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# The Activity of Finite Spirits in Berkeley: Willing Sensible Ideas

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THE ACTIVITY OF FINITE SPIRITS IN BERKELEY:  
WILLING SENSIBLE IDEAS

by

Benjamin Quinn Formanek

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May 2018

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WILLING SENSIBLE IDEAS

by  
Benjamin Quinn Formanek

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2018  
Under the Supervision of Professor Margaret Atherton

Throughout his unpublished and published works alike, George Berkeley repeatedly exclaims that finite spirits have the power to move our bodies by acts of volition. However, given the nature of the way in which Berkeley carves the division between objective and subjective experience, his remarks concerning our agency over our bodies in the real world appear inconsistent. In an attempt to exculpate Berkeley from inconsistency, Sukjae Lee and George Pitcher offer up an occasionalist interpretation of Berkeley. Their account situates finite spirits with agency that extends to producing acts of will which either serve as occasions for God to then actively assist in producing the corresponding ideas of bodily motions in our minds, or in actually producing ideas of imagination. The project of this paper is to show that Berkeley bars himself from holding a coherent account of non-divine causation in the real world, contra Lee and Pitcher. Towards this end, I critically examine the aforementioned commentators' occasionalist approach to elucidate Berkeley's ontological and theological commitments — along with the way in which we ought to interpret statements about the agency of finite spirits — to ultimately derive a set of necessary conditions that must obtain in *any* attempt to reconcile Berkeley's seemingly inconsistent claims. I argue that these necessary conditions are jointly irreconcilable.

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## Introduction

Consider the movement of your hand in the focus of your visual field. Presumably, the motion you notice of your hand and your wiggling fingers are direct products of your will to move in tandem with the way in which your body responds to the commands of your mind. The world is uncontroversially set up in such a way that, provided the circumstances are just right,<sup>1</sup> your will to move your body results in the corresponding affects: your body moving in the way you wished. What is comparably more cumbersome to understand is *how* and by *what means* a mere volitional command to move originating in your mind is causally linked up with the manifestation of its intended, perceivable effects of your moving body. Any tenable view of human agency over the perceived motions of our bodies needs to tell a story about this relationship.

Throughout his works, George Berkeley makes various remarks about the relationship between the will of finite spirits and the perceived motions of our bodies that lend themselves to apparent inconsistencies when we consider them in light of what he says about the nature of the real, sensible world. For Berkeley, the perceived sensible ideas that make up the real world are not up to any finite spirit; all of the ideas that constitute the real world are only passively perceived by finite spirits exclusively in virtue of God's will. In this way, Berkeley sharply carves the division between the real world of sensation and ideas of imagination in terms of involuntary and voluntary control on the part of finite spirits. On face value — with this condition in hand — Berkeley seems to deprive himself of any account of non-divine agency in the real world. But, Berkeley does markedly exclaim that we as finite spirits *do* act in the sensible realm insofar as we are capable of moving our bodies.

If we are to take seriously Berkeley's commitment to involuntariness on the part of finite spirits as a necessary condition for objective reality along with the fact that our bodies consist of real, sensible ideas in his ontology, Berkeley's claim that we as finite spirits can move our bodies either seems confused, or altogether inconsistent. In attempting to exonerate Berkeley of charges of confusedness or inconsistency, George Pitcher and Sukjae Lee both take an occasionalist approach to the problem that situates finite spirits with genuine causal agency over their volitions to move which serve as *occasions* for God to create the corresponding sensible ideas in our minds. Though initially compelling, reading Berkeley in this way not only conflicts with Berkeley's repeated exclamations throughout his works that finite spirits *do* move our own bodies, but it also undermines his goals of maintaining common sense and warding off skepticism.

The project of this paper is to show that Berkeley bars himself from holding a coherent account of non-divine causation in the real world, contra Pitcher and Lee. Towards this end, I critically examine the aforementioned commentators' occasionalist approach to elucidate Berkeley's ontological and theological commitments — along with the way in which we ought to interpret statements about the agency of finite spirits — to ultimately derive a set of necessary conditions that must obtain in *any* attempt to reconcile Berkeley's seemingly inconsistent claims. I argue that these necessary conditions are jointly irreconcilable. In part one, I lay down the relevant tenets of Berkeley's ontology and his claims about the action of finite spirits that together give rise to the troubling inconsistency. In part two, I explicate the occasionalist model that is put forth as a means to show that Berkeley has a cogent account of the activity of finite spirits held by Pitcher and Lee. In part three, I lay out what I take to be two issues that are unique to their view that render it unsuccessful. I will then segue into the fourth and final part where I



first take stock of the conditions that must be satisfied in order for Berkeley to have a tenable picture of non-divine causation in the real world, and finish by presenting a few arguments illustrating that Berkeley deprives himself of the tools necessary for holding such a picture.

## Part One - Berkeley's Apparent Inconsistency

### *Section One: Berkeley's Ontological Commitments*

While it is consistently maintained that spirits are the only active causes, and that ideas are wholly passive and inert according to Berkeley, there remains a great deal of controversy concerning the activity of spirits; specifically concerning the causal efficacy of finite spirits and the Infinite Spirit, God, as each respectively relates to the perceived motion of our bodies. The dust that commentators have been at pains to navigate through was ultimately kicked up by a desire to understand the causal efficacy of finite spirits together with Berkeley's claims about the nature of objective and subjective experience. Berkeley tells us that the way in which the real, physical world of sensible ideas differs from our imaginary, subjective experience lies manifestly in recognizing which experiences we are and are not the authors of. In other words, objective and subjective experiences are distinguished in terms of voluntary and involuntary control:

I find *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 very properly denominates the mind active...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* 25. Emphasis added. I will henceforth cite any quoted passage found in *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* as *PHK* followed by the number of the principle that is quoted. All passages quoted from *De Motu* will be followed by the number of the principle that is quoted. Any passage quoted from *The Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* will be referred to as *3D* followed by the roman numerals I, II, or III indicating which dialogue the passage is from, followed by the pagination as they appear in *Berkeley: Philosophical Writings*, edited by Desmond M. Clark. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008. All passages from the *Principles*, the *Dialogues*, and *De Motu* are quoted from this text.

Here, Berkeley points out that the minds of finite spirits are not only active, but that we can properly denominate the mind *as* active by recognizing our capacity to willingly create, destroy, and shift any idea in our own minds. Immediately following, we are told that sensibly perceived ideas, contrarily, are *not* within our capacity to create, and furthermore, that they owe their existence to a spirit other than our own:

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 daylight 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 senses, *the ideas imprinted on them are not creatures of my will. There is therefore some other will or spirit that produces them.*<sup>3</sup>

I want to emphasize how Berkeley notes that “the ideas actually perceived by sense” do not have a dependence on our will *like* those ideas that are not actually perceived by sense—that is, contrastingly, the ideas that *are* “creatures of [our] will.” In *Principles* 33, just following, Berkeley explicitly spells out the distinction between our experience of the real world of sensible ideas, and our subjective experience of ideas of imagination. He writes that

The ideas imprinted on the senses *by the Author of nature* are called ‘*real things*’; and *those excited in the imagination* being less regular, vivid, and constant, are more properly termed ‘ideas’, or ‘images of things’, which they copy and represent. But then our sensations, be they never so vivid and distinct, are nevertheless ideas, that is, they exist in the mind, or are perceived by it, as truly as the ideas of its own framing. The ideas of sense are allowed to have more reality in them, that is, to be more strong, orderly, and coherent than the creatures of the mind...<sup>4</sup>

