

Comments on Sukjae Lee's "Berkeley on the Activity of Spirits"

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Berkeley's commentators have long been inclined to read him as essentially an occasionalist with respect to human agency. And not without reason. Occasionalism offers an elegant, unified set of answers to many of the most difficult questions that arise in connection with the agency of finite spirits in Berkeley's system: What is the nature of human agency? What is its scope? How is it related to divine agency?

In my essay discussed by Sukjae,¹ I've argued that the attempt to read Berkeley as an occasionalist nonetheless runs into a pair of important difficulties. First, it doesn't square very well with a number of texts in which Berkeley appears to reject occasionalism and insist that finite minds are genuine active secondary causes. The most famous of these passages is, of course, N 548 where Berkeley says flat out "We move our Legs ourselves. 'tis we that will their movement. Herein I differ from Malbranch" (N 548). Second, the ascription of activity to finite agents plays a number of important roles in Berkeley's system. It is caught up in his distinction between minds and ideas, in his semantic doctrine of notions, and in his argument for the existence of other minds. Insofar as occasionalism is understood as the doctrine that God is the only genuinely active substance in the world, Berkeley has strong reasons for resisting it.

Partly in response to such textual and philosophical difficulties, I've suggested that Berkeley is better read as a concurrentist. Although concurrentism is an often overlooked position today, it has a good claim to being the dominant view of secondary causation throughout the later medieval and early modern periods. In order to accommodate intuitions concerning the demands of theodicy and natural philosophy, concurrentists attributed to creatures their own genuine causal powers, and insisted that they exercise those powers in bringing about their ordinary effects. In order to accommodate pious intuitions concerning God's active role in the created world, concurrentists maintained that no creature could succeed in bringing about its ordinary effects without God's active assistance or "concurrence" within the order of nature.

Thus concurrentists held that when (say) I move my legs myself, what really happens is that God and I act together through a unified action to bring about the movement of my legs. Reading Berkeley as a concurrentist allows us not only to make sense of passages such as N 548 in which he emphasizes our own causal activity, but also texts such as the famous “wretcheder than a stone” passage at N 107 in which he emphasizes our impotence in the absence of God’s active assistance.

But while reading Berkeley as a concurrentist helps to shed light on some otherwise puzzling texts and philosophical difficulties, rejecting occasionalism raises anew the important question of the scope of human activity. For Berkeley could abide by the letter, if not the spirit, of concurrentism by adopting a position I’ve referred to as “almost-occasionalism.” Almost-occasionalism would differ from a strict occasionalism in making us active concurrent causes only of our own volitions and ideas of imagination. On such a picture we would indeed be active causes, but nonetheless active causes with an extremely limited range. In particular we would have no immediate causal influence with respect to the objective world.

As I hope is clear in my essay, I don’t think anything absolutely rules out reading Berkeley as an almost-occasionalist. The texts are, at the end of the day, quite limited, and one can always reinterpret seemingly more ambitious passages as being vulgar expressions of a more limited learned doctrine. Nonetheless, I do think that a number of Berkeley’s texts – including many of those mentioned by Sukjae – strongly suggest that Berkeley inclines towards a more robust view of human agency. Indeed, I suspect that Berkeley thinks he is entitled to assign as wide a scope to human agency as any sensible materialist, and that he has the resources to strongly underpin the commonsense claim that “we move our legs ourselves.”

One of several potential difficulties for Berkeley’s adopting a robust view of human agency arises from a certain way of understanding the distinction between subjective and objective experiences within his idealist system. If one supposes that I must be completely passive with respect to every objective experience, then I obviously cannot be an active cause with respect to my limbs insofar as they are counted as part of the objective world. For *prima facie* I am at least partially active with respect to my experiences of my own limbs; I can typically see my legs, for example, as bent or straight – I have only to bend or straighten them as I will. Thus if Berkeley were to accept the condition that Sukjae calls “involuntariness is

necessary for objectivity,” or “INO,” then I think Berkeley would indeed be (almost) committed to an almost-occasionalist view such as Sukjae attributes to him.

I’m still hesitant to attribute almost-occasionalism to Berkeley, however, because I remain unconvinced that he either does, or must, accept INO. In itself it’s not a very attractive position philosophically, and his texts don’t seem to commit him to it. Sukjae argues at some length that Berkeley’s texts *could* be read in such a way as to be consistent with INO, and I think he’s right, but that in itself is no reason to suppose that they *should* be read in such a way. Sukjae also gestures more briefly at two arguments in support of INO, one from the role of involuntariness in Berkeley’s argument for God’s existence, and one from the seeming arbitrariness of our being able to immediately influence our own bodies, but not other bodies such as boulders and bobby pins. Perhaps the further development of those positive arguments would make a stronger case for Berkeley’s commitment to INO and thus to almost-occasionalism. As things stand, however, I’m still inclined to think that Berkeley is entitled to a more ambitious model of human agency, as well as a robust understanding of his commonsense claim that “we move our legs ourselves.”

¹ “Berkeley, Human Agency and Divine Concurrentism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, forthcoming.