muscles.[18]

Luce's comments point to the second major reason for Berkeley's modification of his original occasionalism as well as to the major difference between the metaphysics of Berkeley and Malebranche. As Pitcher has pointed out, Berkeley needed a model, within experience, from which he could argue for the existence of God. Both Malebranche and Berkeley were moved by similar theological considerations to characterize God as omnipotent and continuously active in a causally inefficacious world, but for Malebranche the rationalist, God's existence is a given, established on the *a priori* ground that we have direct, intuitive knowledge of God. He therefore argues from God's certain existence to occasionalism, and finds it necessary to modify this position only insofar as some measure of human freedom must be allowed. Berkeley, on the other hand, argues the opposite way, from the inefficacy of creatures to the existence of an all-powerful God.[19] But in order to do this he had to allow to humans a genuine, if very limited, efficacy which could serve as an empirical conceptual link between man and God. His reasoning is illustrated by the following passage from the *Three Dialogues*:

> For all the notion I have of God, is obtained by reflecting on my own soul heightening its powers, and removing its imperfections. I have therefore, though not an inactive idea, yet in my self some sort of an active thinking image of the Deity.[20]

Granted that Berkeley needed to allow some genuine causal power to the mind, it remains an open question what he identified as the locus of this power. As most commentators have noted, Berkeley places great emphasis on the claim that human beings are capable of moving their limbs themselves. He liked to style himself as an advocate of "common sense," and the consequence that we have no real power over our own bodies is probably the most counterintuitive aspect of occasionalism to accept. It is easy to see how he could

argue that we are but passive receptors of the ideas of sense which seem to be apart from us, as he does in *Principles* 29:

> But whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by sense have not a like dependence on *my* will. When in broad day-light I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or no, or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my view; and so likewise as to the hearing and other sense; the ideas imprinted on them are not creatures of *my* will. There is therefore some other Will or Spirit that produces them.[21]

But the ideas of sense associated with our own bodily movements do involve volitions, and these volitions seem to have a phenomenological property which passive ideas do not have. For this reason, most commentators have interpreted Berkeley to mean that the volitional activity associated with human bodily movement is the paradigm of human causal activity.

However, given other prominent features of Berkeley's metaphysics, *viz.*, his immaterialism and his insistence that ideas of sense are but collections of ideas, it is not altogether clear that Berkeley can consistently claim that human volitions are the genuine, rather than the occasional, causes of the bodily movements associated with them. Since he explicitly holds that God is the sole cause of *all* ideas of sense, and the movement of bodily parts involves such ideas, it is difficult to see how these two doctrines can be reconciled. To an examination of these difficulties we must now turn.

Volitions: Real Causes or Occasions?

Let us begin by briefly reviewing Berkeley's views regarding human volitions and their effects. In addition to PC 107 cited earlier, the following notebook entries[22] show the development of Berkeley's thought on this matter:

> \+ The simple idea call'd Power seems obscure or rather none at all. but onely the relation 'twixt cause & Effect. W^{n} I ask whether A can move B. if A be an intelligent thing. I mean no more than whether the volition of A that B move be attended with the motion of B. . . . (PC 461)

> \+ Power no simple Idea. It means nothing but the Relation between Cause & Effect. (PC 493)

> S What means Cause as distinguish'd from Occasion? Nothing but a Being w^{ch} wills w^{n} the Effect follows the volition. Those things that happen from without we are not the Cause of therefore there is some other Cause of them i. e., there is a being that wills these perceptions in us. (PC 499)

> S There is a difference betwixt power & Volition. There may be volition without Power. But there can be no Power without Volition. Power implyeth volition & at the same time a Connotation of the Effects following the Volition. (PC 699)

