Berkeley on Perceptual Discrimination of Physical Objects
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Abstract: Commentators are divided over whether Berkeley holds that physical objects are immediately perceived by sense. As I read Berkeley, discrimination is necessary for perceiving physical objects by sense. Berkeley says that discrimination requires perceiving motion. Since motions can only be mediately perceived according to Berkeley, physical objects can only be mediately perceived by sense. I defend this reading against the following objections. First, that perception of physical objects is non-conceptual. Second, that physical objects are divinely instituted collections of ideas rather than psychologically associated collections of ideas. Third, that some physical objects are small enough to be immediately perceptually discriminated by touch. I also propose a new objection to the claim that physical objects are immediately perceived for Berkeley. I argue that immediate perception of a subset of a physical object’s sensible qualities is neither necessary nor sufficient to perceive that object by sense, according to Berkeley.

Keywords: George Berkeley, physical objects, immediate perception, suggestion, signification

Commentators are divided over whether Berkeley holds that physical objects are immediately perceived by sense.¹ Those who defend a positive answer argue that physical objects are sometimes immediately perceived in two ways. A physical object may be immediately perceived without mediately perceiving any of its sensible qualities. It may also be the case that some of a physical object’s sensible qualities are immediately perceived and others are mediately perceived by means of the former.² I call this the Hybrid Interpretation. Those who defend a negative answer claim that physical objects are only mediately perceived by sense. On this reading, sensible qualities must be perceived as a distinct collection in order to perceive a physical object. But this requires mental association, which is the hallmark of mediate perception. I call this the Associative Interpretation.³

I defend a version of the Associative Interpretation and propose a new objection to the Hybrid Interpretation. As I read Berkeley, perceptual discrimination is necessary to perceive physical objects by sense. Berkeley thinks that discrimination requires perceiving that a physical object’s parts are related to each other, as well as perceiving one physical object’s relations to other physical objects. Berkeley tells us that perceiving these intrinsic and extrinsic relations, respectively, requires
perceiving motion. But Berkeley also gives us three reasons why motions are only mediately perceived by sense. First, Berkeley thinks that motion is a relation, and that relations are only mediately perceived by sense. Second, perceiving motion requires a succession of ideas some of which must be suggested to the imagination. Third, it is possible to misperceive motion. Yet, Berkeley thinks that immediate perception is infallible. Since perceptual discrimination requires mediate perception of motion, I conclude that physical objects are only mediately perceived by sense for Berkeley.¹

I defend this reading against the following familiar objections to the Associative Interpretation. First, that perception of physical objects is non-conceptual. Second, that physical objects are divinely instituted collections of ideas rather than psychologically associated collections of ideas. Third, that some physical objects are small enough to be immediately perceptually discriminated by touch. The reading proposed here overcomes all three objections.

I also propose a new objection to the Hybrid Interpretation. According to Berkeley, immediate perception of a subset of a physical object’s sensible qualities is neither necessary nor sufficient to perceive that object by sense. I conclude that the Hybrid Interpretation cannot explain perceptual discrimination as Berkeley understands it.

1. Immediate and Mediate Perception

Some interpretive assumptions are required in order to approach the question whether Berkeley thinks that physical objects are immediately perceived. Following other commentators, I acknowledge Berkeley’s distinction between sensible qualities and physical objects.² Sensible qualities include colors, odors, flavors, textures, and so forth (PHK 1, DHP 175). A bus, a horse, and a cherry are examples of physical objects. Berkeley identifies sensible qualities with sensible ideas, and
denies that any sensible idea (or sensible quality) is perceived by more than one sense. I will speak of sensible qualities and sensible ideas interchangeably. Berkeley also claims that a physical object is a collection of sensible qualities. Such collections include ideas from multiple senses as elements, although I focus on ideas of sight and touch (as Berkeley often does). I will use ‘sensible things’ inclusively to refer to both sensible qualities and physical objects.

It is also necessary to assume a reading of Berkeley’s definition of immediate perception (and by extension, mediate perception). Following other commentators once again, I read Berkeley’s definition of immediate perception as follows: A sensible thing $\mathcal{x}$ is immediately perceived by some mind $\mathcal{S}$ at time $t$ if and only if $\mathcal{S}$ perceives $\mathcal{x}$ by sense at $t$ without intermediary or inference. Since this definition refers to sensible things, it applies to both immediate perception of sensible qualities and (putative) immediate perception of physical objects. But it excludes immediate perception of entities that are not sensible, like emotions (NTV 9, 23, 65; DHP 174; ALC IV.5 [147]). I also follow commentators in reading Berkeley’s ‘first-conferred’ criterion as determining whether an instance of perception is immediate: If $\mathcal{S}$ would have perceived $\mathcal{x}$ at $t$ had one or more sense been initially introduced to $\mathcal{S}$ at $t$ (e.g., a patient cured of lifelong blindness), then $\mathcal{x}$ is immediately perceived at $t$ (DHP 204). Perceptions that do not satisfy Berkeley’s first-conferred criterion are mediate perceptions.

