

Comments on Michael Jacovides “How Berkeley Corrupted His Capacity to Conceive”

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Abstract The manuscript includes comments on Michael Jacovides’s paper, “How Berkeley Corrupted His Capacity to Conceive.” The paper and comments were delivered at the conference “Meaning and Modern Empiricism” held at Virginia Tech in April 2008. I consider Jacovides’s treatment of Berkeley’s Resemblance Argument and his interpretation of the Master Argument. In particular, I distinguish several ways of understanding the disagreement between Jacovides and Kenneth Winkler over the right way to read the Master Argument.

Keywords Berkeley · Conceivability · Master argument · Resemblance

Jacovides’s paper can be roughly divided into two parts. In the first, he examines what he calls Berkeley’s Resemblance Argument, which appears in the first of the *Three Dialogues*. In the second part, he argues that consideration of the Resemblance Argument offers guidance in the interpretation of Berkeley’s Master Argument. I propose, then, to consider briefly the Resemblance Argument and to spend somewhat more time considering his interpretation of the Master Argument. In particular, I will distinguish several ways of understanding the disagreement between Jacovides and Winkler over the right way to read the Master Argument; however, I will leave it open which, if any, of these ways best characterizes the disagreement.

The Resemblance Argument

Let me begin by saying a bit more about the context of the Resemblance Argument. At this point in the first dialogue, Philonous is attacking Hylas’s

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claim that the very sensible qualities we perceive exist or inhere in “outward objects or material substance” (3D 2.188).¹ Hylas has already conceded that some sensible qualities—heat and cold, sounds, and colors—do not inhere in outward objects but exist in the mind. He then retreats to the position that only the qualities philosophers call primary are sensible qualities that inhere in outward objects. Hylas, on the verge of conceding that extension, understood as a sensible quality, does not exist in outward objects, claims, “I am loath to give up extension, I see so many odd consequences following upon such a concession.” Philonous then responds, “Odd, say you? After the concessions already made, I hope you will stick at nothing for its oddness. But on the other hand should it not seem very odd, if the general reasoning which includes all other sensible qualities did not also include extension?” (3D 2.189).

The next sentence is the beginning of the Resemblance Argument:

If it be allowed that no idea nor anything like an idea can exist in an unperceiving substance, then surely it follows, that no figure or mode of extension, which we can either perceive or imagine, or have any idea of, can be really inherent in matter; not to mention the peculiar difficulty there must be, in conceiving a material substance, prior to and distinct from extension, to be the substratum of extension.

The following sentence, which Jacovides does not quote, continues,

Be the sensible quality what it will, figure, or sound, or color; it seems alike impossible it should subsist in that which doth not perceive it. (3D 2.190)

Jacovides claims that the conclusion of the argument is that “we can’t have an idea of extension that *represents* a quality inhering in an unperceiving substance” (Jacovides 2009, p. 416). But I think the context of the argument suggests a different, weaker conclusion: Extension, understood as a sensible quality we directly perceive, does not itself inhere in unperceiving substance. It does not follow from this that we can have no idea of extension that *represents* a quality inhering in an unperceiving substance. The view under attack is, as Philonous puts it, “that the very extension and figure which you perceive by sense, exist in the outward object or material substance” (3D 2.188). If the argument is merely directed at this view, it does less work in establishing immaterialism than Jacovides claims.

More important to Jacovides’s case are the claims he sees as driving the resemblance argument. Three claims are important: (1) Ideas are only like other ideas (Berkeley’s Likeness Principle). (2) No idea inheres in a mind-independent body. (3) Resemblance is a necessary condition for representation. (I’ll call this the Resemblance Principle.) Jacovides discusses each of these claims, and offers an interesting account of why Berkeley holds that we cannot have a notion of mind-independent bodies; however, I will turn directly to the interpretation of the Master Argument.

¹ References to the *Three Dialogues* (3D) are to volume and page numbers in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*.

The Master Argument

Jacovides distinguishes in the *Principles* version of the Master Argument a specific and a general challenge. The specific challenge is “to conceive an extended moveable substance existing independently of a mind.” The general challenge is “to conceive of an idea or anything like an idea existing independently of a mind” (Jacovides 2009, p. 424). He suggests that meeting the general challenge is a necessary condition for meeting the specific challenge.