From these principles, we find not only that our experiences of the real, objective world of sensible things are caused by God, but also that those very ideas are more vivid, orderly, and constant than the imaginary ideas of our own will. What is chiefly important in these passages for the purpose of this paper, though, is that the distinction between real, sensible ideas of

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<sup>3</sup> PHK 29. Emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> PHK 33.

experience, and subjective, ‘chimerical’ ideas of our imagination is that the former are necessarily involuntary on the part of finite spirits, while the latter are direct products of our volition. The principle can be stated concisely in the following way: *involuntariness on the part of finite spirits is a necessary condition for the objectivity of sensible ideas.*

## *Section Two: Contestation and Defense of Berkeley’s Commitment to the Involuntariness*

### *Principle*

The involuntariness principle is not, however, universally endorsed in the literature concerning Berkeley’s views the objectivity of ideas of experience. In his paper “Berkeley, Human Agency, and Divine Concurrentism,” Jeffrey McDonough argues that involuntariness is not a necessary nor sufficient condition for rendering sensible ideas real. The sufficiency of the involuntariness principle for Berkeley is not a view that is held by myself, nor any of the commentators that I will contend with later. There is no reason to believe that any sort of hallucination I suffer, such as the image of the Good Bishop Berkeley himself raising an acrimonious brow over my shoulder as I type away, for example, ought to be considered a real idea simply in virtue of the fact that such an experience was involuntary on my behalf.

*Principles of Human Knowledge* passage 33 was quoted above as a means to illustrate the *multiple* ways in which Berkeley carves the distinction between the real and chimerical — it does not exclusively point to involuntariness. Notice again, that Berkeley claims that real ideas are “more strong, orderly, and coherent than the creatures of the mind,” and that ideas of imagination are “less regular, vivid, and constant.”<sup>5</sup> The strength, order, coherence, regularity, vividness, and constancy of ideas all too clearly factor into Berkeley’s account of determining

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<sup>5</sup> *PHK* 33.

which experiences are real, and which are not; it is precisely on this basis that the involuntariness principle is not a sufficient condition.

Though McDonough is clearly right in asserting that the involuntariness principle is not a sufficient condition according to Berkeley, his reasoning for interpreting Berkeley as *not* being committed to its necessity is unconvincing. McDonough writes

That it should not be counted as a necessary condition gains force not only from the ways in which we standardly interpret experiences of our own bodies, but also from our ability to indirectly influence our experience of the world through the control we enjoy over our bodies, as well as by our ability to focus and direct our attention. The fact that I can typically determine whether I see my own hand as open or closed (since I'm the one who typically opens and closes it), that I can avoid seeing the tree by shutting my eyes, and that I can direct my attention to the sound of the birds and away from the noise of the traffic does not require me to suppose that those experiences are merely subjective. Rather than hold that involuntariness is either a necessary or a sufficient condition for objective experience, it would thus seem more reasonable to treat responsiveness to our volitions as one factor among many upon which we may draw in distinguishing between objective and subjective experiences.<sup>6</sup>

Here, McDonough's reasoning for sparing Berkeley from commitment to the necessity of the involuntariness principle only makes use of appeals to how *we* "standardly interpret" the ways in which our perceived bodies respond to the commands of our minds, what phenomenological evidence "typically" seems to suggest, and how viewing things in this way would "seem more reasonable" than adopting the necessity of the involuntariness principle. The task at hand is to uncover *Berkeley's* views about the distinction between objective and subjective experiences — not, conversely, how we now understand the matter, nor what the most reasonable mode of recourse would be in making the distinction in our present age.

McDonough does follow up by suggesting that this mode of reasoning is available to Berkeley. He calls the reader's attention to a portion of a passage in the *Dialogues* as purported

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey McDonough, "Berkeley, Human Agency, and Divine Concurrentism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 46(4), (2008) 27.

evidence: “the ideas perceived by sense, that is real things . . . have not a *like* dependence on our will,” and are at any rate less “dim, irregular and confused” than “ideas formed by the imagination.”<sup>7</sup> Though he does not spell out precisely how it is that this quoted portion of the *Dialogues* lends itself to his interpretation, I take it that McDonough is placing stock in Berkeley’s turn of phrase “*like* dependence.” Presumably, McDonough is contrasting “not a *like*” dependence with “no” dependence, such as to suggest that the ideas of sense have *some* dependence on our will. This is surely a tempting maneuver, though suspiciously, McDonough omits the larger context from which he picked out this portion of Berkeley’s writing.

Interestingly, Berkeley uses the turn of phrase “not a *like* dependence on our will” in *both* the *Dialogues* and the *Principles*. If we are recast our focus to the context in which it is located in the *Principles*, Berkeley immediately follows up by claiming that

When in broad daylight 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 senses, *the ideas imprinted on them are not creatures of my will. There is therefore some other will or spirit that produces them.*<sup>8</sup>

Berkeley is clearly stating that the ideas imprinted on our senses are simply *not* up to us, *unlike* the ideas of imagination. Similarly, the larger context of the passage from which McDonough quoted is equally as revealing to this end. There, Philonous, Berkeley’s mouthpiece, tells Hylas that “...the ideas perceived by sense, that is, real things, are more vivid and clear, *and being imprinted on the mind by a spirit distinct from us*, have not a *like* dependence on our will.”<sup>9</sup>

Again we find that Berkeley is emphasizing that it is God, *and God only*, that imprints ideas of reality unto our senses. McDonough, in quoting this passage, entirely omits the portion that I

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<sup>7</sup> McDonough 27 quoting *Dialogues* 3:235.

<sup>8</sup> *PHK* 29. Emphasis added.

<sup>9</sup> *3D. III.* 235. Emphasis added.

have italicized, and for his interpretation to succeed, it is clear why he chose to leave it out.<sup>10</sup> To drive the point home with brevity then, we ought to understand “not a like dependence” in authoring ideas of sense as meaning *no* dependence whatsoever, and to this end, the necessity of the involuntariness principle is upheld — contra McDonough. Because the success of McDonough’s “Divine Concurrentism” model sits atop a foundation built from Berkeley *not* being committed to the necessity of the involuntariness principle, and because — as I have illustrated — Berkeley *is* in fact committed to its necessity, I will not contend with McDonough’s interpretation any further.

### *Section Three: Moving Our Bodies*

What then are we to make of the motions of our bodies? For we certainly *seem* to move our arms and legs voluntarily. In the *Philosophical Commentaries*, Berkeley straightforwardly tells us that we do so: “We move our Legs ourselves. ‘Tis we that will their movement. Herein I differ from Malbranch.”<sup>11</sup> If we do in fact move our bodies ourselves, of our own volition, then it appears that we cannot consider them objectively real based on the principle of involuntariness as a necessary condition for objectivity. But, as Sukjae Lee helpfully points out in his paper “Berkeley On The Activity Spirits,” *Principles* 34 “provides us with good reason to think Berkeley did not regard the real ideas of his body and the real ideas of distinct physical objects to

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<sup>10</sup> In his paper “Berkeley, Human Agency and Divine Concurrentism,” McDonough argues for the conclusion that both finite spirits and God causally contribute to our perceptions of sensible moving bodies. In order for this to be a viable and consistent view, as McDonough is acutely aware of, Berkeley *must not* be committed to the necessity of the involuntariness principle.