Interpreting Berkeley’s definition of mediate perception is comparatively less straightforward. That’s partly because of thorny questions about the relationship between inference and what Berkeley calls ‘suggestion’, which is the psychological mechanism whereby one idea serves as the perceptual intermediary for another. Samuel Rickless (2013, 49-50) addresses those concerns by arguing that inference is a form of suggestion for Berkeley. Richard Glauser (2017, 355) has recently interpreted Berkeley’s definition of mediate sense perception as follows:
A sensible thing \( y \) is mediately perceived by some mind \( S \) at \( t \) if and only if \( S \)'s perception of \( y \) at \( t \) depends on one or more intermediary ideas \( x \) such that (i) immediate perception of \( x \) suggests \( y \); and (ii) given \( x \), \( S \) expects or predicts that \( y \) will or would be immediately perceived by sense under such-and-such conditions.\(^{10}\)

Assuming with Rickless that inference is a form of suggestion for Berkeley, the first condition of this definition allows for mediately perception by means of inference. The second condition recognizes a consensus among commentators that mediately perception involves the imagination making empirically informed predictions based on immediately perceived sensible qualities. Margaret Atherton, for instance, argues that for Berkeley, “a physical object is a sign plus a meaning, where the meaning can be understood as a set of expectations or predictions,” (2008, 95). This second condition also guarantees that mediately sense perception is at issue since, for instance, virtue and shame cannot be immediately perceived by sense under any conditions. I adopt Glauser’s reading of mediately sense perception in what follows.

The general outline of Berkeley’s account of mediately sense perception is familiar to commentators. A mind \( S \) mediately perceives some \( y \) by means of an immediately perceived idea \( x \) when \( x \) suggests \( y \) to \( S \). This account involves multiple mental faculties. Immediate perception of idea \( x \) requires a sense modality. If \( x \) is a color, then \( x \) is exclusively visible. A mind \( S \) must have the faculty of sight in order to immediately perceive \( x \). The same applies if \( x \) is tangible, audible, gustatory, or olfactory. In addition to one or more sense modalities, Berkeley claims that the imagination is the faculty to which \( y \) is suggested. When this occurs the imagination immediately perceives an idea of \( y \). Such an idea is not a sensible quality but, “in truth only [an object] of the imagination, and originally belonging to some other sense or faculty,” (TVV 9).\(^{11}\) However, since an idea of the imagination is copied from or resembles an idea “originally belonging” to a sense faculty,
ideas of the imagination have sensory content. Mediate perception is therefore a form of sense perception. This is why, in the second condition of the definition of mediate perception given above, $S$ expects or predicts that $y$ would be immediately perceived by sense given that $x$ suggests to $S$ an idea of the imagination that resembles (and thereby represents) $y$.

Berkeley says that $S$ learns through experience which things are suggested to it by immediately perceived ideas. This is the cornerstone of his theory of vision, according to which tangible shape, size, and distance are mediately perceived by means of immediately perceived light and color. Memory and imagination encode regularly experienced patterns of ideas, either of the same sense or multiple senses, as ‘habitual’ or ‘customary’ co-occurrences or sequences of ideas (NTV 45; DHP 245; TVV 39). As a result, immediate perception of an idea $x$ suggests to $S$ another idea $y$ that $S$ regularly perceives at the same time as $x$, or that $S$ regularly perceives before or after $x$. This disposes $S$ to expect to perceive $y$ under such and such conditions given an immediate perception of $x$. Glauser succinctly describes the process involved:

Due to her past experience, when Sally immediately perceives some visible ideas and these suggest to her imagination the ideas of sensible qualities she would perceive by touch if she were to move in the direction of a certain tangible body, she mediately perceives ideas of tangible figure, size, situation and distance. Mediate perception is made possible by the facts that: (a) visible ideas are produced by God in lawfully ordered sequences; (b) tangible ideas are also produced in this way; (c) these intra-modal lawfully ordered sequences co-vary in complex ways according to lawful intermodal relations; and (d) human beings... more or less subconsciously register these intra-modal and intermodal relations merely by experience, custom and association. (2017, 365)
In his *New Theory of Vision*, Berkeley famously declares that this process is inherently linguistic with respect to vision (NTV 147; PHK 44; TVV 38). Learning to mediately perceive tangible size, shape, and distance by means of immediately perceived light and colors is to learn a divinely instituted language, just like learning the meanings of utterances in a human language (ALC IV.11 [155]).

Although Berkeley expands mediate sense perception to include ideas of all five senses in *Alciphron*, he maintains that only immediately perceived visible ideas suggesting tangible ideas to the mind constitutes a divine language (ALC IV.12 [157]).

