Action, Knowledge and Embodiment in Berkeley and Locke

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Abstract:

Embodiment is a fact of human existence which philosophers should not ignore. They may differ to a great extent in what they have to say about our bodies, but they have to take into account that for each of us our body has a special status, it is not merely one amongst the physical objects, but a physical object to which we have a unique relation. While Descartes approached the issue of embodiment through consideration of sensation and imagination, it is more directly reached by consideration of action and agency: whenever we act upon the world, we act by moving our bodies. So if we can understand what an immaterialist such as Berkeley thinks about agency, we will have gone a fair way to understanding what he thinks about embodiment. §1 discusses a recent flurry of articles on the subject of Berkeley's account of action. I choose to present Berkeley as a causal-volitional theorist (realist) not because I think it is the uniquely correct interpretation of the texts, but because I find it more philosophically interesting as a version of immaterialism. In particular, it raises the possibility of a substantive account of human embodiment which is completely unavailable to the occasionalist. §2 articulates an apparent philosophical problem for Berkeley qua causal-volitional theorist and show that Locke was aware of a related problem and had a solution of which Berkeley would have known. §3 distinguishes two interpretations of Berkeley's famous denial of blind agency – as the assertion of a weak representational condition or a strong epistemic one – and provide evidence that there was a well-established debate about blind powers in the 17th century which took the metaphor of blindness as indicating an epistemic rather than merely representational failing. What remains to do in §4 is to consider whether Berkeley, with his own peculiar commitments, could in fact accept this account of agency.

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'We are chained to a body' (Berkeley)

Embodiment is a fact of human existence which philosophers should not ignore. They may differ to a great extent in what they have to say about our bodies, but they have to take into account that for each of us our body has a special status, it is not merely one amongst the physical objects, but a physical object to which we have a unique relation. The range of possible relations philosophers have claimed we hold to our bodies is extreme, from identity to a contingent causal connection.

Descartes famously argued that embodiment consisted of more than being lodged in our bodies like a 'pilot in his ship' (CSM II, 56),[1] since we experience what happens to our bodies as sensations – such as pleasure and pain – rather than

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intellectually, as observations of the physical world. Here Descartes is emphasizing that our relation to our own bodies in unique, but all he says about the relation itself is that 'I am very closely joined and, as it were, intermingled with it, so that I and the body form a unit' (CSM II, 56). While it is hard enough to work out how Descartes could allow there to be a 'unit' – which must be more substantial than a mereological sum, for the pilot and his ship are parts of such a whole – composed of two distinct substances, such an account of embodiment is patently unavailable to an immaterialist. Despite a remarkable concern for the treatment of his corpse,[2] Berkeley said almost nothing about embodiment.[3]

While Descartes approached the issue of embodiment through consideration of sensation and imagination, it is more directly reached by consideration of action and agency. Whenever we act upon the world, we act by moving our bodies. In fact, we pretty much identify our body with that physical object which we can move directly; we regularly talk about instruments with which we have become particularly familiar and adept as 'extensions of our bodies'; and patients will often regard successful prostheses as parts of their bodies.[4] So if we can understand what an immaterialist such as Berkeley thinks about agency, we will have gone a fair way to understanding what he thinks about embodiment.

I begin by discussing a recent flurry of articles on the subject of Berkeley's account of action. It is my view (Stoneham, 2010) that Berkeley was torn between two possible accounts of action, occasionalism and realism (the causal-volitional theory of action), and that each can be made consistent with his immaterialism, though each has its own costs. It seems to me that Berkeley the anti-atheist would have been attracted by occasionalism and Berkeley the anti-sceptic by realism.[5] In the absence of Part 2 of the *Principles*, we cannot know which would have won out. So I choose to present Berkeley as a realist not because I think it is the uniquely correct interpretation of the texts, but because I find it more philosophically interesting as a version of immaterialism.[6] In particular, it raises the possibility of a substantive account of human embodiment which is completely unavailable to the occasionalist.

In §2 I articulate an apparent philosophical problem for Berkeley qua causal-volitional theorist and show that Locke was aware of a related problem and had a solution of which Berkeley would have known. In §3 I distinguish two interpretations of Berkeley's famous denial of blind agency – as the assertion of a weak representational condition or a strong epistemic one – and provide evidence that there

was a well-established debate about blind powers in the 17th century which took the metaphor of blindness as indicating an epistemic rather than merely representational failing. So at this point in the paper we have an account of agency which Berkeley would have known about and which imposes a condition upon the relation between volition and action which his contemporaries would likely have taken him to accept had he published his denial of blind agency. What remains to do in §4 is to consider whether Berkeley, with his own peculiar commitments, could in fact accept this account of agency.

1. Realism and Occasionalism

Berkeley clearly says some things which look like unequivocal statements of causal-volitional realism about action (e.g. NB 548, PHK 145-6, DHP1 196, DHP3 237, DM 25). But he also says many things which seem inconsistent with that view, primarily to the effect that God is responsible for all the motion in bodies (e.g. PHK 30, DHP2 212-4, DM 34). On the grounds that it is essential to Berkeley's philosophy that he can distinguish between sense-perception and imagination and that involuntariness both is a necessary condition for the former and a crucial premise in his argument for the existence of God, most commentators have attempted to render Berkeley consistent by reinterpreting the causal-volitional passages in ways which make them consistent with God being the cause of all we sense.[7]

It has become a commonplace amongst early modernists that Berkeley rejects the realist view of action. For example, McDonough tells us 'Berkeley had no truck with mere conservationism [i.e. realism] with respect to finite wills' (2008, 574) while referring us to Berkeley's letter to Johnson of 25 November 1729 'especially paragraphs 2 and 3'.[8] But paragraph 2 of that letter contains one of the most unequivocal statements of the coherence of realism Berkeley penned: 'Neither doth it hinder admitting other causes besides God; such as spirits of different orders, which may be termed active causes, as acting indeed, though by limited and derivative powers.'[9] These powers are limited and derivative because these different orders of spirits are imperfect and created, but they are still real powers. And paragraph 3 objects only to those who take the *material* world to have causal powers – a view which was held by the pre-Berkeleian 'mere conservationists' but is clearly one he can thoroughly reject without denying realism about the causal powers of finite spirits.