<sup>11</sup> Berkeley, *Philosophical Commentaries* (548). All cited passages from Berkeley’s *Philosophical Commentaries* will henceforth be referenced as *PC* followed by the pagination that they appear in as found in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, edited by Arthur Aston Luce and Thomas Edmond Jessop. London, UK: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948. All passages quoted from *Alciphron* are also found in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*; they will be followed by the dialogue number and then the section number.

differ in their causal makeup.”<sup>12</sup> Though Berkeley’s main task in *Principles* 34 is to provide a defense to the charge that all real things of nature are banished out of the world on his scheme, in his defense, he groups our own bodies amongst trees, rivers, houses, stones, and mountains in a list of real things that *really* exist just as they had before.<sup>13</sup> So, if we are to take involuntariness as a necessary condition for the objectivity of sensible ideas, and we are to take seriously the claim that our bodies consist of real, sensible ideas, Berkeley does not seem to be at liberty in claiming that we move our bodies — as moving our bodies seemingly consists in *voluntarily* authoring sensible motions of sensible ideas.

## Part Two - The Occasionalist Model

### *Section One: The Occasionalist Reading of Berkeley’s Views about the Agency of Finite Spirits*

In order to reconcile the apparent conflict between Berkeley’s ontological commitments and the claim that we move our bodies, a number of readings have been put forth that ultimately differ in the extent to which finite spirits can be considered genuinely causally efficacious with respect to sensibly perceived motions. In a thoughtful and reasoned attempt to abide by the involuntariness principle, one may attribute full causal efficacy over the perceived motions of our bodies along with all the other real ideas in the sensible realm exclusively to God. The model I wish to lay out and examine henceforth, a view that does just this, is ultimately an amalgamation of Lee’s, and Pitcher’s views on the matter; a view that I take to be the most prevalent and compelling in the debate.

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<sup>12</sup> Sukjae Lee, “Berkeley On The Activity Of Spirits,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20 (3), (2012) 17.

<sup>13</sup> *PHK* 34.

This view, which I will call the occasionalist model, attributes genuine agent activity to finite spirits only insofar as we have “the power to produce *volitions*, the act of willing itself... [and] the power to produce our ideas of the imagination.”<sup>14</sup> Our volitions to move, so both Lee and Pitcher argue, serve as *occasions* for God’s divine active assistance in producing sensible bodily movements in us. A bit needs to be said about what I am calling “God’s active assistance” before moving on. The “active assistance” of God, as I will be using the phrase throughout, simply amounts to God noticing our wills and subsequently creating the corresponding sensible effects in our minds. With respect to the sensible ideas we perceive, in the *Philosophical Commentaries*, Berkeley writes that “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.”<sup>15</sup> The being that “wills these perceptions in us,” as we have seen, is God. So, if we are to understand willing as an active enterprise for Berkeley — a notion that will be discussed at more length shortly — God is *active* whenever he implants ideas in our minds. It is in this sense, following our volitions, that God *actively assists* in producing the ideas of moving bodies in our minds.

It is massively important to stress that on the occasionalist model, our volitions to move, as *mere occasions*, are entirely causally inert. This is to say, in other words, that they do not cause God to then arouse in us the ideas of our moving bodies that we intended as effects. Our volitions are nevertheless, despite their futility towards their end in their own right, enough to render finite spirits active beings. Lee puts this point in the following way:

we have the power to produce volitions, and this power comprises the inner core of our activity in such a way that, even if we were to possess just these powers, we would be genuinely active in virtue of them.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Lee 2.

<sup>15</sup> PC 499.

<sup>16</sup> Lee 27.



These acts of volition, as Pitcher notes, “are enough to make the [finite spirit’s] mind a genuinely active entity” simply in virtue of the fact that we, as finite spirits, are able to bring them about ourselves.<sup>17</sup> Though the passage is not made use of by Lee nor Pitcher, Philonous’ exchange with Hylas in the *Dialogues* book II, passage 196 lends itself immensely to their considered views concerning this point:

Philonous: When is the mind said to be active?

Hylas: When it produces, puts an end to, or changes anything.

Philonous: Can the mind produce, discontinue, or change anything but by an act of the will?

Hylas: It cannot.

Philonous: The mind therefore is to be accounted active in its perceptions, so forth as volition is included in them.<sup>18</sup>

According to the account espoused by Lee and Pitcher, genuine agent activity consists in the capacity to bring about changes *without external causes*. It is precisely in light of this condition that finite spirits have not got the power to bring about sensible states in the real world — they *require* God’s active assistance, an external cause. The power to bring about our volitions as finite spirits, conversely, require only that we are able to do so on our own.

Concerning himself with the means by which a mere volitional command originating in the mind of a finite spirit is associated with the ideas of our sensibly perceived moving bodies, Pitcher paints a nice, promising, occasionalist picture on Berkeley’s behalf:

God, being omniscient, and thus knowing that I will my arm to move in a certain way, produces in any suitable observers (including myself) ideas of sense that answer to the intended arm-movement. I am, my volitions are, therefore merely the occasional cause of the voluntary movements of my body, *not their real or true cause*.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> George Pitcher, “Berkeley of the Mind’s Activity,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 18(3), (1981) 17.

<sup>18</sup> *3D.I.196*.

<sup>19</sup> Pitcher 2. Emphasis added.

Lee, towards the same end, discusses the apparent regularity between our volitions to move and their intended effects. He tells us that

the regularity *is not* grounded in any *real* causation between our volitions and their effects. Rather, the regularity is grounded in divine causality, which treats our volitions as occasions for the production of the ideas of sense. The lack of real causal power of ideas of bodily parts accounts for why, despite our willing our bodily parts to do certain things, they don't. It is because our volitions are but occasions for God to *will* certain sensible ideas *when appropriate*—that is, God implements the occurrence of sensible ideas, *if doing so conforms to or is consistent with the laws of nature*.<sup>20</sup>

These two passages vividly reflect the relevant tenets of the occasionalism they want to attribute to Berkeley: not only are the volitions, which are at heart, that which comprises the activity of finite spirits, but that those volitions — that is, the volitions that aim at bodily motion — are not, in any way 'real' causes. For if they were more than occasional causes, that is, more than pitifully impotent causes on their own, finite spirits could be said to be actual contributors to states of affairs in the real world, which as we have seen, seemingly conflicts with Berkeley's ontological commitments.