When Berkeley invokes his divine language thesis, he sometimes uses ‘suggestion’ and ‘signification’ interchangeably. This seems appropriate given Berkeley’s definition of a language in terms of arbitrary (i.e., contingent) signification (ALC 4.12 [157]). Berkeley also repeatedly speaks of visible ideas as *signs* for tangible ideas, and of words as *suggesting* their meanings, reinforcing the impression that suggestion and signification are roughly the same relation. But Glauser argues that there is an important difference. Signification is a divinely instituted relation between divinely produced sensible qualities. Signification is therefore independent of and external to any psychological associations performed by the imagination of any finite mind. Conversely, suggestion is a psychological association that a finite mind performs between immediately perceived sensible qualities and its own ideas of memory and imagination.

This distinction between signification and suggestion prompts Glauser to read Berkeley in terms of a parallel distinction with respect to perception of physical objects. For Berkeley, a physical object is a collection of sensible qualities of diverse senses, but this is ambiguous between a divinely instituted collection and a psychologically associated collection. Glauser argues that Berkeley’s readers should be careful to distinguish divinely instituted collections of sensible qualities that constitute a physical object from psychologically associated ideas of the imagination that represent a physical object:
God produces both the constituent sensible ideas and the intra-modal and intermodal lawfully regulated relations that unite them into a combination. Now, the relations that obtain between past, present and possible sensible ideas must not be confused with the psychological, associative relations by which a finite mind combines together suggested ideas of the imagination so as to form a complex idea that represents a physical object. (2017, 374)

Physical objects are public because they are divinely instituted collections of sensible qualities. These collections are distinct from representations of them constructed by particular finite minds from sensible qualities and ideas suggested to the imagination. Ideas suggested to the imagination are not themselves elements of physical objects, but only represent elements of a physical object that are not immediately perceived. Glauser suggests (correctly in my view) that a sensible quality bears a divinely instituted relation of membership to the collection that constitutes a particular physical object, whereas ideas of the imagination do not. These divinely instituted membership relations are “gradually discovered” (2003, 116-17; 2007, 55, 56, 68) by finite minds.

2. Objections to the Hybrid Interpretation

According to the Hybrid Interpretation, a physical object can sometimes be immediately perceived without mediatley perceiving any of its sensible qualities. At other times, a subset of a physical object’s sensible qualities is immediately perceived, and this is sufficient to mediatley perceive some of its other sensible qualities. I argue that Berkeley thinks that immediate perception of a subset of a physical object’s sensible qualities at t is neither necessary nor sufficient to perceive
that object by sense at \( t \). Commentators agree that it is difficult to ascertain how many sensible qualities Berkeley thinks is sufficient to immediately perceive a physical object. I propose the following rough criterion based on Berkeley’s remarks about perception in counterfactual situations.\(^{20}\) If the very same subset of sensible qualities that \( S \) actually perceives would be sufficient to perceive a physical object in counterfactual circumstances, then that subset is sufficient to perceive that physical object in \( S \)’s actual circumstances as well. In what follows, I assume that a subset of sensible qualities that satisfies this counterfactual condition is sufficient to immediately perceive a physical object by sense. I also assume that this is consistent with the Hybrid Interpretation.

Imagine being in the woods and looking directly at a camouflaged gecko, indistinguishable from the tree bark on which it rests. Your viewing conditions are optimal. You are only a few feet from the gecko, and your attention is focused on it. (Suppose that your hiking companion has focused your attention by saying, “Look, that’s a gecko!” while pointing to the gecko.) You immediately perceive a subset of the gecko’s visible qualities sufficient to perceive it in counterfactual circumstances. If you were to view the gecko from the same angle, distance, and so forth, while it is in an otherwise empty terrarium, you would see the gecko. Nevertheless, you are unable to see the gecko as a discrete object in the woods because you cannot discriminate it from the surrounding tree bark. You are not consciously aware of the gecko by sight.\(^ {21} \) You are blind to the gecko, although you immediately perceive a subset of its visible qualities sufficient to visually discriminate it in counterfactual circumstances.

Defenders of the Hybrid Interpretation might explain this scenario by arguing that you must also mediately perceive the gecko’s tangible qualities in order to perceive the gecko. But you do mediately perceive the gecko’s tangible qualities. For instance, you mediately perceive its distance, extension (roughly) and solidity. The problem is that you cannot discriminate the gecko’s tangible
qualities from tangible qualities of the tree. (Likewise, you cannot discriminate the gecko’s visible qualities from visible qualities of the tree.) Immediate perception of a sufficiently large subset of the gecko’s qualities is therefore not sufficient to perceive immediate and mediately perceive the gecko by sense.

It might be objected that the gecko case relies too heavily on visible qualities, whereas physical objects are collections of various sensible qualities. If your eyes were closed and you touched the gecko you would immediately perceive its tangible qualities, allowing you to discriminate it from the bark on which it rests. A reply to this objection is suggested by a comment by John Locke (Essay II.xxxiii.7). Suppose that the sweetness, aroma, and viscosity of honey correlates with nausea for a particular finite mind. That mind immediately perceives nausea along with the honey’s sensible qualities, and this is due to a divinely instituted relation between honey and nausea for that finite mind. But nausea is not an element of the honey. Immediately perceiving an intermodal subset of the honey’s sensible qualities is not sufficient to discriminate the honey from the nausea with which it is naturally correlated.