Now I do not want to deny that there is a coherent concurrentist interpretation of Berkeley, nor even that there is a coherent occasionalist interpretation, but rather I want to assert that there is also a coherent realist interpretation and that this has considerable philosophical merits. If we take the realist option seriously, then it immediately becomes apparent that most of McDonough's arguments are not for concurrentism but against occasionalism, and thus can equally be wheeled out by the realist. The real mistake is not to prefer one particular interpretation of Berkeley on action, but to think that Berkeley's extant works will provide a determinate answer to the question. Perhaps if someone finds the missing manuscript of *Principles* Part 2 we will have a decisive text, but the very fact that no later works reconstruct that suggests Berkeley himself thought it inadequate.

However, in what follows I shall largely set aside the possibility of a concurrentist interpretation of Berkeley. It seems to me that such a position is inherently unstable, threatening to collapse into occasionalism or realism depending upon how we spell out the understanding of the joint action. If, as God's omnipotence suggests, the human contribution is not necessary to the bringing about of the effect, then the position looks like a variation on occasionalism. But equally, if it is sufficient, then we have a variant on realism. So it must be somehow necessary but not sufficient in a way which does not impugn God's omnipotence. We can achieve the former by saying that it is nomologically necessary given how God has created the laws of nature, but then it is hard to see why it is not also nomologically sufficient, since the natural explanations of my success and failure in action make no reference to God's particular concurrence, taking us back again to realism. If concurrentism was Berkeley's settled view, he ought to have told us how he would deal with this problem, and, given his personality, it is hard to imagine him either not noticing or not telling us. Like so many of the more unusual interpretations of Berkeley, concurrentism faces the – to my mind decisive – objection: If that is what he thought he would have told us.[10]

A defence of causal-volitional realism as a coherent position for Berkeley to hold would thus have to (a) show that the philosophical benefits of the view are at least as attractive as those of holding God causally responsible, with or without our concurrence, for all motions in the physical world, (b) show how Berkeley can account for the perception of our own actions, and (c) reinterpret the passages in which Berkeley seems to leave no space for finite spirits to be causally efficacious in the physical world. I have tackled the first two tasks before (Stoneham 2002, ch.6; 2010), arguing that only

the realist view gives adequate accounts of our knowledge of other minds and our moral responsibility.

Sukjae Lee (2012) discusses the arguments from other minds and moral responsibility in some detail.[11] With respect to the former, he never explains how the consequence for the occasionalist that my knowledge of God's existence (as cause) is so different to my knowledge of the existence of other finite minds (by some sort of analogy, I suppose) sits with the pivotal argument of A IV.4 ff. For it is crucial to the argument in *Alciphron* that we know God's existence in the same way we know of the existence of other finite minds, since dialectically Alciphron is presented with a dilemma: either accept we have reason to believe in God's existence or deny we have reason to believe in any other minds (Stoneham, 2013).With respect to the latter, Lee leaves the occasionalist Berkeley unable to draw a moral distinction between conspiracy (or intending to perform a wrong action) and the crime or sin itself. This is because Lee fallaciously infers from 'all guilt is in the will' to 'sinfulness consists in the *willing* of the physical event and not the physical event itself' (2012, 571), overlooking the view that some physical events are sinful in virtue of the intentions of the agent. Berkeley the clergyman was well aware that while willing murder, theft or fornication is a sin, actually committing would be a greater one. After all, the general confession in the rite of Holy Communion in the Anglican Church, a service Berkeley would have been intimately familiar with, takes care to distinguish three ways of committing sin: 'By thought, word, and deed'.[12]

The crucial text for understanding the possibility of a realist interpretation of Berkeley's account of action is:

> But though there be some things which convince us, human agents are concerned in producing them; yet it is evident to every one, that those things which are called the works of Nature, that is, *the far greater part* of the ideas or sensations perceived by us, are not produced by, or dependent on the wills of men. (PHK 146, my emphasis; v. also A. IV.5, quoted below)

This passage seems to imply a division in the physical events between those which are the products of finite, created minds and those which are the products of the divine mind, the former being the works of man (and other finite spirits) and the latter the works of Nature. That there is such a division in the physical events between things

that happen and things that we (finite creatures) do is part of the pre-philosophical understanding of the world, and it is a distinction that philosophers have fought hard to maintain in the face of the apparent ability of physics, or physiology, or neurophysiology, or some other branch of science, to subsume all the things we do into the class of things that merely happen. It is not at all surprising that Berkeley should find himself attracted to such a view, for those who insist that – despite appearances – all the things we do are merely things that happen in the natural world, no different in their explanation than storms or sunsets, would be putting forward a view he would regard as sceptical. As such, occasionalism about action would also look sceptical to Berkeley.[13]

Now, as PHK 146 makes clear, the restriction of 'nature' to those parts of the physical world not directly under the control of finite minds doesn't threaten the argument for the existence of God, because nature makes up 'by far the greatest part' of the physical world, so the proofs of God's existence remain abundant and unavoidable. In fact, when articulating the argument in *Alciphron*, Berkeley makes clear that the inference to the existence of God is from those parts of nature not under the control of man:

> The soul of man actuates but a small body, an insignificant particle, in respect of the great masses of nature … Does it not follow then, that from natural motions, *independent of man's will*, may be inferred both power and wisdom incomparably greater than that of the human soul? (A IV.5, my emphasis)

By so doing, Berkeley leaves space for a proof of other finite minds with exactly the same structure as the proof of the existence of God but drawing upon different observed data. The problem this metaphysical picture faces, however, is that God's creative intentions are meant to determine the regularity and order to be found in the physical world and yet there is a significant part of the physical world, namely the bodily movements which are basic actions of finite minds, which are – assuming freewill (see A VII. 19-23) – outside of the scope of God's direct creative act. Since finite minds are imperfect and diverse, this threatens to undermine the admirable order and regularity of the physical world.

There are a few things to note here:

1. The powers of finite minds are limited and there is no reason why they should not be limited in precisely the ways which will preserve the order and regularity of the natural world: I can move my hand into the path of a falling object, but whether I stop its fall or break my fingers depends upon the laws of nature. This is, in part, what makes the difference between the action of a finite mind and the miraculous action of Christ.
2. God's intentions for order in the natural world can be conditional upon the volitions of finite minds: if I choose to let go of the book, it will fall, but if I choose not to, it will remain suspended.[14]
3. Casual, or even quite careful, inspection of the natural world would lead one to believe that the order and regularity it has when left to its own devices is disrupted by the actions of humans and other creatures. Of course, there is a clear sense in which we cannot defy gravity, but there is another in which we can: by holding the book I interfere with the natural regularity according to which it should fall. To see such 'interventions' as themselves merely expressions of the interaction of a series of complex laws is not an easy achievement.