I think it is important to highlight what Lee tells us in the last sentence of the passage just quoted. For Berkeley, he stresses that in order for our volitions to move to be answered by God, they must be in accord with the pre-ordained, "set rules or established methods"<sup>21</sup> of God — that is, the laws of nature; only in those cases are they then appropriate occasions for God to cause certain, corresponding sensible ideas in us. With careful inspection, we can find some evidence for Berkeley's purported adoption of the view that finite spirits depend upon God to produce corresponding sensible ideas to our volitions. In *De Motu* 25, Berkeley tells us that

we have learned from our own experience that there is a power of moving bodies in [thinking things], since our mind may at will initiate or stop the movement of our limbs, however that is eventually explained. It is certainly established that bodies are moved at

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<sup>20</sup> Lee 27. Emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> *PHK* 30.

the command of the mind, and that the latter can be called appropriately a principle of motion—a *specific and subordinate principle indeed, which itself depends on the first and universal principle.*<sup>22</sup>

In the same vein, in *Principles* 147, Berkeley writes that

The will of man hath no object, than barely the motion of the limbs of his own body; *but that such a motion be attended by, or excite any idea in the mind of another, depends wholly on the will of the creator.*<sup>23</sup>

The occasionalist interpreters suspect that from these passages, Berkeley is pointing out that although the will of finite spirits *apparently* have the motion of their bodies as an effect, strictly speaking, they *do not* have sensible ideas as their proper effects. The will of finite spirits are nonetheless related to the actual motion of sensible ideas *only insofar as they are principles to produce occasions* for the will of the Creator to actively assist in the production of such ideas. This interpretation places heavy stock in the way in which Berkeley makes use of the term ‘dependence.’ The will of finite spirits, in this context, though they are in a loose sense “principles of motion,” are *subordinate principles* which are wholly dependent upon God.

### *Section Two: The Upshots of the Occasionalist Model*

To shift gears, I will now attempt to address the ways in which the occasionalist model appears to be both a “coherent and interesting”<sup>24</sup> account of Berkeley’s views about the activity of finite spirits. One of the strengths of the occasionalist account actually derives from what could be initially presented as an objection to the view. Situating God as the sole agent over every state of affairs in the sensible realm effectually demarcates him as He who causes sinful states of affairs. He is, in this sense, the ‘author of sin.’ Such a conclusion presents a very real

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<sup>22</sup> *De Motu* 25. Emphasis added. The “first and universal principle” being God.

<sup>23</sup> *PHK* 147.

<sup>24</sup> Lee 2.

implication for Berkeley's theodicy, and it seems as though Lee and Pitcher have a serious problem on their hands.

Sukjae Lee explicitly addresses this implication of his reading head on in the final section of "Berkeley on the Activity of Spirits." As he puts it,

If we only cause our volitions and imaginary ideas, the worry is that this 'activity' seems far from sufficient to provide the kind of robust ground for holding that it is our actions which 'the pain and uneasiness in this world are pursuant.' In other words, could the mere act of willing itself be rich enough for a theodician account that relies on the *actions* of finite spirits to account for certain evils in the world?<sup>25</sup>

To save his occasionalist interpretation from the throes of a damaged Berkelian theodicy, Lee directs our attention back to the passage in the *Dialogues* where Hylas presses this very charge unto Philonous. There, Philonous states that

sin or moral turpitude doth not consist in the outward physical action or motion, but in the internal deviation of the will from the laws of reason and religion.<sup>26</sup>

Given that finite spirits, on the occasionalist account, have control over our volitions, and that sin — as clearly stated here by Berkeley — "consists of" deviant willing (rather than the ensuing sensible bodily motions), Lee concludes that we, and *not* God, are the authors of sin.

There is textual support for the essential relationship between genuine agent activity and agent responsibility in *Alciphron*:

It should seem, therefore, that, in the ordinary commerce of mankind, any person is esteemed accountable simply as he is an agent... I know I act, and what I act I am responsible for. And, if this be true, the foundation of religion and morality remains unshaken.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the fact that God is the sole cause of all of our sensory perceptions, some of those ideas are "but immediately under the *direction of* [our] *own wills*", and this "is sufficient to entitle

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<sup>25</sup> Lee 30.

<sup>26</sup> *3D.III.237*.

<sup>27</sup> *Alciphron* 7:19.

them to all the guilt of [our sinful] actions.”<sup>28</sup> In an exchange with Samuel Johnson, who charges him with engendering the conclusion that God is the author of sin, Berkeley retorts by writing

As for guilt, it is the same thing whether I kill a man with my hands or an instrument; whether I do it myself or make use of a ruffian. The imputation therefore upon the sanctity of God is equal. Whether we suppose our sensations to be produced immediately by God, or by the mediation of instruments and subordinate causes, all which are His creatures, and moved by His laws.<sup>29</sup>

From these passages, we get both a pretty clear defense of the notion that God is not the author of sin, insofar as sin consists in the “internal deviation of the will” taken in tandem with the fact that the deviation of the will is something that finite spirits have genuine control over.

A second point in favor of the occasionalist model is that it sits cozily with Berkeley’s commitment to the involuntariness principle. To bring this to light, we need only bear in mind that by way of rendering finite spirits entirely void of causal contribution in the intended effects of our volitions to move, it clearly follows that we play no voluntary role in authoring ideas of sensible moving bodies. Given that we simply play *no role at all* whatsoever in bringing them about, the occasionalist model satisfactorily abides by Berkeley’s involuntariness principle.

## Part Three - The Incongruence and Inimical Nature of the Occasionalist Model

### *Section One: Statement of the Occasionalist Reading’s Shortcomings*

Despite its ability to answer the author of sin problem as well as avoid inconsistencies with the involuntariness principle, the occasionalist model faces a few unique problems of its own. The occasionalist model, so I will argue in this part, *does not* provide us with Berkeley’s views on the activity of finite spirit that is to be “both coherent and interesting *despite the*

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<sup>28</sup> 3D. III. 237.

<sup>29</sup> Lee 32 quoting Berkeley PW 424.

*various texts that seem rather incongruent*” as Lee suggests it ought.<sup>30</sup> The occasionalist interpretation of Berkeley put forth by Lee and Pitcher fails on two fronts. Firstly, it fails to take adequate consideration for the plentitude of passages where Berkeley clearly indicates that finite spirits *do*, contrarily, have some degree or other of real causal agency over sensibly perceived bodily motion. I of course do not mean to suggest that these passages are utterly and wholly unmentioned by Pitcher and Lee, but rather that I find the ways in which they endeavor to skirt them to be unsatisfying. Secondly, their account of that which comprises genuine agent activity for finite spirits is pernicious to Berkeley’s intention to preserve common sense and repel skepticism.

### *Section Two: Textual Incongruence*

Concerning the first problem with the occasionalist model, I will lay out each passage where Berkeley explicitly claims that finite spirits *do* move our bodies via our wills, and take them in turn dialectically with Lee’s and Pitcher’s readings. One such passage has already been called to attention, namely, the passage from the *Philosophical Commentaries*, where Berkeley exclaims that “We move our Legs ourselves. ‘Tis we that will their movement. Herein I differ from Malbranch.”<sup>31</sup> Lee equates this claim to be merely a text from Berkeley’s early notebooks, and as such, he adds that “there is the general question of how seriously we should take Berkeley’s remarks in these entries as indicative of his mature, well-thought out views.”<sup>32</sup> Given that Lee spends no more time beyond that which I have just quoted answering the question he has posed outside of explaining away the sense in which Berkeley takes himself to differ from

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<sup>30</sup> Lee 2.

<sup>31</sup> *PC* 548.

<sup>32</sup> Lee 4.

Malebranche, I take it that he believes this claim to be immature and not well-thought out. So much might be convincing if it were not the case that Berkeley, in his ‘mature works.’ explicitly states that we do, in fact, move our bodies. In the *Three Dialogues*, Philonous tells Hylas that

In plucking this flower, *I am active, because I do it by the motion of my hand, which was consequent upon my volition*; so likewise to applying it to my nose. But is either of these smelling?<sup>33</sup>

Just following, Philonous follows up by exclaiming that in smelling the flower via breathing it in “is the effect of my volition.”<sup>34</sup> Here we get a pretty blatant case of Berkeley making it clear that firstly, in accord with what the occasionalist model indicates, we are active in virtue of our volitions, but also, and towards the occasionalist model’s implausibility, that the motion of our bodies is *consequent* upon our volitions.