Similarly, suppose that you experience a sharp pain at the same time that you touch the gecko, and that this pain is experienced continguously with the gecko’s tangible qualities. There must be some means by which you can intra-modally discriminate the gecko’s tangible qualities from the pain. But if touch were first-conferred upon you at the very moment that you feel the gecko and the pain, you will have no means of separating the tangible qualities that are elements of the gecko from the simultaneous and contiguous pain that is not an element of the gecko.22

In several passages Berkeley also suggests that immediate perception of a physical object’s sensible qualities is not necessary to perceive that object by sense. In the First Dialogue, Berkeley considers variations in color that occur under different lighting conditions:
Nay, all other circumstances remaining the same, change but the situation of some objects, and they shall present different colors to the eye. The same thing happens upon viewing an object in various degrees of light. And what is more known than that the same bodies appear differently colored by candle-light from what they do in the open day? Add to these the experiment of a prism which, separating the heterogeneous rays of light, alters the color of any object, and will cause the whitest to appear of a deep blue or red to the naked eye. (DHP 186)23

Berkeley’s comments in this passage suggest the following problem. Suppose that you see a white sphere under red light. Assume that white qualities are divinely included in the collection that constitutes the sphere,24 but red qualities are not. Then although you perceive the sphere by sight you do not immediately perceive any of its sensible qualities.

Something similar can be said of the sphere’s tangible qualities. Suppose that you touch the sphere and instead of feeling its surface you feel intense burning pain. You feel the sphere because you feel its size, shape, and solidity. But suppose that you do not perceive its tangible qualities immediately. Rather, you immediately feel pain and only mediately feel the sphere’s tangible qualities by means of the immediately felt pain.25 Since the pain you feel is not an element of the sphere, and you only feel the sphere’s tangible qualities by means of the pain, it follows that although you perceive the sphere by touch you do not immediately perceive any of its tangible qualities.

I conclude that for Berkeley, immediate perception of a physical object’s sensible qualities is neither necessary nor sufficient to perceive that object by sense. What these cases suggest is that perceptual discrimination is required in order to perceive physical objects by sense. In the next section, I argue that Berkeley has an account of perceptual discrimination grounded in perception of motion.
3. Perceptual Discrimination

Perceptual discrimination requires perceiving that a physical object’s parts (i.e., subsets of its sensible qualities) are related to each other, as well as perceiving a physical object’s relations to other physical objects. The objections raised in the previous section suggest that discrimination is necessary for perceiving physical objects by sense. Relations among subsets of a physical object’s sensible qualities are intrinsic to that object. Relations between one whole collection of sensible qualities and another are extrinsic to a physical object. Berkeley claims that both intrinsic and extrinsic relations are divinely instituted significations. I argue that for Berkeley, perceptual discrimination requires registering both intrinsic and extrinsic divinely instituted significations; and that finite minds register these by perceiving motion.

Berkeley’s distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic relations has already been noted by commentators. For instance, Daniel Flage (1994, 140) argues that a divinely produced miraculous vision of New Jerusalem is composed of sensible qualities in divinely instituted intrinsic relations. Yet Flage argues that New Jerusalem is not a real physical object. It is not a member of the rerum natura, as Berkeley puts it (PHK 34), because it bears no extrinsic relations to other physical objects. Similarly, Glauser speaks of two kinds of divinely instituted significations. The first kind are “the inter-modal correlations” between visible and tangible qualities that constitute physical objects. The second kind are what we loosely and, Berkeley thinks, incorrectly call causal connections. On Glauser’s reading, these are lawful and divinely instituted significations. But we do not consider the ideas correlated by these relations to be elements of the same physical object. Rather, we take one complex idea to be a ‘cause’ and the other to be an ‘effect’, (2007, 69-70; see PHK 65-66, 108; TVV 13). Causal relations, such as one body moving another or a fire burning one’s hand, are lawful
extrinsic significations that a whole physical object bears to other things rather than intrinsic significations that elements of a physical object bear to each other.26

Evidence that Berkeley thinks that perceptual discrimination is necessary in order to perceive physical objects by sense is clear in a discussion of the Molyneux patient from New Theory of Vision:

Hence it follows, that a man born blind, and afterwards, when grown up, made to see, would not in the first act of vision, parcel out the ideas of sight, into the same distinct collections that others do, who have experienced which do regularly coexist and are proper to be bundled up together under one name. ... For there can be no reason assigned why he should do so, barely upon his seeing a man stand upright before him. There crowd into his mind the ideas which compose the visible man, in company with all the other ideas of sight perceived at the same time. But all these ideas offered at once to his view, be would not distribute into sundry distinct combinations, till such time as by observing the motion of the parts of the man and other experiences, be comes to know, which are to be separated, and which to be collected together. (NTV 110, emphases added)