Now it seems a distinctive mark of modern metaphysics to accept that science itself gives us reason to think that the laws of nature are complete and universal with respect to the physical world, so the superficial appearance of finite spirits intervening in the operation of those laws is just that, a superficial appearance which will go away once we have a better understanding of the laws themselves. This metaphysical picture was being constructed in the 17th century and began to be widely accepted in the 18th. But it would be a mistake to read back into the early 18th century the universal acceptance of this metaphysics of science which only became such an article of faith in 20th century philosophy. We should have an open mind with respect to the question of whether Berkeley accepted it.

Though Berkeley was writing more than 20 years after the publication of Newton's *Principia*, there is the risk of anachronism in thinking that, had he rejected the universality and completeness of the laws of nature, he would have felt obliged to defend himself on that point. *De Motu* gives us some examples of Berkeley confidently challenging Newton over the bucket thought-experiment and – more significantly for

our purposes – over the third law of motion (DM 70, see Stoneham 2002, 150-3 for discussion), and his concerns over infinitesimals are recurrent throughout his work. But the really striking text is PHK 106, where he offers direct counter-examples to the universality of gravitational attraction:

> … we are apt to … humour that eagerness of mind, whereby it is carried to extend its knowledge into general theorems. For example, gravitation, or mutual attraction, because it appears in many instances, some are straightway for pronouncing *universal*; … Whereas it appears the fixed stars have no such tendency towards each other: and … in some instances, a quite contrary principle seems to shew itself: as in the perpendicular growth of plants, and the elasticity of the air.

Lee (2012, fn. 23) responds to this point by claiming that Berkeley's concern in this passage is over whether gravitational attraction follows from the 'essential natures' of corporeal things. Be that as it may, his method of arguing involves giving counterexamples to *universality*. Of course, we know that the correct interpretation of Newton is that gravity is one force amongst others which acts upon bodies and we can thus explain the examples without granting an exception to the universality of gravitational attraction, but it seems that if Berkeley had understood that, he would have made his point very differently. It certainly looks as if his target here is a certain version of Newtonian physics which holds gravitational attraction between every two bodies to be a universal law, whether or not it explains that by the essential natures of bodies.[15]

A final problem recently raised for the coherence of the realist reading of Berkeley is an intriguing argument offered by John Russell Roberts (2010, 428). Roberts is considering the standard interpretation of PHK 28 which reads it as a clear statement that the realist casual-volitional theory is true of ideas of imagination (as would also be held by an 'almost-occasionalist' position like Lee's – Roberts is, like everyone else in this debate, not taking realism about bodily actions seriously). He objects that:

> It would mean that in imagining, we have something that is partly active in nature and partly passive. It is odd that he would both draw attention to this

> and not notice the trouble it creates for the very foundations of his metaphysics [viz. the absolute active/passive distinction]. (2010, 428)

But this just muddles things up by forgetting that when we say that Berkeley's ontology includes two fundamental types, namely minds and ideas, we are including ideas of imagination in the latter category. Ideas of imagination are no more modes of minds than are ideas of sense. Where Roberts' argument goes wrong is in thinking that there is any sense in which an idea of imagination is active: to be active an idea of imagination would have to be a cause, not an effect. The mistake is encouraged by a sloppy way of talking in which we say ideas of sense are involuntary (excepting, perhaps, when we perceive our own actions) and ideas of imagination are voluntary. But ideas themselves are neither voluntary or involuntary, for those terms apply to events not objects, and this way of speaking is just shorthand for saying one type of idea is, and the other is not, caused by the volitions of the mind that perceives it – after all, my ideas of sense are caused by God's volitions so on Roberts' view they would also be both voluntary and involuntary, both active and passive.

To understand Berkeley's ontology, we have to remember that ideas stand in two distinct relations to minds: perceptual and ontological. Every idea is perceived by some mind and caused by some mind. Ideas of sense (excepting, perhaps, when we perceive our own actions) are perceived by a finite mind and caused by a distinct mind, usually God's. Ideas of imagination are perceived and caused by the very same finite mind. In causing (but not perceiving) ideas the mind is active. Ideas do not cause anything, and there is no other form of activity, so all ideas, both of sense and imagination, are passive or inert. All this is consistent with allowing finite minds to be the immediate causes of not only their ideas of imagination, but also of some ideas of sense.

I conclude then that there is no fundamental obstacle to interpreting Berkeley as holding a realist causal-volitional theory of human action. But to repeat myself, I do not make this as a claim about the actual opinions of the historical Berkeley, for I do not think he had any fixed opinions on the matter, and if he did, he did not write them down in any work that has survived. Rather it is a coherent position for him to take and has significant philosophical benefits over occasionalism. I now proceed to consider how that theory might account for the fact of human embodiment.

2. Volitions and Agency

The simple volitional theory of agency is: S comes to have[16] a wish/desire or 'willing' towards the occurrence of some event A and that willing causes A to happen, thereby making A an intentional action of S. But this just raises two further challenging questions: why does my willing my arm to rise cause my arm to rise rather than your arm to rise, and why does my willing to walk up the hill cause me to walk whereas my wishing I could fly has no effect? These questions point to the fact that on this account of agency our relation to our bodies is entirely contingent. It would seem as if the infant must learn how to act on the world by willing things and watching to see what effects if any those willings have, then repeating the willings to bring about the now predicted effect. This is absurd, since it makes trying to move our own bodies just like trying to move a pencil by telekinesis (though rather more successful) and as such seriously misrepresents the nature of our embodiment. Suppose I had the power of telekinesis, the power to move objects just by willing them to move. Then I would have two distinct ways of moving my arm: the normal way of moving it and the telekinetic way of moving it by willing and that willing causing it to move. If we only had the latter, we would have a very different relation to the world and our bodies than we appear to have.