Pitcher does attempt to address this passage in the *Dialogues* by claiming that Berkeley is

...speaking loosely here, for he is simply trying to make the point that our wills have more to do with the making of bodily movements than they do with the actual perceiving of sense impressions. Thus he might well mean that my volition is the *occasional* — not the *real* — cause of my plucking the rose, of my applying it to my nose, and of my drawing air in through my nose, but that my will plays no further part at all in my perceiving the delicious smell of the rose.<sup>35</sup>

It is entirely unclear to me from the passage under consideration in the *Dialogues* that Berkeley “is simply trying to make the point that our wills have more to do with the making of bodily movements than they do with the actual perceiving of sense impressions” as Pitcher insists. It appears that Pitcher’s statement merely dances around what is actually at stake here: whether or not bodily motions are true effects of our volitions. Pitcher’s view is committed to the notion that the motions of our bodies are merely *subsequent* upon our wills, but here Berkeley explicitly

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<sup>33</sup> *3D.I.196.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Pitcher 4.

states that they are *consequent* upon them. This suggests, fairly vividly in fact, that *we* produce them.

Additionally, what reason do we have to suppose that Berkeley is speaking loosely here? Why be incredulous when Berkeley is giving a detailed and methodological account of how it is that we are active, and how it is in other cases that we are not? When we are told that the motion of my hand in plucking a rose is consequent upon my volition, and that breathing it in (a sensible motion) is too an *effect* of another volition of mine, we can confidently gather that we have “more to do” with the making of bodily movements than merely providing occasions for God to do his work. As such, Pitcher’s reading of this passage evades the task at hand.

Perhaps the most glaring passage to the effect that finite spirits *actually* causally contribute to the motions of our bodies is one that I have already partially quoted earlier in addressing the mode by which the occasionalist model is immune to the ‘author of sin’ problem. Taking notice of the larger context, we observe that Philonous tells Hylas that

... *I have nowhere 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 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.<sup>36</sup>

Pitcher points out that this passage apparently tells us that God has delegated a certain degree of causal power over the motions of their bodies to finite spirits. Correctly, Pitcher writes that this is an implausible view for Berkeley to hold, and one that he could receive only the “the lowest marks for.”<sup>37</sup> Pitcher makes an effort to recast this passage in a way that is in accord with the occasionalist model by suggesting that we look back to the passage in *De Motu* which tells us

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<sup>36</sup> 3D.III.237. Emphasis added.

<sup>37</sup> Pitcher 4. This sentiment is justified by the inconsistency it raises with the involuntariness principle.



that the principle of motion that we do enjoy is subordinate to the “first and universal principle” — God.<sup>38</sup> Conglomerating these two passages, as Pitcher would have it, tells us that the power we are delegated by God is merely, again, the capacity to will occasions for God to then do his business.

I do not take it that the aforementioned move by Pitcher affords him the conclusion he draws. What *is* clear from the passage from the *Dialogues* in question is that finite spirits produce some motions in bodies — it is not only God that produces them. Reverting our attention to Berkeley’s claim in *De Motu* that our efficacy is dependent upon God only tells us that we would not be able to be efficacious ourselves, absent God’s good graces. That which falls out of these passages taken in tandem is *not* the conclusion that we as finite spirits play no real causal role in producing sensible bodily motions, but rather that our causal contributions, together with God’s, produce some motions in bodies. The simple fact that we are a real *part* of the causal story is enough for Philonous to tell Hylas that God is not the only agent that produces all the motions in bodies.

### *Section Three: Destroying Common Sense*

Not only is the occasionalist reading problematic inasmuch as it conflicts with numerous textual passages, it entirely dismembers Berkeley’s aim of maintaining and justifying common sense. As per common sense, willing is a sufficient condition for bodily motion for able-bodied agents in normal, natural circumstances; when we will that we wave our hand, lo: our hand moves as a direct result of our will. Berkeley asserts in enough instances to make it clear that finite spirits act in the real, sensible world, and, as a matter of fact, *he has to* in order to uphold

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<sup>38</sup> *De Motu* 25.

one of the features that he takes to be so appealing about his immaterialist project: that it accords with common sense, and as such, wards off skepticism.

By committing Berkeley to a view of the agency of finite spirits that tells us that we are simply mistaken altogether when we believe that our bodies move because *we* willed them to, one of our most basic beliefs is thrown to the wind, and skepticism concerning that which our senses tell us lurks eerily in the shadows. Though, an occasionalist interpreter, while agreeing that Berkeley sought to maintain common sense, might contest that he would not espouse a particular view that he believes is patently false simply for the sake of making his views appear agreeable to ‘the vulgar.’ After all, though he wants to “speak with the vulgar,” he professes that we ought to “think with the learned.”<sup>39</sup> In line with this, one might follow up by stating that Berkeley, in all of the instances where he apparently tells us that we do move our bodies, is simply ‘speaking with the vulgar,’ but really, he does not mean it. We are, in these cases, getting clean cut examples of Berkeley speaking with the vulgar and thinking with the learned.

I am not moved by such arguments for the following reason: as we have seen, Berkeley makes statements about our capacity to move our bodies as consequence of our wills in *numerous* instances. I might be tempted to buy into the idea that Berkeley, in these plethora of cases, is *merely* speaking with the vulgar *if* we had sufficient reason to believe that his meaning — in each case — could be cashed out in ways that lend themselves to an occasionalist interpretation. I have illustrated in the previous section of this part that such a project fails.

## Part Four - Berkeley’s Irreconcilable Commitments

### *Section One: Taking Stock*

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<sup>39</sup> PHK 51.

We are now in a place to evaluate the constraints that must apply to any tenable account of the agency of finite spirits in the objective, sensible realm for Berkeley. Firstly, we know that it is God exclusively who authors any sensible state of affairs in the objective, sensible realm. This condition is given to us by the necessary involuntariness principle on behalf of finite spirits. For any sensible idea to be considered real, it must be authored by God, and God only — finite spirits, necessarily, cannot play any voluntary role in authoring real, sensible ideas. Finite spirits, as we have seen, have only got the direct capacity to author ideas of imagination. This constraint apparently deprives Berkeley from any account of non-divine causation in the real world. Yet, as we have seen, Berkeley explicitly claims that finite spirits do indeed move our bodies.

If we are to consider our bodies to be conglomerates of real, sensible ideas for Berkeley, together with his repeated emphasis that we *do* move our bodies, Berkeley *must* think that finite spirits' agency extends into the real, sensible world in some sense. Considering Berkeley wants to equate his views as closely as possible to common sense — and thereby slash the threat of skepticism, to rob finite spirits of the capacity to move our bodies would undercut those very goals. Lastly, Berkeley's theodicy must remain intact; God must maintain his divine attributes. What has been stated can be summarized into three necessary conditions that any tenable account of the agency of finite spirits in Berkeley must satisfy: (i) the perceived sensible ideas of the real world must be authored by God exclusively — they are involuntary on the part of finite spirits, (ii) finite spirits must have the capacity to move their bodies in some sense, and (iii) Berkeley's commitment to keeping God as an omnipotent and beneficent centerpiece in his immaterialist project must remain intact.