In the first two entries Berkeley seems to subscribe to a view of causation that would later be associated with Hume. The expression "be attended with" in PC 461 signals that power or cause on the mundane level is a purely conventional notion; effects accompany or "follow upon" their causes only in the sense of regular sequence or constant conjunction, rather than in any logically necessary way. Such a view is of course consonant with Berkeley's early acceptance of an uncompromised occasionalism; "cause" as applied to finite minds could be used only in a "vulgar" or parasitic sense, since God is the only real cause.[23]

Berkeley never worked out a mature and well-developed theory of causation, but he did modify his views on the subject considerably from those held in PC 107, 461, and 493, as the "+" indicates. In PC 499 he offers something of a definition of a genuine cause, indicating that in such cases volitions are related to their intended effects in a far more intimate way than the regular sequence model would allow. For our purposes it is crucial to note that both PC 499 and PC 699 are preceded by "S." Berkeley used this symbol to mark entries that apply to souls or created spirits.[24] Reading between the lines, we can see that Berkeley has come to believe that the notion of a real cause does pertain to the activity of the human mind in volition. Indeed, at PC 548[25] he flatly announces:

> S We move our Legs our selves. 'tis we that will their movement. Herein I differ from Malbranch. (PC 548)

The above notebook entry and several other passages seem to indicate that Berkeley did indeed locate the locus of human causal efficacy in the ability to move parts of the body. But was this really Berkeley's view, or, if it was, should it have been? To answer these questions, let us turn to an examination of three passages from his more mature works which, at least superficially, seem to assert that the ability to will parts of our bodies to move is the paradigm of human efficacy. Consider the following:

> (1) Besides corporeal things there is the other class, viz. thinking things, and that there is in them the power of moving bodies we have learned by personal experience, since our mind at will can stir and stay the movements of our limbs, *whatever be the ultimate explanation of the fact* [my emphasis]. This is certain that bodies are moved at the will of the mind, and accordingly the mind can be called, correctly enough, a principle of motion, a particular and subordinate principle indeed, and one which itself depends on the fist and universal principle.[26]
>
> (2) Philonous: I have no where said that God is the only agent who produces all the motions in bodies. It is true, I have denied there are any other agents besides spirits; but this is very consistent with allowing to thinking rational beings, in the production of motions, the use of limited powers, ultimately indeed derived from God, but immediately under the direction of their own wills, which is sufficient to entitle them to all the guilt of their actions.[27]
>
> (3) . . . it is evident that, in affecting other persons, the will of man hath no other *object* than barely the motion of the limbs of his body; but that such a motion should be attended by, or excite any idea in the mind of another, depends wholly on the will of the Creator. [my emphasis][28]

Though these passages seem at first blush to straightforwardly attribute real causal power to humans, this view would be implausible for Berkeley. Arms and legs are "material objects," and on Berkeley's view this translates into collections of ideas of "congeries,"

to use his term.[29] Thus, if humans have any real power to move their limbs, this can mean only that they cause some ideas which correspond to the intended movement. What kind of ideas could these be? Pitcher distinguishes the following three possibilities:

(i) ideas of sense perceived by sentient creatures other than the agent who happens to observe the agent's bodily movement.
(ii) ideas of sense perceived by the agent himself (if he happens to observe the movement), and
(iii) ideas in God's mind.[30]

Possibility (i) is certainly ruled out on Berkeley's view. Finite minds have no power to directly cause ideas in the mind of another. Indeed, in PHK 147 he explicitly states: *that a motion should be attended by, or excite any ideas in the mind of another, depends wholly on the will of the Creator.* Likewise, Berkeley would not want to assert possibility (iii), since it would not only imply that God was not immutable, but would also upset the uniformity of the laws of nature, which "evidently display the goodness and wisdom of that governing spirit whose will constitutes the Law of Nature."[31]

It seems, then, that Berkeley is left with (ii) as the only viable possibility for genuine human efficacy, i. e., human minds cause ideas in themselves. But even this much weaker thesis is extremely problematic for Berkeley. Pitcher points to some of the complications when he asks:

> . . . are we to suppose that when I move my arm and look at it moving, I directly cause in myself the fantastically complicated visual sense-impressions that I thereby receive—including sense-impressions of the hundreds of hairs that cover my arm, the freckles, the veins, the little bumps and nicks that I knew nothing about before I moved my arm, etc., etc? What if I am wearing a wristwatch; do I cause the sense-impressions of the watch, or does God? Why can't a person whose arm has been amputated exercise his powers, and cause in himself sense-impressions as of his arm moving? And so on.[32]

Furthermore, such a view severely limits the human efficacy that Berkeley wishes to affirm. For it is obvious that simply willing some idea to appear in one's imagination is by no means an assurance that it will appear. As Berkeley himself has pointed out in PC 669, "There may be volition without power." I may will to conjure up the image of the license plate complete with numerals, of the car which sped away from the scene of an accident, but my willing is no guarantee that the desired idea will be forthcoming.

In spite of its shortcomings, it seems clear that possibility (ii) comes closer to expressing Berkeley's real view than the standard interpretation. Indeed, when in the *Principles* he sets out to establish the real power of the mind he says nothing at all about the movement of limbs, but writes:

> I find that I can excite ideas in my mind at pleasure, and vary and shift the scene as oft as I think fit. It is no more than willing, and straightway this or that idea arises in my fancy: and by the same power it is obliterated, and makes way for another. This making and unmaking of ideas doth very properly denominate the mind active.[33]

If Berkeley's view is that human volitions are the genuine causes of ideas in the imagination, he produces no argument for this view. Perhaps he thinks it is a self-evident truth which can be learned by simply "attending to" the volitions involved. However, this option is not available to Berkeley. Although he argues for the passivity of ideas in PHK 25 on the ground that they can be *observed* so to be ("All our ideas, sensations, or the things which we perceive, but whatsoever names they may be distinguished, are visibly inactive. . . . To be satisfied of the truth of this, there is nothing else requisite but a bare observation of our ideas."),[34] he cannot appeal to that kind of argument to demonstrate the activity of volitions, since he holds throughout his writings that there can be no direct awareness of spirit or any of its powers.[35]

What alternative is left for Berkeley? He seems constrained by his own metaphysical principles to hold that volitions are the occasional, rather than the genuine cause, of the ideas of sense associated with them, whether these ideas arise in the minds of others or in the mind of the agent himself. And indeed, the three passages mentioned earlier can plausibly be interpreted in this manner.

The key to the *De Motu* passage is the qualifying phrase *whatever be the ultimate explanation of the fact.* The second passage from *Three Dialogues* can plausibly be interpreted as allowing "limited power" to humans to form volitions without attributing to these volitions any power to bring about their effects, even in the case of one's own bodily movements. This interpretation is reinforced by the third passage (PHK 147), which implicitly distinguishes between the content of a volition (its "object"), which may be within the power of the agent, and the causal efficacy of the volition, which is not.

This is Malebranchean territory. Whatever success Berkeley may or may not have had in eliminating matter from his metaphysical system, he was clearly unsuccessful in eliminating occasionalism. Not only did Berkeley start out with occasionalist themes, he never really found a way to overcome them.

NOTES

1. For example, see Norman Kemp Smith, *Studies in the Cartesian Philosophy* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1902) 217-218; Richard Aaron, "Locke and Berkeley's Commonplace Book," *Mind* 40 (1931): 439-459; G. Dawes Hicks, *Berkeley* (London: Ernst Benn, 1932) 229-236; A. A. Luce, *Berkeley and Malebranche: A Study in the Origins of Berkeley's Thought* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1924). Of the above, Luce is the commentator who has most emphasized the relation between George Berkeley and Nicolas Malebranche. Consider the following comments from *Berkeley and Malebranche*, cited above:

- *Locke taught him, but Malebranche inspired him* (7).
- *. . . the way to the heart of Berkeleianism lies through Malebranche* (43).
- *Malebranche did more than weaken the evidence for matter. He showed Berkeley, if I mistake not, how to construct a system dispensing with matter* (83).