The problem with the simple volitional theory seems to be that if I will or even intend *that something happens*, such as the pencil moves, then the connection between the willing and the happening is definitely contingent. But we can and do distinguish between someone who wills or wishes something to happen and someone who forms the volition, that is intends, *to do something*. There is a difference between intending that the pencil should move – perhaps by the effect of gravity or wind – and intending to move the pencil. Only the latter is constitutive of genuine intention to act. Consequently, a being which willed certain things only to find that they happened would never be able to regard any worldly event as a basic action of hers, as something she *just does* rather than something she does *by* doing something else, for every effect she had on the world would be something she did *by* doing something else, namely willing.

If all action were like telekinesis, like the contingent effect of a willing, disembodiment would be the breaking of a contingent relation; it would not be a matter of losing certain abilities, but merely being placed in a less favourable relation to the physical world, like someone who cannot reach the top shelf in the library. In contrast, someone who intends *to do* something, when they are successful, does not bring that

about *by* willing, but simply brings it about *as they willed*. It is precisely because of this, rather than the lack of causal connection, that we think an occasionalist account of action in fact leaves us impotent, for the intention *to do* something, rather than merely that something happens, is never fulfilled: however reliable an occasion of God's action our willings are, nothing happens as willed but merely consequent upon willing. In the case of genuine agency, the connection between the intention and the basic action is not contingent in the same way: whatever is the relation between my intention and my arm rising when I raise my arm intentionally (and it is at least causal), that is not a relation which can hold between that intention and a different event, an event which is not[17] a raising of my arm by me. My intention to raise my arm might have all sorts of effects, but only one of those effects can ever be something I *do* directly, an expression of my agency.

What seems problematic about the account of human action as a matter of forming a volition to do A and that volition reliably causing A to happen is that it collapses into the view that doing A is a matter of forming the volition that A should happen and that volition causing A to happen, which we have seen is an inadequate account of our agency. For if doing A consists in forming a volition which causes A to happen, then the content of the volition to do A, is the same as the volition that A happen as a result of a volition, that is, that one does A by forming the volition. (Woozley 1985) While it might have seemed that strengthening the relation from occasioning to causing would have helped, the fundamental problem remains.

This is often taken to be an entirely general objection to any volitional theory of action deriving from the fact that it gives an inadequate account of the role of the body in human agency, for it is assumed by critics that the only relation a volitional theory can allow between volition/intention and its bodily effect is causal and thus incapable of sustaining a unique relation to our bodies. Setting aside the question of what Berkeley took the nature of the causal relation between volition and effect to be (see Stoneham 2002, 147-53 for an initial discussion of the matter), it is open to the proponent of such a theory to place other constraints upon the relation between volition and action, so the volition to do A does not reduce to the volition that A should happen as a result of my willing.

If the volition to do A is reducible to the volition that A should happen as a result of my willing, then it would seem that there are no constraints upon what one could form a volition to do. However, it seems that there are such constraints[18] and

Berkeley himself would have been familiar with this point, for it crops up briefly in Locke's *Essay*:

> Such is the difficulty of explaining and giving clear notions of internal Actions by sounds, that I must here warn my Reader that *Ordering, Directing, Chusing, Preferring*, etc. which I have made use of, will not distinctly enough express *Volition*, unless he will reflect on what he himself does, when he *wills*. For Example, *Preferring* which seems perhaps best to express the Act of *Volition*, does it not precisely. For though a Man would preferr flying to walking, yet who can say he ever *wills* it? (E 2.21.15, emphasis original)

Locke has noted the difference between merely wanting something to happen and forming a volition to do it. The final sentence draws attention to an apparent restriction on what we form volitions to do, noting that however much we may want to fly, none of us will it. Why? The obvious explanation is that flying is just not within our repertoire as human beings.[19] Now it is unlikely that Berkeley, a keen student of Locke's *Essay*, would have been unaware of this point. The question is whether he can account for it, and if he holds the simple volitional theory that to act is to form a volition which causes a bodily motion, then it seems he cannot. Unfortunately, Berkeley appears to have nothing more to say about what it is to be an agent than that it is to have volitions which are effective, and in so doing ignores the difference between a willing that one flies which somehow causes one to fly, and a genuine volition to fly. Furthermore, the conception of ourselves as agents which best explains the facts about what we can and cannot form a volition to do, which answers the question of how we act, is a conception of ourselves as being agents in virtue of our embodiment (and having the specific kind of body we do). It is hard to see how the Berkeleian can make embodiment essential to agency in this manner, since it is spirits and not human beings who are agents. It seems that our agency is essential to us but our embodiment merely contingent.

Locke answered his own question very briefly:

> *Volition*, 'tis plain, is an Act of the Mind knowingly exerting that Dominion it takes it self to have over any part of the Man, by employing it in, or withholding it from any particular Action. (E 2.21.15, emphasis original)

What Locke seems to be saying here is that we cannot form the volition to fly up the hill rather than walk because we cannot *knowingly* exert the power to fly. In that case, we fail the epistemic condition because we know we cannot fly, and thus do not 'take ourselves' to have the power to do so. But what of cases where we erroneously take ourselves to have a power? Can we form a volition then? It seems to me that this very much depends upon the grounds for our error. Consider a retired athlete who thinks she can still perform a feat of her youth. Here the belief she has the power may or may not be reasonable, depending upon her health, fitness etc., and that in turn matters to whether she can form the volition, for if she knows she is ill or unfit or arthritic, then her belief that she still has the power will be unreasonable and it seems she cannot 'knowingly' exert that power. Similarly, imagine a child who has seen a gymnast perform a standing back-flip and wants to do one as well. She may take herself to have that ability, and if strong and agile enough, she may even have it and be able to perform the flip with a little direction, but she cannot 'knowingly exert' that ability if her belief that she has the ability is unreasonable. Reasonableness here is going to depend upon her background beliefs and whether they support the thought that a back-flip is something anyone, or even most people, can do (e.g. a forward roll) or whether it is a special skill. At this stage, whether her belief that she has the ability is unreasonable or not may be a little vague, and thus it may be unclear whether she is really forming a volition, but once she has been shown how to do it by a coach, or perhaps just told by the same reliable source that she can do it if she tries correctly, then the belief is reasonable. The epistemic condition seems to require that we are not unreasonable in what powers we take ourselves to possess, though it may not go so far as to require that we in fact have good positive grounds for the belief.[20]

If this line of thought is right, then we should unpack Locke's point as expressing the following necessary conditions upon successful action:

(1) The mind has dominion, i.e. has power over, some parts of the body.
(2) The mind not unreasonably does take itself to have this power.
(3) In forming a volition, the mind exerts this power knowing that it does so.