Berkeley is speaking explicitly about perceptually discriminating a physical object (a person’s body) from its surroundings. Specifically, Berkeley is considering whether physical objects can be perceptually discriminated in an instance of immediate perception that is consistent with his first-conferred criterion. He wants to know whether a Molyneux patient would be able to discriminate immediately perceived visual qualities into distinct collections when sight is first-conferred on that patient. Berkeley’s answer is negative, and his explanation is that discriminating physical objects requires perceiving motion.
Berkeley implies that two forms of motion must be perceived in order to discriminate a physical object. These are extrinsic motions between physical objects that allow a perceiver to determine which ideas are divinely separated into distinct collections; and intrinsic motions “of the parts of” physical objects that allow a perceiver to determine which ideas are divinely collected together. The former motions indicate which collections of sensible qualities move independently of one another. These enable a perceiver to register divinely instituted extrinsic significations that “are by us termed the laws of nature,” (DHP 231). The latter motions indicate which collections of sensible qualities move together. These enable a perceiver to register divinely instituted intrinsic significations. Elsewhere, Berkeley includes motions of the perceiver’s own body as registering divinely instituted significations (NTV 45). These motions must be perceived in order to gradually discover divinely instituted significations between sensible qualities, and to discriminate divinely instituted collections of ideas.

To see what Berkeley has in mind, let’s return to the camouflaged gecko. You do not perceive the gecko as a discrete object independent of the bark on which it rests. But should the gecko move, other things being equal, you will perceive it as a discrete physical object. You will also perceive the gecko’s parts – its head, its legs, its tail, and so forth. Those parts move independently of one another, perhaps, but not independently of the whole collection. However, the whole collection moves independently of the bark. Perceiving motion is a necessary condition for discrimination, Berkeley thinks; and discrimination is necessary in order to perceive physical objects. Thus, physical objects are immediately perceived only if motion is immediately perceived. In the next section, I argue that motion is only mediately perceived for Berkeley. Before turning to that argument, I address the question whether perceptual discrimination requires sortal concepts.

Richard Brook (2005) defends the Associative Interpretation by arguing that (a) immediate perception is non-conceptual; (b) perception of physical objects as a collection of ideas is
conceptual; and therefore (c) physical objects are not immediately perceived. In defense of (b), Brook asks us consider Adam’s collection of vases displayed in various rooms throughout his home. On a tour of Adam’s home, you see the vases one at a time. According to Brook, you do not perceive Adam’s collection of vases unless you perceive all of its members, (2005, 497, 500). Brook likens this scenario to immediate perception of subsets of sensible qualities of a physical object (those subsets, Brook says, are perceived diachronically – hence the tour of Adam’s home). Brook argues that you do not immediately perceive a physical object unless you perceive all of its sensible qualities, “and perhaps not even then,” (2005, 500). But given the sheer number of sensible qualities included in a physical object, perceivers very rarely if ever immediately perceive all of them. Brook concludes that perceivers do not immediately perceive physical objects. However, Brook argues that perceivers can recognize physical objects by associating an immediately perceived subset of sensible qualities with an established concept within a linguistic community – say, the concept ‘apple’. The result is mediate perception of an apple.

Berkeley’s account of perceptual discrimination does not entail Brook’s account of object recognition. Perception of motion enables a perceiver to determine which sensible qualities are members of a physical object without perceiving every member of that collection. Perception of motion also allows a perceiver to discriminate a physical object without applying sortal concepts. Suppose that on your hike through the woods you come across a new species of camouflaged animal. As with the gecko, you are initially blind to it. But once it moves, you’re able to distinguish its tangible qualities from those of its surroundings. Since it’s a new species, there is no concept for this animal in your linguistic community. In that case, you don’t recognize it by associating its immediately perceived qualities with any concept that you possess. You perceptually discriminate the animal through its motion without applying any concepts.
It might be objected that you recognize the animal by applying a very general concept such as ‘animal’. In reply, consider that this would also have to be the case before the animal moves. Before the animal moves you immediately perceived a subset of its visible qualities sufficient to apply the concept ‘animal’. In that case, you should mediately perceive it through object recognition despite its camouflage. But by hypothesis, the animal is invisible before it moves due to its camouflage. Therefore, you also cannot recognize it. In order to apply the general concept ‘animal’ to immediately perceived visible qualities, you must first perceptually discriminate the animal. According to Berkeley, you do so by perceiving its motion.

Glauser (2017, 371-72) offers two objections against conceptual perception of physical objects. First, in order to acquire a sortal concept, one must already perceive at least one object of that sort. This entails that one perceives a physical object prior to acquiring a sortal concept. Second, sortal misperception is possible (e.g., perceiving a tomato as an apple). But this is inexplicable if perceiving a physical object is conceptual. Neither of these objections applies to perceptual discrimination by means of motion. The example of seeing a new species entails that a physical object is perceptually discriminated prior to acquiring a sortal concept of that species. A slight variation on that example is also consistent with the possibility of sortal misperception. Perhaps the camouflaged animal you discover in the woods is actually a member of a new species of toad, but you misperceive it as a gecko. Nevertheless, you are able to discriminate it from its surroundings by perceiving its motion.