2. Kuno Fischer, *Francis Bacon of Verulam: Realistic Philosophy and Its Age* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Robert, 1857) 454, 464.

3. Nicholas Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion*, Dialogue VI, Sec. 3, trans. Morris Ginsberg (New York: Macmillan, 1923).

4. Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, Bk. VI, Part II, Ch. 3, trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Columbus: Ohio State U P, 1980).

5. Malebranche, *The Search after Truth,* Bk. VI, Part II, Ch. 3.

6. Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion* IV.11.

7. Louis E. Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981) 193-195.

8. Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, Bk. 2, Ch. 1, Sec. 2.

9. Loeb, *From Descartes to Hume*, 229. Loeb lists three modifications made by Berkeley: (1) eliminate matter (2) allow that some volitions of created minds are causally efficacious and (3) deny that created minds are directly acquainted with anything except their own ideas and mental operations. No doubt Malebranche would not have regarded the elimination of matter "trivial." Indeed, Pitcher tells the (possibly apocryphal) story that after a meeting in Paris between Malebranche and Berkeley in which philosophical themes were discussed, the former became so agitated that he suffered an attack which resulted in his death a few days later. [Cf. George Pitcher, *Berkeley* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977) 1.]

10. Cf. *Berkeley's Philosophical Writings*, David M. Armstrong, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1965) especially *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, Principles 3-5, 62-63; Principle 8, 64; Principles 18-19, 67-68; Principles 22-23, 69-70. Berkeley explicitly criticizes Locke and abstract ideas in the Introduction to the *Principles*, Sections 6-25, 46-60. (Henceforth *The Principles of Human Knowledge* will be cited as PHK.)

11. Berkeley, *Philosophical Commentaries*, A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, eds. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946) I, 476, 60. (Henceforth references to *Philosophical Commentaries* will be to Vol. I of Luce and Jessop and cited as PC.)

12. PHK 53, 82.

13. Cf. PC 686, 83; PC 818, 98; PHK 82, 94-95.

14. Loeb has pointed out that both Malebranche and Berkeley were interested in stressing God's omnipotence and the causal inefficacy of creatures for religious reasons, namely, to undermine idolatry. (See Loeb 242-243.)

15. PC 107, 18.

16. Luce 180-188.

17. Armstrong, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, "The Third Dialogue" 199.

18. Luce 89-90.

19. George Pitcher, "Berkeley on the Mind's Activity," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (July, 1981): 221-227. Also see Loeb 247.

20. Armstrong, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, "The Third Dialogue" 194.

21. PHK 29, 72.

22. PC 461, 57; PC 493, 62; PC 499, 63; PC 699, 85.

23. Cf. PHK 65, 88, in which Berkeley claims that "the connexion of ideas does not imply the relation of *cause* and *effect*, but only of a *mark* or *sign* with the thing signified. The fire which I see is not the cause of the pain I suffer upon my approaching it, but the mark that forewarns me of it." Also see PHK 25-33, 70-74 for Berkeley's account of the conventional nature of the "laws of nature."

24. Cf. Luce and Jessop, Vol. I, 50.

25. PC 548, 69. Also see PHK 116, 109.

26. Armstrong, *De Motu* Sec. 25, 257.

27. Armstrong, *Three Dialogues*, "The Third Dialogue" 199.

28. PHK 147, 123.

29. Cf. PC 580, 72.

30. Pitcher (1981) 223.

31. PHK 32, 73.

32. Pitcher (1981) 224.

33. PHK 28, 72. Pitcher calls these ideas "image-volitions." [See Pitcher (1981) 225.]

34. PHK 25, 70-71.

35. Cf. PC 663, 81; PHK 138, 119-120 and PHK 142, 121-122.