

Hugh Hunter (Algonquin College), “George Berkeley's Proof for the Existence of God”

This paper is a defence of George Berkeley’s proof of the existence of God. Pretty much everyone agrees that Berkeley has an original proof for the existence of God. Unfortunately there is also near universal agreement that it is a *non sequitur*.ⁱ The proof proceeds from certain features of the world, features which Berkeley suggests can only be explained as coming from the direct intervention of a mind, or several minds. Berkeley’s is not a deductive argument, and so he appeals to parsimony to establish that one mind rather than many are responsible for these features of the world. Given how extensive these features are, and how pervasive they are in our lives, the mind that accounts for them must be both very powerful and very intimately involved with living things and in this sense *vast*. Up to this point, Berkeley’s inductive argument strikes most readers as at least defensible. The trouble is that Berkeley seems to slide from it to a much stronger conclusion, namely to the existence of the God of Christian theology, who is omnipotent, infinite, and perfect, and who is, to put it mildly, “conceptually distinct” from the powerful and intervening being whose existence Berkeley has established.ⁱⁱ As one critic put it, the inadequacy of the argument is “so obvious it is hard to see why Berkeley did not address himself to it.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Berkeley is not guilty of such an obvious error, I submit. He would have been, if he had tried to conclude that the Christian God exists. But he doesn’t; the defensible conclusion that an intervening and vastly powerful being exists is where the proof ends. Of course Berkeley calls this being ‘God’, and surely he is entitled to conclude, minimally, that the being is *a* God. And of course he personally identified the being with the Christian God. But Berkeley’s argument does not make this identification.

Showing what Berkeley’s argument does establish will be my first task here. The remaining two sections of this paper will consider two good reasons why my interpretation has hitherto not been the dominant one. One reason is that Berkeley very much *appears* to conclude the existence of the Christian God in his proof, though as I will show a close look at the texts tells a different story. The other reason is that some readers of Berkeley bring to his works the quite erroneous notion that he *needs* to show the existence of the Christian God if he is to advance his life’s project of promoting the veneration and recognition of that deity. Not so! The conclusion that a powerful and intervening God exists refutes not only atheists but also deists; Berkeley’s discussion reveals a nuanced appreciation of the way his argument might be applied to refute followers of Baruch Spinoza and Thomas Hobbes; even if Berkeley had proved the existence of a perfect and infinite God he would still be far from having used philosophy to vindicate Christianity against the “impious schemes of atheism and irreligion”,^{iv} a situation of which Berkeley shows himself to be fully aware.

ⁱ E.g. George Pitcher, *Berkeley* (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, Ltd. 1977) 134; Robert Fogelin, *Berkeley and the Principles of Human Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2001) 74; Douglas Jesseph, “Berkeley, God and Explanation,” in *Early Modern Philosophy: Mind, Matter, and Metaphysics*, edited by Christia Mercer and Eileen O’Neill, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 183-205, 200; Talia Mae Bettcher, *Berkeley: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2008) 126; Georges Dicker, *Berkeley’s Idealism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 252-263.

ⁱⁱ A recent reading suggests that in the case of the so-called “passivity argument” the entity whose existence is proved (as I would say) in all three versions of the argument remains distinct from the perfect and infinite Christian God. Daniel Flage and Ekaterina Ksenjek, “Berkeley, the Author of Nature, and the Christian God” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 29:3 (2012) 265-299, 288ff.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Muehlmann, *Berkeley's Ontology* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992) 250 n. 4. Harsher critics have said of Berkeley's argument that it falls “falls short of theism, let alone Christian monotheism”. Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) 165, see also Dicker *Idealism* 263.

^{iv} George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, vol. 2, 92. All of Berkeley's works are quoted from *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols. (London: Nelson, 1948-1957).