While I am sympathetic to the occasionalist model propounded by Pitcher and Lee on the basis that it satisfies the involuntariness principle, (i), and that it escapes the grips of the 'author

of sin' problem — satisfying condition (iii), it throws Berkeley's commitment to condition (ii) into the rocks. By stripping finite spirits of the capacity to be genuinely causally efficacious over the perceived sensible motions of our bodies, the occasionalist model not only conflicts with Berkeley's claim that we do in fact do so, but it also bears an uncanny resemblance to a Malebranchian picture of causation. Such a picture takes God to be the sole efficient cause of all events. In line with the occasionalist model, if we are to consider all states of affairs in the real world as being such in virtue of God's making alone, then finite spirits have no genuine causal efficacy over those very states of affairs — and this is the exact picture Malebranche endorses. But, as we have seen, following his claim that we do move our bodies ourselves, Berkeley explicitly states that he differs from Malebranche. In what is to follow, I will cash out what I see as the only possible reconciliations of conditions (i), (ii), and (iii) in light of what has been illuminated by the occasionalist model's shortcomings. After each construction, I will argue that each, in turn, will not do for various reasons.

*Section Two: A Possible Avenue: Bodily Motions' Dependence on both Finite Spirits and God*

Any account of Berkeley's views about the nature of non-divine causation in the real world would be faced with the herculean task of telling a convincing story about how conditions (i) and (ii) can be jointly satisfied. Reconciling these two conditions specifically appears to be the most cumbersome. That is, one must be able to reconcile the claim that no finite spirit can play any voluntary role in authoring any state of sensible affairs in the real world with the claim that we as finite spirits do have some capacity to move our bodies. Having learned that our activity as finite spirits consists in volitional activity, but also that this capacity — *on its own* — is insufficient for the project at hand, let us grant that our volitions *are* efficacious in moving our

bodies. As we have seen, we *cannot* be efficacious on our own; that is, we cannot be the ones who ‘author’ the sensible ideas of moving bodies. What then are we left to be able to do?

The only remaining option appears to suggest that both finite spirits and God causally contribute to the production of sensible bodily motions, but that God is the *immediate* cause of our sensible ideas of moving bodies. According to this construal, our volitions are not mere impotent occasions, but they *really do* causally contribute insofar as they are necessary in the causal chain leading up to God actively assisting us in authoring perceptions of bodily motions. Given that it is not finite spirits who ‘author’ the ideas of bodily motions, but nevertheless contribute to them being brought about by provoking a separate agent who does — God — it appears that conditions (i) and (ii) have been satisfied. Unfortunately, due to the way that this construction fits together with Berkeley’s views about causation, it runs into inconsistency with condition (iii): God’s omnipotence is undermined.

To see how this results from the foregoing attempted reconciliation of conditions (i) and (ii), we must consider what type of causal role we as finite spirits could play at all in the production of bodily motion if it can only be God that authors the sensible ideas that constitute them in our minds. But first, Berkeley’s views on what counts as a cause must be unearthed. It has already been established that genuine activity consists in willing, and if we look to Berkeley’s remarks in *Principles* 25 and 26, we find that only spirits can be causes. There, to the end that “ideas, sensations, or the things which we perceive” are inactive, Berkeley notes that there is “nothing of *power* or agency included in them” because they “cannot *produce* or make any alteration.”<sup>40</sup> In *Principles* 26 immediately following, we are told that because ideas themselves are inert and void of power, “There is therefore some *cause* of these ideas whereon

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<sup>40</sup> PHK 25. Emphasis added.

they depend, and which *produces* and changes them,” and additionally, because “this *cause* cannot be any quality or idea... It must therefore be a substance.” Just later, Berkeley points out that because there is no corporeal or material substance, the “*cause* of ideas is an incorporeal *active* substance or spirit.”<sup>41</sup>

From the foregoing, Berkeley makes it clear that only *active* spirits can be properly called causes. Given that activity consists in willing, we know that volitions — as that which renders spirits active — have to be the source of that which is considered a genuine cause. However, volitions, considered on their own (as was made evident by the occasionalist model) can be impotent in ‘producing’ anything. Clearly then, causes must be a species of volitions (which are themselves the genus of activity). As Kenneth Winkler points out in his paper “Berkeley on Volition, Power, and the Complexity of Causation,” Berkeley’s views concerning the relationship between mere volitions and causations appears only in his unpublished notebooks.<sup>42</sup> In the *Philosophical Commentaries*, Berkeley distinguishes between ‘power’ and volition in the following way:

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.*<sup>43</sup>

Here, in conjunction with the aforementioned passages in the *Principles*, we can infer that a mere volition is to be distinguished from a cause on the basis that causes are volitions that have ‘power’ insofar as they are followed by their effects. Berkeley makes the same point earlier explicitly using the word ‘cause’ instead of ‘power’ by stating that

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<sup>41</sup> *PHK* 26. Emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> Kenneth Winkler, “Berkeley on Volition, Power, and the Complexity of Causation.” *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1985): 55. Despite the inkling that it may be dubious to get a handle on Berkeley’s views concerning anything from unpublished works, what he does say there with respect to the relationship between volitional activity and causal activity appears in no way inconsistent with his writings in published works.

<sup>43</sup> *PC* 699. Emphasis added.

What means Cause as distinguish'd from Occasion? Nothing but a being w<sup>ch</sup> wills w<sup>n</sup> the Effect *follows* the volition.

In this context, if we are to understand an 'occasion' as a volition, we can decisively denominate causes as volitions which actually produce effects. On this basis, in order to distinguish a cause from a mere volition, it is necessary that the former are followed by their effects. Otherwise, we would have no other mode by which we could say the two differ.

In his book *Berkeley: An Interpretation*, Winkler offers what I take to be a concise account of Berkeley's views about causality that perfectly captures that which I have just laid out. Recall that only volitions can be the source of anything that is considered a cause, and that in order for a cause to be distinguished from a mere volition, it is necessary that it is followed by its effects. Winkler frames these conditions illuminatingly and helpfully in the form of the following biconditional:

- An event counts as a cause if and only if
- (a) It is followed by another event (its effect);
  - (b) Supposing only that God's decrees remain the same, an event of the first type *must* be followed by an event of the second type; and
  - (c) The first event is a volition.<sup>44</sup>

The clause in (b) that states "Supposing only that God's decrees remain the same," needs to be unpacked. God's decrees, as I will henceforth interpret them in this context, amount to His pre-established rules and laws that govern nature and all of its constituents. Understood in this way, (b) then tells us that a volition that is consistent with the laws of nature (as they are now) must be followed by an event of the second type (its effect). So, our volitions count as causes if and only if they are followed by their effects, and they are consistent with the laws of nature (as they are now) such that they *must* be followed by their effects.

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<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Winkler, *Berkeley: An Interpretation*, Clarendon Press, (1989), 112.

Now that Berkeley's views about what counts as a cause has been fleshed out, we can retrace our steps back to what type of causal role finite spirits could actually play in the production of bodily motion according to the foregoing construction. Considering that bodily motions cannot be the direct effects of our volitions, and that we require God's active assistance in actually authoring them, the effects of our volitions to move must consist in God omnisciently taking notice of our wills to move and actively assisting accordingly.