4. Perceiving Motion

Glauser (2017, 377) defends the Hybrid Interpretation against the claim that perceptual discrimination implies that physical objects are only mediately perceived. According to Glauser, we
can immediately discriminate physical objects by touch. Discrimination of physical objects requires perception of tangible size, shape, and position. These qualities are immediately perceived by touch. Since Berkeley claims that perceptual discrimination requires perception of motion, Glauser's argument stands only if motions are immediately perceived by touch.

In order to determine whether motions are immediately perceived by touch, we must understand how Berkeley thinks motion is perceived at all. Berkeley takes motion to be a displacement in spatial position over time relative to some other object. “For, to denominate a body moved,” he says, “it is requisite... that it change its distance or situation with regard to some other body,” (PHK 115). Perceiving motion therefore requires experiences of space and time (and more than one object). Indeed, Berkeley suggests that perceptions of motion and of space are inseparable, saying that, “it is not to be supposed that the word ‘space’ stands for an idea distinct from, or conceivable without, body and motion,” (PHK 116).

To experience some sensible thing $x$ moving, it must change position relative to some other sensible thing $y$, over time. But Berkeley thinks that time is a relation between ideas rather than a quality in its own right:

Whenever I attempt to frame a simple idea of time, abstracted from the succession of ideas in my mind, which flows uniformly and is participated by all beings, I am lost and embraced in inextricable difficulties. I have no notion of it at all... Time therefore being nothing, abstracted from the succession of ideas in our minds. (PHK 99)

In a letter to Samuel Johnson, Berkeley writes, “A succession of ideas I take to constitute time and not to be only a sensible measure thereof, as Mr. Locke and others think,” (CJ, 293). A succession of ideas is a relation between an idea and its successor or predecessor. Perceptions of motion are
inseparable from time and space, and the latter are relations. This explains why Berkeley remarks, “that the idea I have of motion necessarily includes a relation,” (PHK 112, emphasis added).

Notoriously, Berkeley thinks that we cannot have ideas of relations. Berkeley says that relations are mental acts, whether they are divinely instituted or instituted by a finite imagination. Berkeley tells us in PHK 89 that, although we may perceive the ideas related by an act of the mind, we do not perceive “by way of idea” the action of relating those ideas. According to Berkeley, ideas represent things by resembling them (PHK 8). But ideas are passive (PHK 25) and so cannot resemble activities. Since relations are activities of the mind, Berkeley says that, “we have notions of relations between things or ideas, which relations are distinct from the ideas or things related, inasmuch as the latter may be perceived by us without perceiving the former,” (PHK 89 see also PHK 142). For this reason, we can only have notions of relations. Since the idea of motion necessarily includes a relation, this implies that we experience motion through notions rather than ideas. And since relations are not immediately perceived, neither are motions.

Berkeley’s claim that time is a succession of ideas is another reason why motions are not immediately perceived. Berkeley is clear that sensible ideas are immediately perceived only as long as they are present to consciousness, and vice-versa (PHK 3). He also suggests that their presence to consciousness is instantaneous.30 Berkeley tells us that immediately perceived sensible ideas are “perpetually fleeting and variable” (DHP 205; also see PHK 89 and Siris 292); and that, “We perceive a continual succession of ideas, some are anew excited, others are changed or totally disappear,” (PHK 26).31 But a succession of perceptions precludes immediate perception of all relata. If $q_1$ and $q_2$ are successive perceptions, either $q_1$ is immediately perceived and $q_2$ is not; or $q_2$ is immediately perceived and $q_1$ is not. In either case, the relation of succession between $q_1$ and $q_2$ requires mental association. For instance, if $q_1$ is immediately perceived, that idea suggests an idea of $q_2$ to the imagination. In order to accurately represent a succession, the imagination must associate
the suggested ideas of $q_2$ as following $q_1$. The divinely instituted succession would be misrepresented by the mind if memory associates $q_2$ as having occurred before $q_1$, or if the imagination associates $q_1$ and $q_2$ as being simultaneous. A succession between sensible qualities themselves is divinely instituted. But perceiving that relation requires two representative functions of the imagination. First, the imagination must accurately represent absent sensible qualities by means of ideas resembling those qualities. Second, the imagination must accurately represent a divinely instituted succession by means of a correctly ordered mental association.

The implication is that motion can be misperceived if the imagination incorrectly orders a succession of ideas that constitutes motion. But Berkeley explicitly denies the possibility that immediate perception is fallible. When considering the example of an oar that looks crooked under water, Berkeley says that the perceiver “is not mistaken with regard to the ideas he actually perceives,” and that if the perceiver should judge the oar crooked on the basis of his immediate perceptions, “his mistake lies not in what he perceives immediately, and at present, (it being a manifest contradiction to suppose he should err in respect of that),” (DHP 238). This passage indicates that immediate perception is infallible for Berkeley, and it implies that misperception is only possible at the level of mediate perception. Berkeley would therefore deny the possibility of misperceiving motion if he thought motion were immediately perceived.