At the heart of the paper lie two claims. Jacovides suggests they come to the same thing, but I think it is helpful to distinguish them, since I am not sure that they do come to the same thing. The first claim is that the Master Argument just is, or is something very like, the Resemblance Argument. The second claim concerns the disagreement between Winkler and Jacovides about the interpretation of the Master Argument. Winkler claims that there is a crude point that the Master Argument might seem to rely on, but doesn’t. Jacovides argues that something very like the crude argument is or, at least motivates, the Master Argument. The two claims come together because Jacovides writes, “The crude argument that Winkler doesn’t want to attribute to Berkeley is what I’ve called the Resemblance Argument” (Jacovides 2009, p. 425).

Before turning to Jacovides’s disagreement with Winkler, there are a few important things that I think they agree on. First, they agree that Berkeley assumes that the materialist will agree that to conceive of something is to call up a mind-dependent object, i.e. an idea. Second, they agree that Berkeley assumes that the materialist will agree that representation involves, in some sense, resemblance. Taken together, these two assumptions suggest that the materialist will agree that meeting Berkeley’s challenge requires calling to mind a mind-dependent object that resembles an extended, moveable substance existing independently of a mind. Finally, they agree that the argument purports to show that conceiving of something *as* mind-independent or *as* unconceived is impossible, and that Berkeley does not fallaciously take this to follow from the impossibility of conceiving of something which is *in fact* unconceived.

Now, on to the disagreement. Here is the passage Jacovides cites from Winkler, “I do not think that Berkeley wants to make the crude point that an idea, being mind-dependent, cannot mirror the independence of its intended object. There is no evidence that he has such an argument in mind” (Winkler 186; Jacovides 2009, p. 425). Jacovides responds, “But, I cry, the general challenge *just is* evidence that he has such an argument in mind” (Jacovides 2009, p. 425). The verb “to mirror” might be taken to suggest representation or just resemblance. Taking it in the latter way, we can rephrase the crude point as the point that an idea, because it is in fact mind-dependent, cannot resemble a mind-independent body in the respect of being mind-independent.

Here is the trouble. I’m not sure what exactly Jacovides takes the crude argument to be, nor, therefore, how the existence of the general challenge constitutes evidence that the crude argument really is Berkeley’s. The problem is that I’m not sure exactly how, on Jacovides’s view, to understand the claim that resemblance is a necessary condition for representation. I’m going to sketch two ways one might start to flesh out Berkeley’s views about resemblance and representation and consider how the crude point would entail that we cannot meet Berkeley’s challenge.

Resemblance Principle 1: Having some feature in common is a necessary condition for resemblance. Resemblance is a necessary condition for representation.²

Resemblance Principle 1 seems pretty innocuous. However, it, in combination with the crude point that a mind-dependent idea does not resemble a mind-independent body in the respect of being mind-independent, does not entail that an idea cannot resemble, or, therefore, represent something mind-independent. This would only follow from the claim that an idea does not have *any* features in common with a mind-independent body. One might bridge the gap by claiming that something mind-dependent cannot have any features in common with something mind-independent, but this would require additional argument.

The second possibility is, I think, more promising:

Resemblance Principle 2: For an idea to represent some thing *as F* the idea must resemble the thing represented in the sense that they must have the feature of being *F* in common.

Resemblance Principle 2 in combination with the crude point does seem to secure the conclusion that an idea cannot represent something *as mind-independent* because the idea is not itself mind-independent. Notice that here it does not follow that we cannot represent something that is in fact mind-independent, we just cannot represent something *as mind-independent*.

This interpretation also seems to make sense of the general challenge. To conceive of an extended moveable substance existing independently of a mind would require having an idea that is mind-independent. We cannot even conceive of an idea that is mind-independent—this, Berkeley thinks, is plainly contradictory. It follows that we cannot represent something *as mind-independent*. (To fill out this interpretation, one would have to give some account of how the claim that we cannot represent something as mind-independent is related to the claim that we cannot conceive of something as unconceived.)

I think there is reason to think that something like this is the crude argument Winkler wants to avoid attributing to Berkeley. The crude argument as I've characterized it relies on the idea that representing something *as F* requires having an idea of it which is *F*. We can't have an idea that represents an apple *as red* unless the idea is red. But, Winkler might protest, there is a difference between sensible qualities like being red, rough or round and existence, or independent existence, which is not a sensible quality, or even a quality, at all. To treat independent existence as just another quality like redness, roundness or smoothness is too crude. Winkler argues elsewhere that Berkeley denies that existence is a quality; he holds that we have no idea of existence, since this would be an abstract idea. We can't represent something as barely existing; Winkler claims, "Nothing *in* an idea can be said to represent existence" (Winkler 187). The Master Argument, according to Winkler, does not crudely purport to show that we cannot have an idea of

² We could augment the principles by considering what is required for two things to have some feature in common, e.g. whether it is enough that they have some determinate feature in common, or whether they must have some determinate feature in common.

independent existence because our ideas are in fact mind-dependent, but rather that “whenever we frame an idea of a purportedly mind-independent object, what we have managed to do is, as far as the idea is concerned, no different from what we do when we conceive of something mind-dependent” (Winkler 187).