In the case of bodily movements then, we are genuinely causally efficacious if and only if our volitions to move are followed by God actively assisting in producing sensible bodily motions in us, and they are consistent with the laws of nature (as they are now) such that they *must* be followed by God actively assisting in producing sensible ideas of bodily motion in us. With this in mind, notice that we can infer two conditionals from this biconditional:

- (1) If finite spirits are genuinely causally efficacious in our volitions to move, then our volitions are followed by God's active assistance in the production of sensible bodily motions, and they are consistent with the laws of nature (as they are now) such that our volitions *must* be followed by God's active assistance in the production of sensible bodily motions.
- (2) If our volitions are followed by God's active assistance in the production of the sensible bodily motions, and our volitions are consistent with the laws of nature (as they are now) such that God *must* actively assist in the production of sensible bodily motions, then spirits are genuinely causally efficacious in our volitions to move.

In (1), part of the consequence of attributing genuine causal efficacy to finite spirits in our volitions to move is that our volitions are consistent with the laws of nature (as they are now) such that they *must* be followed by God's active assistance in the production of sensible bodily motions. Given that "an event of the second type" on this account *just is* God's active assistance, it follows that it is *necessary* that our volitions be followed by God's active assistance in the production of their sensible bodily motions when finite spirits are attributed genuine causal efficacy. So, in this way, it appears that God is subservient to the will of genuinely causally



efficacious finite spirits — He *must* create the corresponding sensations in us, and that is certainly a conclusion that undermines God’s omnipotence, and something that would thereby conflict with Berkeley’s theological commitments.

One may be drawn to press back on this on this point in a few ways. I will lay out each rebuttal and address them in turn. One might claim that I have mistakenly inserted “God’s active assistance in the production of sensible bodily motions” for “an event of the second type” that necessarily follows a causally efficacious volition where, instead, I should have merely said that “an event of the second type” is actually *just* “sensible bodily motions.” By reconstruing an “event of the second type” as “sensible bodily motions,” God is in no way bound by necessity to our volitions. So much is surely true. Unfortunately, this reinterpretation omits God’s necessity in the production of sensible bodily motions entirely. In fact, it tells us *nothing* about the causal story we were after in the first place; that is, *how* a mere volitional command to move originating in the mind of a finite spirit is causally linked-up with the manifestation of sensible bodily motions. All we get, here, is that a causally efficacious finite spirit’s volition to move is *sufficient* for producing sensible bodily motions in our minds. Clearly, this is an unsavory consequence. As we have seen, if finite spirits’ volitions are sufficient for producing sensible ideas of bodily motion, the involuntariness principle is breached.

This construction sought to provide a causal story about the relationship between finite spirits’ volitions to move and the sensible motions of our bodies by appealing to how it is — *in virtue of God’s role in this relationship* — that Berkeley avoids inconsistency with his ontological commitments. If one were to press back in the way previously illustrated, they would effectually be impaling their view on the pike of the very issue that they were trying to resolve in the first place: whether the involuntariness principle can remain intact *while also* maintaining

that finite spirits play a role in the production of sensible bodily motions. This was achieved by the claim that *God* notices the will of finite spirits and, consequently, *He* arouses in us the motions we willed. One might stop me here and suggest that I am committing the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. To entertain this thought, all I propose is that we consider what would result from claiming that God does not *consequently* respond to our wills, but rather *subsequently* does so. If God subsequently responds to our wills to move, which is to say that He did so through *no* causal connection, it follows that it is in virtue of *His will alone* that we perceive sensible bodily motions. The will of finite spirits, then, are bereft of causal contributions altogether in the motions of our bodies — there is virtually no sense in which *we* move our bodies; this is the occasionalist picture exactly.

It also might be objected that God's omnipotence is not, contrarily, undermined by the foregoing argument — insisting that God, on a 'proper' interpretation of Berkeley's scheme, nevertheless has the capacity to refuse or ignore the will of finite spirits. This is not something that I think bears any contention. He surely can, even in light of the argument I am propounding. Be that as it may, if He were to not actively assist in the production of sensible bodily motions following our volitions to move, we simply would not be able to say we are causally efficacious. This falls out of not satisfying both the first and second conjuncts in the consequent of conditional (1):

(1) If finite spirits are genuinely causally efficacious in our volitions to move, *then our volitions are followed by God's active assistance in the production of sensible bodily motions*, and they are consistent with the laws of nature such that our volitions *must be followed by God's active assistance in the production of sensible bodily motions*.

In every case, then, that God opts not to actively assist in producing sensible bodily motions in us, we are stripped of causal efficacy. Nevertheless, in any instance that we *are* attributed causal efficacy in our volitions, God still *must* actively assist.

Here we find ourselves at a bit of an impasse concerning God's will. Perched atop the precipice of the dilemma, we can gaze in either of two directions: either God maintains his consistent omnipotence by bereaving finite spirits from being causal agents over their bodies at all times, or, He stifles his omnipotence by submitting Himself to the will of finite spirits in some cases. The first horn of the quandary can be brushed to the side straight away. Berkeley claims that we *do* move our bodies; this clearly suggests that there are in fact instances when we are causally efficacious. As such, only the latter horn remains. Though we could say that in those instances where God yields to the will of finite spirits, He does so because *He wills it* — maybe out of his beneficent nature, He is nevertheless subservient in those very cases in virtue of the simple fact that he *must*, out of causal necessitation, respond to our wills in a specific way. If we are sometimes causally efficacious in our volitions to move, God puts a damper on His own power. It is highly improbable that Berkeley would be pleased with the news that God is *not always* omnipotent.

Lastly, it might be insisted that God could very well change the laws of nature such that the effects of our volitions do not, necessarily, have to follow. After all, Berkeley does write that

By a diligent observation of the phenomena within our view, we may discover the general laws of Nature, and from them deduce the other phenomena, I do not say *demonstrate*, for all the deductions of that kind depend on a supposition that the Author of Nature always operates uniformly...<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> PHK 107.

This supposition, so I take it, is one that is misled according to Berkeley; for God “can indifferently produce everything by a mere fiat or act of his will.”<sup>46</sup> Taken in tandem with the prior passage, it seems evident that God certainly *does* have the capacity to change the laws of nature such that the effects of our volitions do not have to follow. If He were to change the laws in this way, there is no sense left in which God *must* answer to our volitions to move.

By doing so, however, the second conjunct in the consequent of conditional (1) falls apart, thereby destroying the entire conditional. If God were to change the laws of nature such that our volitions to move could not be in accord with them — to the extent that He would not have to actively assist us in producing bodily motions in our mind, we could not be considered causally efficacious in our volitions. This objection therefore fails in the very same way that the previous one did. Beyond this, Berkeley tells us that without the law of nature, as we observe them to be so settled, “we should be all in uncertainty and confusion, and a grown man no more know how to manage himself in the affairs of life than an infant just born,”<sup>47</sup> and earlier, that the laws of nature we observe “testifies the wisdom and benevolence of its Author.”<sup>48</sup> If God were to suddenly change the laws of nature to the extent that our volitions would not be efficacious, we might rightfully call into question God’s benevolence; would God will that His creatures become uncertain and confused? I suspect Berkeley would surely say no. At this point, we would be forced to either catch ourselves on the snares of Berkeley’s theological commitments (insofar as God’s omnipotence *or* His benevolence is undermined), or fall into the rift separating the integrity of the involuntariness principle from the efficacy of finite spirits’ volitions to move our bodies.