In sum, Berkeley gives three reasons why motions are only mediately perceived. First, motions are relations and relations not immediately perceived. Second, perceiving motion requires a succession of ideas but not all relata in a succession are immediately perceived simultaneously. This implies that some relata must be suggested to the imagination or memory in order to perceive motion. Third, it is possible to misperceive motions. This can happen when the imagination misrepresents the order of a divinely instituted succession. For instance, a divinely instituted succession may order qualities as moving left to right; but the imagination may represent those same
qualities as moving right to left. Of course, the qualities ordered by a succession may also be misrepresented when ideas suggested to the imagination do not resemble those qualities. Since immediate perception is infallible, but it is possible to misperceive motion, motion is mediately perceived.

The conclusion that motion is only mediately perceived applies to visible as well as tangible motions. Glauser recognizes that tangible qualities require motion to perceive, and that they are mediately perceived due to their diachronic structure:

Most of the time, ideas of touch are produced in us by God in chronological sequences. Feeling the figure and the tangible size of a horse, or even of a large watermelon, by touch is to perceive a chronological sequence of tactile qualities by moving one’s hands over the tangible surfaces of these objects. That’s not to say that two or more tangible ideas can never be sensed simultaneously. No doubt one immediately perceives the tangible figure, size, and situation of a cherry by closing one’s hand on it. But there are clearly many cases where it is empirically impossible for ideas to be immediately perceived by touch other than successively, even though they constitute one and same physical object. Now, this seems to imply that a complex idea of the imagination, in order to represent a tangible body by resembling it or even one of its qualities, should itself have a successive temporal structure in the sense that it could not be immediately perceived by the imagination but only part by part, one after the other. Otherwise, we will say, it cannot resemble a tangible body, or even one of its tangible qualities. (2003, 115-16; my translation)

Glauser’s solution to this difficulty is that the imagination can synchronically represent diachronic sequences of tangible qualities. In that case, the imagination can represent the diachronic structure
of motion “as a whole, all at once.” When tangible qualities require successive ideas to experience the imagination can represent them, “as coexisting... even though those ideas cannot be perceived immediately, but only successively, by a finite mind,” (2003, 116; my translation).

But if the imagination must represent temporally sequenced tangible qualities as coexisting in order to perceptually discriminate a physical object, then that object can only be mediately perceived. Even if a complex idea can be presented to the imagination all at once, a complex idea of tangible motion cannot be perceived by touch all at once. It is the latter that determines whether or not the tangible qualities of a physical object are perceptually discriminated, not the former. Ideas of the imagination only represent temporally structured tangible qualities. This is why they can misrepresent tangible motions, as argued above.

It might be objected that relations are not perceived by sense, and so neither are motions. But motions have sensory content due to the sensory content of their relata. An idea with such-and-such tangible content is suggested to the imagination as succeeding an immediately perceived tangible quality; just as an idea with tangible content is suggested to the imagination as signified by immediately perceived visual qualities. If mediate perception by means of ideas of the imagination with sensory content counts as perceiving by sense, then so does mediate perception by means of relations of motion whose relata have sensory content.

This may be why Berkeley speaks of ideas being tangible in two ways, either immediately perceived tactile ideas or ideas of the imagination with tangible content (NTV 54; TVV 51; Bellemare and Raynor 1989, 12). This may also be why Berkeley suggests that neither tangible shapes nor motions are immediately perceived by touch, but are suggested to the imagination:
Figures and motions which cannot be actually felt by us, but only imagined, may
nevertheless be esteemed tangible ideas, for as much as they are of the same kind with the
objects of touch, and as the imagination drew them from that sense. (TVV 51)

Admittedly, there are two ways to read “figures and motions which cannot be actually felt by us.”
One way is to take Berkeley to refer to figures and motions beyond the capacity of our senses to
perceive, like a chilia
gon. Another way to read the passage is to take Berkeley to mean immediately
perceived when he says “actually felt,” and to deny that figures and motions are immediately
perceived. If the latter reading is correct, then Berkeley recognizes in this passage that tangible
motions, and shapes that require motion to perceive, are perceived by touch despite requiring the
assistance of the imagination.

Lastly, although physical objects too large to touch all at once (such as a bus or a horse) are
perceptually discriminated through motion and so mediately perceived, it might be objected that this
does not apply to a cherry or a pebble that can be entirely felt all at once.34 This objection is
suggested by Glauser in the passage quoted above when he says, “No doubt, one immediately
perceives the tangible figure, size, and situation of a cherry by closing one’s hand on it,” (2003, 115;
my translation). Suppose that God spontaneously brought a cherry into existence in your hand at the
same moment you were endowed with a sense of touch. In that case, no motion is required to
perceive the cherry’s tangible size, shape, and position. Since these qualities are felt at the moment
touch is first conferred on you, they are immediately perceived. But let’s suppose that you also feel a
pain in your hand at the same time. As argued in the previous section, in order to discriminate the
cherry, you must separate its size, shape, and position from a pain in your hand that you feel at the
same time, and that is contiguous with the cherry’s tangible qualities.
Berkeley suggests that motion is required to make such discriminations. Motion reveals to you the divinely instituted relation between the pain in your hand that is extrinsic to the cherry, and tangible qualities intrinsic to the cherry. Perhaps the cherry causes you pain on contact, which you only discover by moving your hand. (This is meant in Berkeley’s sense of causation as divinely instituted extrinsic significations between physical objects.) Of course, if you perceive the pain as an element of the cherry, then you misperceive the cherry. But as said earlier, immediate perception is infallible. We are therefore brought the same conclusion as before. Since motion is mediately perceived by sense, and since perceptions of motion are necessary in order to perceptually discriminate physical objects, even cherries and pebbles are mediately perceived by sense.