Yet I have two reasons for doubting that the argument as I’ve characterized it is the one Jacovides wants to attribute to Berkeley. First, when Jacovides summarizes the argument, he claims “ideas can’t resemble mind-independent objects, therefore they can’t represent them” (Jacovides 2009, p. 425). The crude argument as I’ve characterized it only yields the conclusion that our ideas can’t represent mind-independent objects *as mind-independent*, not that our ideas can’t represent them at all.

Second, this argument can be easily extended to the conclusion that one cannot conceive of anything existing independently of one’s own mind: To have an idea that represents something as independent of one’s own mind, the idea would have to have the feature of being independent of one’s own mind in common with the thing represented, but this is obviously impossible. However, Jacovides is clear that the Master Argument does not entail solipsism. Our own ideas can represent the ideas of others because our ideas resemble theirs. However, in defense of this interpretation, one could admit that the Master Argument does entail that one cannot have an idea of something as existing independently of one’s own mind, but argue that the solipsist conclusion can be avoided because one can have a notion of the ideas of others.

Finally, I think it may be helpful to consider separately the claim that the Master Argument is, or is similar to, the Resemblance Argument. So far, I’ve taken this in a weak sense, as the suggestion that the considerations motivating the Resemblance Argument, such as Berkeley’s views about representation and the claim that ideas do not inhere in unperceiving substances but are mind-dependent, play some role in the Master Argument. But perhaps the similarity between the Master Argument and the Resemblance Argument is much stronger. Perhaps Berkeley’s likeness principle, that an idea can only be like other ideas, is a *premise* of the Master Argument. Thus, the Master Argument, on this interpretation, relies on two premises: 1. An idea can only resemble other ideas. 2. Resemblance is necessary for representation. It follows that an idea cannot represent a non-idea. It is then a short step to the conclusion that an idea cannot represent something existing independently of a mind or something unconceived.

If this is the argument, then it does not depend on any *particular* understanding of the claim that resemblance is necessary for representation and my earlier complaint that Jacovides does not tell us enough about representation and resemblance is out of place. (Indeed, it may be a virtue of this interpretation that it only requires the materialist to assume that resemblance is somehow required for representation, and not to hold any more specific views about representation.)

However, here is my worry about this interpretation of the Master Argument. Berkeley presents the argument, in both the *Principles* and the *Three Dialogues*, as self-standing. Before he introduces the argument in the *Principles* he asks, “For what purpose is it to dilate on that which may be demonstrated with the utmost evidence in a line or two, to any one that is capable of the least reflexion?” (PHK 22).³ Thus,

³ References to *The Principles of Human Knowledge* (PHK) are to section numbers.

we should expect that the premises of the argument rely minimally on what has come before and are independently acceptable to the materialist. But if the likeness principle is a premise of the argument, then the argument relies heavily on Berkeley's argument for the likeness principle in section 8.

Near the end of the paper, Jacovides writes, "Hylas forms an idea of a tree... He knows for sure that he has formed the idea of a tree, but whether that idea represents something independent of the mind is not something that he can tell through the same sort of introspection" (Jacovides 2009, p. 428). So far, this sounds to me like something that Winkler would agree with. Jacovides continues, "It is left to the semanticist and the philosopher of mind to recognize that ideas represent through resemblance and that ideas can only resemble other ideas." This, however, seems problematic; it suggests that Berkeley is wrong that the Master Argument will convince anyone "that is capable of the least reflexion" (PHK 22).

Jacovides closes the paper with the interesting claim that Berkeley's conviction that he couldn't conceive of unperceived bodies led him to lose the ability to conceive of them. Berkeley's capacity to conceive was corrupted in a real sense—he lost the capacity to do something that most of us can do with no trouble at all, simply because he believed he couldn't do it. Thus, it seems to be a subjective, psychological fact about Berkeley that he really couldn't conceive of mind-independent bodies. But, I wonder, what is the philosophical significance of this fact? What implications would it have, for example, for understanding the connection, for Berkeley, between conceivability and possibility? If Berkeley really corrupted his power to conceive in the way Jacovides suggests, does it follow that inconceivability is no indication of impossibility at all?

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