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<sup>46</sup> PHK 152.

<sup>47</sup> PHK 31.

<sup>48</sup> PHK 30.

### *Section Three: Attempted Reconfigurations*

One might be compelled to try and reconfigure our understanding of what Berkeley really means when he says that we move our *bodies* ourselves. Previously, I have suggested that the proper understanding entails the idea that our bodies are conglomerates of real, sensible ideas.<sup>49</sup> Frankly, I have no conception whatsoever of what else our bodies could be for Berkeley. Surely, Berkeley is not claiming that we move our bodies ourselves *in our imagination* — that is, that we move our imaginary bodies ourselves. Naturally, and as evidenced by his explication of the activity and agency we have over the ideas in our minds, we can move our imaginary ideas in our minds in any way we please. If this is what he had meant, he would have said so. Reading Berkeley's claims about the agency we have over our own bodies in this way entirely misses the point we are after: whether or not our agency extends into the real world. It seems to me that reading *all* of Berkeley's claims about the motions of our bodies to be manifest only in our imagination is effectually a massive misinterpretation, and as such, ought not to be taken seriously. If the object that we are moving is neither a chimerical idea of imagination nor a real sensible idea, what else could it be?

In Berkeley's ontology — barring spirits — there are *only* ideas of imagination, and real ideas of sensation. As I have shown, reducing Berkeley's claims about the motions of our bodies to ideas of imagination is both a misreading, and, if we were to hypothetically read him in this way, it still says nothing about the type of agency we are after.

Another path that may be trod in order to reconcile conditions (i), (ii), and (iii) might consist in taking the *motion* alone of our sensibly perceived bodies to be attributable to finite spirits such that the rest of the ideas that compose whatever object is in motion to be attributable

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<sup>49</sup> This position is mainly derived from *PHK* 34 where Berkeley directly situates our bodies to be amongst other real things of sensation such as trees, rivers, mountains, etc. See page 9 of this paper for my summation of the view.

to God. In adopting this picture, one might say that *I* am responsible for the *motion* of my arm that is otherwise authored by God. One might speculate whether *moving* our legs—which, as we have found, are identified as real things—is the same as being the voluntary author of our ideas of legs. To frame this thought in the form of a question, one may ask: is the activity of moving our legs identical to voluntarily creating the ideas of moving legs? If one were to press on this point, they might call upon the following passage in *De Motu*:

we have learned from our own experience that there is a power of *moving* bodies in [thinking things], since our mind *may at will initiate or stop the movement* of our limbs, however that is eventually explained. It is certainly established that bodies *are moved at the command of the mind*, and that the latter can be called appropriately a principle of motion—a specific and subordinate principle indeed, which itself depends on the first and universal principle.<sup>50</sup>

Here, Berkeley clearly claims that we as finite spirits have the capacity to move our bodies at the command of the mind, and that the mind’s activity can appropriately be dubbed a principle of motion. This might be construed as *prima facie* reason to believe that it is the motion of moving bodies that finite spirits are causally responsible for. What we are to make of the claim that the mind’s activity is a *subordinate* principle with respect to the “first and universal principle,” God, requires a bit of assiduity. So far as I take it, Berkeley’s meaning is that the efficacy of our mind’s volition to move is dependent upon God. Without God, our volition to move would be impotent.

On first impression, it may seem as though that *moving* our legs and being the *author* of moving legs are two wholly separate activities.<sup>51</sup> But, once we consider the fact that Berkeley claims that motions, just like all other sensible qualities, cannot be abstracted away from their particular instances, it becomes clear that being the author of particular motions cannot be

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<sup>50</sup> *De Motu* 25. Emphasis added. The “first and universal principle” being God.

<sup>51</sup> That is, willing the motion of our bodies and creating the set of sensible ideas that constitute a moving limb.

abstracted from being the author of the particular sensible thing itself. For Berkeley, our bodies do not differ in their causal makeup from other real things, and that part of what constitutes a moving body is its particular, non-abstractable motion. It certainly seems pretty bizarre to claim that we, as finite spirits, are the authors of one particular non-abstractable sensible idea that partially constitutes a sensible thing that is otherwise authored by God. Given that real motion is necessarily bound to real ideas, it too must be authored by God; otherwise, one who argues in this line would be breaching the involuntariness principle, (i).

## Conclusion

By way of a thoroughgoing exegetical analysis of Berkeley's claims in his writings, three necessary conditions have been uncovered that must be satisfied in any attempt to plausibly attribute Berkeley a consistent and coherent account of non-divine agency in the real world. After examining the variety of interpretive paths that one may walk down in attempting to cash out Berkeley's views concerning the relationship between the activity of spirits and the perceived motions of our bodies, I have shown that while the occasionalist model escapes the grips of the author of sin problem and inconsistencies with Berkeley's immaterialist ontology, it does not remove itself far enough from conflicting with condition (ii). I have illustrated that the prevailing occasionalist model endorsed by Pitcher and Lee (which effectively bars finite spirits from the capacity to be individually efficacious agents by way of our wills being entirely causally inert), ought not be considered a successful interpretation given that it cannot adequately account for Berkeley's repeated profession that finite spirits do produce the motions of our bodies. In addition, it forces us to concede that our senses deceive us in one of our most basic, common

sense beliefs: that we do in fact cause our bodies to move. This engenders the threat of skepticism that Berkeley vigilantly tried to combat.

Given the pernicious character of these consequences, I have constructed a possible reconciliation of conditions (i) and (ii) that takes both finite spirits and God to be genuine causal forces in the production of sensible bodily motions. When applied to Berkeley's views about the causality of finite spirits, the attempted reconciliation failed by way of turning condition (iii) on its head; God's omnipotence was undermined by making it necessary that he responds to the will of causally efficacious finite spirits.

I have addressed two other possible attempts to reconcile Berkeley's commitments to (i), (ii), and (iii) that I take to be the only remaining options for acquitting Berkeley's views about non-divine causation from inconsistency. Trying to reconstrue Berkeley's meaning of 'body' when referencing that which it is we move had proven to be impossible in his schema: if Berkeley had meant that we move our imaginary bodies, we are left empty handed concerning our agency in the real world, and if he meant something other than real, sensible ideas, he would have been stepping outside of his immaterialist constituents. The last remaining avenue of exculpating Berkeley's views about non-divine agency in the real world consisted in taking the *motion alone* of our sensibly perceived moving bodies to be under our causal control. Because motion itself cannot be abstracted away from the other ideas that constitute a real body, it too must be authored by God exclusively.

Berkeley tells us in the introduction of the *Principles* that when reading his words, we are entreated to make his words the occasions of our own thinking, and that we would do well to attain the same train of thoughts in reading that he had in writing them. His words, as he implores, will not be marks of deception so long as we understand them by way of our own



naked, undisguised ideas.<sup>52</sup> When we are told that the motions of our bodies are consequent upon our volitions, a rather lucid idea is thrust upon my mind: I am a true cause of the motion of my body I perceive when I will it to move. When we are told that we cannot cause any states of affairs that we perceive via sense, another idea becomes manifest: I am not the cause of the motion of my body that I perceive when I will it to move. These ideas considered together, as I have argued, bar Berkeley from being understood as holding a coherent and consistent account of non-divine agency in the real world upon considered interpretations, reconstructions, and reconciliations that I see as exhaustive.

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<sup>52</sup> *PHK* Introduction 25.

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