Behaviours which are not actions fall into different categories. When we wish we could fly up the steep hill, we simply do not form a volition and any subsequent arm-

flapping is not even an attempt to fly. But we may also fail condition (3) by forming a volition to do X which brings about Y: in such a case Y is not an intentional action because, though caused by a volition, the mind is not *knowingly* exerting its power to do Y. There are also a range of cases where we try but fail to do something. If trying to do something entails having the volition to do it,[21] these are cases where the volition is formed so the epistemic condition is met. These can be cases where the agent reasonably but incorrectly believes herself to have the power, or where she has the power and exerts it but the context prevents the outcome. The boundaries between all these situations need not be sharp.

Thus Locke holds a version of the volitional theory of action according to which the mind, in acting, succeeds in bringing about an effect it intends to bring about and it knows, or at least not unreasonably believes, it has the power to do so. He retains the structure of the volitional theory, the division into volition and its effect, but places a constraint upon forming a volition which ensures that the relation between the two is not merely contingent: if you form the volition to do A, you must meet an epistemic condition with respect to your power to do it. If we assume that reasons for belief raise the probability of its truth, then that epistemic condition ensures that the connection between the volition and its effects is not merely arbitrary: in forming the volition to raise my arm, I must meet a condition which raises the probability of my arm rising but does not raise the probability of your arm rising or my leg moving. And since in most normal cases we know we have the powers we exert, then this connection is very tight.

This also addresses the problem of basic actions being a matter of doing something *as willed* rather than *by willing*. For if we form the volition to do something, and doing it consists not merely in causing it to happen, but knowingly exerting one's dominion over one's body, then when I intend to move my arm, I do not intend that my arm move as a result of my volition, that I move it by willing, but rather that I move it simpliciter, for that is part of my dominion over my body.

Returning to the initial question of our embodiment, it seems that the Lockean epistemic condition upon volition gives us at least part of an answer to the question of what is so special about our own bodies, namely that our bodies are those physical objects we know (or at least reasonably believe) ourselves to have (direct) dominion over. This is a plausible sufficient condition for a part of the physical world to 'belong' (Descartes, CSM II 52) to me, at least if we accept that prostheses can literally become part of one's body. But it is not a necessary condition because of those parts of my

body, such as the heart and liver, over which I exercise no power of agency. It is, significantly, a sufficient condition which an immaterialist could accept.

3. Blind Agents

That an immaterialist *could* impose an epistemic condition upon forming a volition and thus give an account of embodiment tells us nothing about what Berkeley might have thought. What I propose to argue is that Berkeley's famous denial of 'blind agents' should be interpreted as imposing an epistemic condition upon agency. The phrase 'blind agent' is metaphorical and it is unclear what its denial amounts to precisely. In this section I shall argue that there was a long intellectual tradition in the 17th century in which blindness is used as a metaphor for an epistemic failing, so we can read Berkeley's denial of blind agency as the denial that there could be agents who lacked knowledge of something.

Kenneth Winkler's justly influential discussion (1989, 207-16) of Berkeley's denial of blind agency pays almost no attention to *physical actions*. His objectives in that discussion are to show that (i) the denial of blind agency is something Berkeley might have taken to be uncontroversial given that it was widely and uncritically accepted by Descartes, Malebranche and Locke, and (ii) the denial helps us understand some passages in the major works, thus (iii) we can attribute the denial to Berkeley in his published works. Given that what Winkler wants to establish with this attribution is that the ideas of unperceived objects are in God's mind in virtue of his intentions/volitions to create perceptions in us, he only needs to establish that Berkeley holds a weak, representational thesis: agents must have an idea of that which they intend or will. However, it is entirely consistent with all the arguments Winkler gives that Berkeley held the stronger, epistemic thesis: agents must have knowledge that they are able to do that which they form a volition to do.

Berkeley only uses the phrase 'blind agent' twice, once in the Notebooks and once in *Siris*:[22]

> [God] is no Blind agent & in truth a blind Agent is a Contradiction. (NB 812)

> Nor will it suffice from present phenomena and effects, through a chain of natural causes and subordinate blind agents, to trace a divine Intellect as the

> remote original cause, that first created the world, and then set it a-going. (S 237)[21]

The occurrence in the *Notebooks* comes not long after his reference to Locke's correspondence with Limborch (NB 743) in which Locke also uses the phrase, suggesting where Berkeley came across it. For in fact, that precise expression is surprisingly rare in the 17th century. None of Winkler's quotations from Descartes or Malebranche[23] use precisely that expression and a search of Early English Books Online produces only one occurrence in a 1640 treatise by Edward Reynolds 'of the passions and faculties of the soul of man' where it appears twice in Chapter XXXI on the causes of anger. Reynolds was a high profile Bishop of Norwich and a prolific author. He had been Dean of Christ Church until March 1651, just 14 months before Locke's election to a Studentship. According to the DNB (Atherton, 2004), his *Treatise of the Passions* 'was still a common undergraduate text at Oxford at the end of the 17th century', 20 years after his death:

> Now nothing doth more aggravate a wrong than this, that it proceeded from the will of man. And the reasons are, First, because a mans Power is in his Will[,] but Passions and other blind Agents, when they work ungoverned, are our Imperfections, and not our Power; and therefore the easier borne withall. (1640, 311-310 [N.B. the page numbering in this chapter contains many errors])

> 8 Give Injuries a New Name, and that will worke a new Affection. In blinde Agents call it Chance· in weake Persons, Infirmity, In simple, Ignorance, in wise Counsell, in Superiours, Discipline, In equals, Familiarity, in Inferiors, Confidence, where there is no other construction to be made, doe as Ioseph and David did, call it Providence, and see what God sayes to thee by it. (1640, 322-3)

It seems that Reynolds is using the phrase as a stylistic variant for 'blind powers' (caeca potentia) which was a much more common term of art and one he used elsewhere. In both these passages, Reynolds is concerned with attributions of responsibility and blindness in a cause is taken to exculpate. He does not regard the Will as blind (supporting Winkler's argument that the denial of blind agency was a

commonplace) and regards the blind agents or powers as being 'ungoverned' in their effects, even to the point of randomness. And it is quite clear that the crucial deficiency in a blind power for Reynolds is ignorance:

> Now, since all appetite (being a blind Power) is dependant upon the direction of some Knowledge; from the diversitie of Knowledge in, or annexed unto things, may be gathered the prime distinction of Passions. (1640, 32)

And in a striking passage where he uses actual blindness as an illustration, it is the fact that the blind man does not know where to walk which is significant for Reynolds:

> Or, as if a blind man, who hath not the power of directing his owne feet, should be permitted to run headlong, without wit or moderation, having no Guide to direct him. (1640, 45)

Reynolds is not alone in regarding the deficiency of a blind power as a random and chaotic force which lacks knowledge. For example, in Henry More's 1659 *The Immortality of the Soul* we find the lack of chaos in nature being taken to be evidence that its cause is not blind but wise:

> The evidence of Externall Objects of Sense, that is, the ordinary Phaenomena of Nature, in which there is discoverable so profound Wisdome and Counsell, that they could not but conclude that the order of things in the world was from a higher Principle than the blind motions and jumblings of Matter and meer Corporeall Beings. (1659, 66)[24]

> Can a blind impetus produce such effects, with that accuracy and constancy, that, the more wise a man is, the more he will be assured That no Wisdome can adde, take away, or alter any thing in the works of Nature, whereby they may be bettered? (1659, 81)

Other references which support the connection between blindness in a power or force and an epistemic deficiency (in most cases the alleged blindness of the will is equated with its not knowing what is good or desirable, though presumably it is directed

on some end, and is thus intentional) include:

> Richard Allestree, *Forty sermons ... preach'd before the King and on solemn occasions*, 1684, p.262
>
> Anthony Burgess, *A treatise of original sin*, 1658, p.197
>
> Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus linguae Romanae & Britannicae*, 1578, def. Caecus casus
>
> Nathanael Culverwel, An elegant and learned discourse of the light of nature, 1652, p.118, 155
>
> John Dryden, *Notes and observations on The empress of Morocco*, 1674, p.39
>
> John Flavel, *Pneumatologia, a treatise of the soul of man*, 1685, p.397
>
> A Gentleman in communion with the Church of England, *Sober, and serious considerations occasioned by the death of His Most Sacred Majesty, King Charles II (of ever blessed memory)*, 1685, p.35
>
> J. A., of Ailward, *An historicall narration of the iudgement of some most learned and godly English bishops, holy martyrs, and others*, 1631, p.24
>
> Thomas Manton, *One hundred and ninety sermons on the hundred and nineteenth Psalm*, 1681, p.873
>
> John Northleigh, *Exercitationes philologicae*, 1681, Preface
>
> Edward Polhill, *The divine will considered in its eternal decrees, and holy execution of them*, 1695, p.442
>
> Edward Reynolds, *Israels prayer in time of trouble with Gods gracious answer thereunto*, 1649, p.20
>
> John Sadler, *Masquarade du ciel presented to the great Queene of the little vvorld.* 1640, p.35
>
> John Wallis, *Truth tried*, 1643, p.43

And when we turn from the general intellectual culture of the 17th century to Locke's use of the term, it is far from clear that he was only imposing a weak, representational condition when he denied blind agents. Consider the passage where he uses the phrase 'Agentem caecum' which Winkler quotes and Berkeley refers to at NB 743:

> If you say that the judgement of the understanding, or cogitation, is not one of the 'requisites for acting'. Please consider whether, while you want in this way to make a man free, you are not simply making him a blind agent; and whether, in order to make him free, you are not taking away from him understanding, without which any sort of Liberty cannot exist or be supposed to exist. For

> liberty does not belong in any way whatsoever to things destitute of cogitation and understanding. (1976: 408)

Here the implausible consequence of blind agency is an objection to a view which denies not merely representation but 'judgement' or (*sive*) 'cogitation' as conditions on agency. And when Berkeley discusses this, the phrase he quotes is 'Judicium Intellectus'. It seems then that there was a long tradition of the denial of blind agency being equivalent to the assertion of an epistemic condition upon agency, and Berkeley had come across it, at least in Locke if not in others.

It is also worth commenting briefly on the distinction in Reynolds between the blind appetites and the knowing will. This was a familiar contrast in an established debate at the time, but the important point for our purposes is that these blind appetites are the motivational forces behind such habitual sins as lust, gluttony and sloth. Now it would seem very strange to think that such appetites do not represent their objects, that he who lusts does not have an idea of she for whom he lusts. It seems then that blindness in appetites might be consistent with meeting the weak representational condition on agency.

4. Immaterial Agents

So Berkeley's denial of blind agency can, in its historical context, be taken to be an assertion of an epistemic condition upon agents: in order to do X, one must form the volition to do X, and in order to form the volition to do it, one must know how to do X,[25] that is, one must know that one has the power to do it just by trying.

It remains to be shown that this interpretation is consistent with what Berkeley does say about agency, which is very little, and with what he says about knowledge, which is rather more. Clearly the required knowledge is sometimes based on experience. Consider a child learning to catch a ball: the progress from total failure, to occasional lucky successes, to regular achievement, to confident control. At the end of the process, as someone calls 'Catch' and hurls a ball in her direction, she knows whether she can catch it (not whether she will, since mistakes are always possible, reminding us again of the near factive character of intentions), and that knowledge is clearly based on experience. Now, if all knowledge of what we can and cannot do could be shown to be based on experience, then the Berkeleian would be able to consistently assert the epistemic condition. It might be surprising to discover that the mewling

infant only knows how to suckle or cry from experience, but no more surprising than Berkeley's claim that the infant can only see that her mother is close or far on the basis of experienced correlations of the ideas of sight and touch.

Unfortunately Berkeley faces a dangerous regress. The child can learn to catch because she already knows she can move her hands into those positions and track a moving object with her eyes. What she learns is how to coordinate actions she can already perform. Similarly for playing the piano and riding a bike. So we need to ask how she knows she can perform those more basic actions. And if that knowledge is only acquired from experience because there are yet other actions she can perform, the regress is started.

Tracing back the regress from our complex mature actions would be a difficult and tedious matter, but we can easily spot a starting point and ask our question about that. Seconds after birth, perhaps in response to the actions of the midwife, a new born child utters her first cry. Is that blind agency or does she know she can do it? And if she knows, how does she know?