**Works Cited**


1 All references to Berkeley’s writings are to The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne. Edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols. London: Thomas Nelson, 1948-57 (abbreviated ‘Works’). The following abbreviations are used for specific works: An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision (NTV); A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge (PHK); Introduction to the Principles (PI); Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous (DHP); The Theory of Vision Vindicated (TVV); Alciphron (ALC); and Correspondence with Johnson (CJ). Section or entry numbers are used where available. Page numbers refer to those in the respective volume of Works.


3 These readers include Daniel Flage (1994); Richard Brook (2005); and Margaret Atherton (2007, 2008).

4 My comments are limited here to veridical perceptual discrimination. A detailed account of non-veridical perception is beyond the scope of this paper. For a related discussion of non-veridical perception in Berkeley, see Glauser (2003, 118-128; 2007, 70-71; and 2017, 361, 372-73).


6 In PHK 1, Berkeley adds flavors and smells as included in such collections; and flavors are again included in the ‘cherry’ passage of DHP 249.
See George Pitcher (1977, 9); Winkler (1989, 156-8); Atherton (1990, 69); Pappas (2000, 170-171); Glauser (2003, 108; 2017, 355); and Rickless (2013, 10-11).

I will henceforth omit the qualification ‘putative’.

For discussion see, Glauser (2017, 356).

I have slightly modified Glauser’s presentation without detracting from his original intent. As I hope to show, these modifications clarify certain features of Berkeley’s account of mediate sense perception.

Also see TVV 10 and 39. For discussion, see Glauser (2017, 356).

See Glauser (2007, 73), and Marc Hight (2007, 102-4).

For a defense of this claim, see Glauser (2017, 362)


Also see Glauser (2007, 69-71).

Atherton’s claim that a physical object is sign plus a meaning is particularly evocative of this thesis.

God could have related sensible qualities otherwise than they actually are related. This is why Berkeley calls these relations ‘arbitrary’. For discussion, see Glauser (2007, 61-62, 68).

Also see Glauser (2007, 56), quoted below.

For discussion see Glauser (2017, 375; 2007, 70). Atherton agrees that, “The qualities that are members of a particular physical object are the ones God created when He created aggregations of sensible qualities,” (2008, 87).

For instance, Berkeley’s comment that if I were in my study, I would perceive the table (PHK 3); and his first-conferred criterion (DHP 204).

Winkler aptly describes immediate perception for Berkeley as, “a form of conscious or sensuous awareness,” (1989, 153).

Berkeley says that pain is only experienced through touch and not through sight (NTV 59). In that case, if touch is first-conferred on you at the moment you feel the gecko and the pain, you would never have felt pain previously.

For discussion of variations in viewing conditions of physical objects, see Atherton (2008, 88-90).

Atherton (2008) disagrees, arguing that visible qualities are not elements of physical objects at all.

This scenario is consistent with Berkeley’s arguments in the First Dialogue that some sensible qualities are inseparable from pleasures and pains (see DHP 176-80). Those arguments do not rule out the possibility that sensible qualities are inseparable in experience because immediate perception of one automatically triggers mediate perception of the other. Indeed, Berkeley argues that this is the case when words suggest meanings, and when visible ideas suggest tangible ideas (see NTV 51, ALC IV.12 [156]).
26 Also see Atherton (2008, 93).

27 For this reason, although the argument given in section two that immediate perception of a subset of sensible qualities is not sufficient to perceive a physical object looks quite similar to Brook’s example of Adam’s collection of vases, the former argument does not suppose that every element of a physical object must be perceived in order to perceive that object.

28 Also see Notebooks 4, 16, 39, 118, 167, 590, 647. For discussion of Berkeley’s views on time, see Flage (1994, 134).

29 See the opening sentence of PHK 142.

30 For discussion, see Glauser (2007, 57).

31 Also see Stir 347. For discussion, see Glauser (2007, 57 and 75).

32 For discussion, see Glauser (2003, 118; 2007, 17; 2017, 361), and Atherton (2008, 89-93).

33 For detailed discussion of Berkeley’s distinction between two kinds of tangible ideas, see Glauser (2003, 111-12; 2007, 59, 74, 78 n19; 2017, 356).

34 The example of a pebble comes from Rickless (2013, 78).