The attractive answer is to say that the first cry and those which soon follow it, like many other behaviours of the neonate, are not intentional actions. Once the child learns she can make that noise, and especially once she learns its effect on her mother, then she may make it intentionally. Similarly for limb movements and eye-tracking and other things the neonate achieves. There is no blind *agency*, intentional action does require knowledge, which requires experience and thus children gradually gain intentional control of their behaviours as they acquire experience of what they can achieve.

Unfortunately Berkeley cannot accept this answer. Consider the neonate's first cry. Did she cause that or not? If she did not cause it, it is unclear how her experience of the cry could teach her that she has the power to cry and thus ground later intentional crying. But if she did cause it while not meeting the epistemic condition upon volition, then she caused something without willing it, without a volition, and Berkeley explicitly denies that:

> This making and unmaking of ideas very properly denominates the mind active. Thus much is certain, and grounded on experience: but when we talk of unthinking agents, or of exciting ideas exclusive of volition, we only amuse our selves with words. (PHK 28, v. also NB 699)[26]

That only minds are active and that their activity requires volitions is a fundamental part of Berkeleian idealism and not one to be given up lightly.

What seems to have gone wrong is that Berkeley has failed to spot an ambiguity in the term 'agent': on the one hand, an agent, as in 'agent of change', is a cause, but on the other, an agent is one who performs an intentional action. So it is possible for Berkeley to say that nothing is an agent in the first sense except in so far as the change is a result of its 'mental operations', preserving the thesis that only minds are active, but that a further condition must be met for agency in the second sense, namely that the subject must know she can achieve what she wills. For example, imagine standing in front of a mirror trying to wiggle your ears. For a long while nothing happens, then they wiggle, but when you try again, they do not. We have no difficulty with the idea that the wiggle was caused by your trying – a mental operation, but we do not, in such a case, think that the wiggle was an intentional action, for you still do not know how to wiggle your ears, it is not something you can do 'at will' even if your trying to do it occasionally causes it to happen. Similarly, if someone tries to move a pencil telekinetically and to their surprise it moves, they may be the cause of its motion but they did not move it in the same sense as had they picked it up. And returning to our neonate, the first cry is a mere reaction, caused by her mental act but not itself an act of hers, and on observing these cries, the child may try to bring one about on demand and finds she can with ease. Learning she can so cause a cry by trying, she discovers it is in her power and comes to cry intentionally.

It seems that this distinction between minds as causes and as agents of intentional actions may be required by Berkeley's account of suggestion in NTV and elsewhere. For suggested ideas are not caused by God, otherwise we would not need to learn the visual language from experience of the relation between sign and signified. So they must come from us, and are a result of our mental operations, namely learning the signification of certain combinations of ideas. But, and this is an important contrast between suggestion and inference, when an idea is suggested, it is not voluntary, that is, its coming to mind is not an intentional action of mine. So perhaps Berkeley's denial of the exciting of ideas exclusive of volition actually overstates the case.[27]

Concluding Remarks

This paper has been a move in that enticing game of guessing the contents of the *Principles of Human Knowledge* Part 2. As many have said before, there is reason to suspect that part of the reason the lost manuscript was never re-written was that Berkeley saw some problems he could not solve. I have been arguing that the problem of giving an adequate account of agency and embodiment is solvable, but at a cost, namely he would have had to accept that finite minds can be causes without being intentional agents, so that they can acquire the knowledge necessary to become such agents. Is that too high a price to pay? It depends whether Berkeley's commitment to volitional causation is primarily a rejection of non-mental causes, or whether it is rooted in a rejection of all forms of 'blind power'. If the denial of blind agency gives Berkeley an account of human embodiment, then the denial that God is a blind agent gives a further reason to think that 'in him we live and move and have our being' should be taken literally: God's relation to nature is the same as – or very similar to – our relation to our bodies.

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Abbreviations

A Berkeley's *Alciphron*, in Jessop & Luce volume III. References by dialogue and section numbers.

CSM Descartes' *Meditations, Objections and Replies,* in Cottingham, Stoothof and Murdoch (1985). Reference by page number.

DHP Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, in Jessop & Luce volume II. References by dialogue and page number.

DM Berkeley's *De Motu*, in Jessop & Luce volume IV. References by section number.

DNB *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*

E Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Reference by book, chapter and paragraph numbers.

NB Berkeley's *Notebooks*, in Jessop & Luce volume I under the title 'Philosophical Commentaries'. References by entry number.

NTV Berkeley's *New Theory of Vision*, in Jessop & Luce volume I. References by section number.
S Berkeley's *Siris*, in Jessop & Luce volume 5. References by section number.

Notes

1. See 'Abbreviations' for references to Descartes, Locke and Berkeley.
2. 'Item, that my Body, before it is buried, be kept five days above ground, or longer, even till it grow offensive by the cadaverous smell, and that during the said time it lye unwashed, undisturbed, and covered by the same bed clothes, in the same bed, the head being raised upon pillows' (Last Will and Testament, Jessop & Luce, VII, 381)
3. The epigraph to this paper comes from the following passage:

   > We are chained to a body, that is to say, our perceptions are connected with corporeal motions. By the Law of our Nature we are affected upon every alteration in the nervous parts of our sensible body: which sensible body rightly considered, is nothing but a complexion of such qualities or ideas, as have no existence distinct from being perceived by a mind: so that this connexion of sensations with corporeal motions, means no more than a correspondence in the order of Nature between two sets of ideas, or things immediately perceivable. But God is a pure spirit, disengaged from all such sympathy or natural ties. No corporeal motions are attended with the sensations of pain or pleasure in his mind. (DHP3 241)

   The point of this passage is to draw attention to our embodiment and use it to explain why we feel pain and God does not.
4. In the preamble to *Siris*, Berkeley describes the relation between mind and body as analogous to that between a musician and his instrument. While the purpose of this is to recommend looking after the health of the body as well as the mind, it implies a particularly close relation between mind and body, for a musician with no instrument makes no music (Jessop & Luce, V, 31).
5. Berkeley would not be alone in thinking the denial of action realism to be sceptical, e.g. Catherine Trotter (1702, 31) writes: 'Do you understand *how* your soul … moves your body, or is affected by it? These are operations, which I suppose you are not so sceptical as to deny'.
6. Few others have defended realism, the notable exception being Fleming (2006). The best defence of almost-occasionalist interpretations is Lee (2012), though the view that for Berkeley volition is our only action can be traced back to Hornsby (1980, 52). There is a third option, called 'concurrentism', according to which our bodily motions are the joint upshot of both our volitions and God's. As far as I know, this was first suggested by Dancy (1998, 56) and defended in McDonough (2008). Roberts (2010) gives a different account in terms of immanent causation, but for present purposes that will stand or fall with occasionalism.
7. Oddly, few note that the problem only arises if we can perceive our own actions (Stoneham 2002, 192-99).

8. The other passages McDonough cites only show that Berkeley was aware of concurrentism and rejected it as a possible account of material causation, just as he rejected mere conservationism for material causes. The 'strange impotence of men' passage in the notebooks (NB 107) is hard to reconcile with realism, but we should note that it has the mysterious '+' sign and comes very early in the notebooks, crucially before the consideration of the rejected bundle view (NB 580), so I am not inclined to place much weight on it.
9. This is clearly a paraphrase of DHP3 237: 'the use of limited powers, ultimately indeed derived from God, but immediately under the direction of their own wills'.
10. It is also striking that McDonough's contextualist argument for concurrentism being a live option to Berkeley concentrates on the 16th century scholastic tradition. If this genuinely was a live option in 1710, then we would expect (a) to find other concurrentists, and (b) to have some readers of Berkeley notice this. It is worth noting that we do find contemporary occasionalists and plenty of readers of Berkeley who take him to be a closet Malebranchian (and we also find other contemporary immaterialist occasionalists, e.g. Collier).
11. Lee notes that he is responding to an anonymous referee, whose identity should now be obvious to the attentive reader.
12. Roberts appears to deny this (2010, 426), but his theology seems more suited to dissenters than orthodox Anglicans.
13. Cf. Molina's remark on occasionalism, quoted by McDonough (2008, n.16), himself drawing from Freddoso: 'everyone rejects this position, and St. Thomas justifiably calls it stupid. For what could be more stupid than to deny what is obvious from experience and sense perception?'
14. Berkeley explicitly endorses the Molinist position that God's intentions for the physical world are conditional upon our (free) actions in PHK 44.
15. (Woodbridge 1918) is an interesting study of Berkeley's disagreement with the Newtonian conception of laws. Thanks to John Blechl for this source.
16. Is this forming of a 'volition' itself an intentional action? We shall see that on this simple account it must be, because we move our bodies by willing. On the modified account below, it does not have to be. Would it still be objectionable to still think of it as an action? So long as it is not an action by which we move our bodies, I do not see a problem here, for we can say that in intentionally moving my legs, I do two things, I form the intention and I move them. I can't do the latter without the former, but I may well do the former without the latter.
17. …(identical to or part of or a necessary consequence of)…
18. This is what Annette Baier (1977, 404) calls the 'near factive' character of intentions. The qualification 'near' reminds us that there can be internal relations which are weaker than logical necessity. If the relation between a volition and its effect is that kind of internal relation (Stoneham 2002, 148-9), then pace Kendrick (2014, 11) there is a third option for the volitional theory between 'blind chance' and 'fatal necessity' (PHK 93).
19. At 2.21.9, Locke imagines 'a Man falling into the Water (a Bridge breaking under him,)' and notes that 'though he has Volition, though he prefers his not falling to falling; yet the forbearance of that Motion not being in his power'. A casual reader might think that this contradicts what I say here,

for Locke seems to be imagining a man forming an anti-gravitational volition to stop falling through the air and into the water. But presumably the preference for not falling, what he forms the volition to do, is to cross the river safely and drily, and when the bridge breaks, it is no longer in his power to do this. To put it another way, 'falling' is ambiguous between the event of losing one's balance, slipping etc. and the subsequent loss of altitude. We should read Locke as concerned with the former, not the latter, here. (Thanks to Sam Rickless for drawing this passage to my attention.)

20. In this paragraph I am indebted to conversations with George Pappas and Sam Rickless about an earlier, less cautious, version of the paper.
21. Some might object that I can try to wiggle my ears while not knowingly exerting the power to do so, since I have no idea whether I can do it or not until I try. But it is not clear to me that someone who believes that some people do and some people do not have the ability to wiggle their ears can simply try to do it. What they do is experiment with deliberate control of various muscles which they use in other actions to see what the effect is. They are trying to wiggle their ears in the sense that someone who buys a ticket is thereby trying to win the lottery.
22. For cognate phrases, see PHK 93, 150, *Alciphron* III 10-11, IV 14, *Siris* 242.
23. The case for Malebranche as a denier of blind agency is not as clear cut as Winkler makes out. He omits to mention *Search* 1.1.2: 'In plain language, I mean that the will is a blind power, which can proceed only toward the things the understanding represents to it.' It is worth comparing this translation by Lennon and Olscamp (1997, 5) with Thomas Taylor's: 'I would say, to make use of the ordinary terms, that the Will is a blind Power, that can make no advances to things but what are represented to it by the Understanding' (1700, 3). It seems to me that Taylor's phrase 'ordinary terms' does not mean the vulgar terms so much as those we are familiar with in philosophy. Whichever is a better translation of the original, Taylor's provides evidence that the phrase 'blind power' was a philosophical term of art he took to have a stable meaning.
24. Cf his *Antidote to Atheism*: 'we are to inferre that it was established by a Principle that has in it Knowledge and Counsell, not from a blind fortuitous jumbling of the parts of the Matter one against another' (1653, 50).
25. I am not here assuming that knowing or at least not unreasonably believing one has a power to do something is knowing how to do it, but rather that knowingly exerting such a power is a form of know how.
26. This sentence, with its talk of 'unthinking agents' may well be the descendant of the blind agents passage from the *Notebooks*. But it is not without its puzzles: is Berkeley claiming that we only know what follows the colon by experience, or is he saying that it is certain and furthermore backed up by experience? Or does 'Thus much' refer back to the previous sentence ('This making and unmaking of ideas doth very properly denominate the mind active.'), as it certainly would were the colon a full-stop.
27. This point was suggested by Migely's comment: 'We may not always have a *choice* which ideas we relate together, but we are the *cause* of those relations of ideas.' (2007, 156)

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