Fictions in Berkeley:  
From Epistemology to Morality  

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In the classical era, imagination garnered poor press: fooling the senses, perverting judgment, subverting reason, skewing social relations, and generally providing wrong ideas about the way things are; it was a faculty of which to beware. Occasionally it was recognized as not being entirely without value—Descartes, for example, insisted on its great usefulness as a figurational function in simplifying the work of the understanding in geometry. The traditional tendency in philosophy, though, was to denigrate imagination for its misleading nature and negative effects and to dwell on its limits as a faculty bound to the body. Indeed, its first function is to represent to the mind things previously perceived by the senses as images in their likeness. But as imagination has neither the same vividness nor the same order as sensation, it is potentially misleading, since in fact images look only approximately the same as their models. Above all, however, imagination was reproached to be potentially misleading for its second function, the creation of images or entire fictions bearing no relation whatsoever to reality, which made it dangerously capable of nourishing all manner of superstition and fantasy.

Within such a context, Berkeley’s conception of the imagination hardly seems original at first glance. But as I will propose, in its creative guidance of reason, imagination plays an important and distinctive role in Berkeley’s scientific, moral, and religious discussions. Rather than focusing solely on the representational character of imagination, then, I suggest that we attend also to the way in which Berkeley appeals to the imaginative aspects of reason itself. In this way, we can better appreciate the educational presuppositions of human freedom.

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In the *Principles* [PHK], he refers to the usual two sides of the imagination, active and passive, as well as its necessary connection with perception:

> It is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind, or lastly ideas formed by help of memory and imagination, either compounding, dividing, or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways.\(^1\)

Berkeley presents imagination as being both the faculty that compounds ideas and the faculty that represents them, with such representations being only approximate likenesses or copies of perceived objects having no other source than experience itself, even if the productions of

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imagination may exceed the norms of that source. Nothing too original there.² Likewise, in borrowing the example of comparing the difference between the liveliness of one’s sensible perception of the sun at noon versus the weaker and imagination of the sun at night, in PHK 26 Berkeley merely adopts the classical conception of imagination that Locke had conjured in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:

> For I ask anyone whether he be not invincibly conscious to himself of a different perception when he looks on the sun by day and thinks of it by night; when he actually tastes wormwood, or smells a rose, or only thinks on that savour or odour? We as plainly find the difference there is between any idea revived in our mind by our own memory, and actually coming into our minds by our senses, as we do between two distinct ideas.³

Being representational by nature, imagination would then seem to be quite limited on at least three accounts: first, it cannot go beyond what is furnished by the senses,⁴ such that the number of its possible ideas is restricted (compared to the number producible by God),⁵ and the loss of a sense (e.g., blindness) should only accentuate this limitation; second, it is limited in that its ideas must respect the requirements of logical coherence (no square circles, for example); and third, it cannot distinctly represent the thing in question—to use Bergson’s example, even though one might well have a seemingly neat and precise image of the Parisian Pantheon in one’s mind, one could still not count its columns. This is exactly how Berkeley responds to Molyneux (who had questioned him on this point) in a too-often ignored letter of 8 December 1709 that plainly shows how, relying on his reading of Descartes’ *Meditations*, Berkeley links imagination inherently to representation. Answering Molyneux’s first question about imagination as a representational faculty, Berkeley shows that

> the ideas laid up in the imagination need not be images, strictly speaking, of what they represent. . . . When you recollect in your thoughts the idea of any house or city, for instance, ’tis certain that idea do’s very rudely resemble the thing it represents, and not in each circumstance accurately correspond with it.⁶

Regarding Molyneux’s second question (viz., concerning Descartes’ attempt in the sixth Meditation to demonstrate the imagination’s limits by referring to the impossibility of distinguishing the mental representation of a chiliagon from that of a myriagon), Berkeley agrees that the two ideas are indistinguishable. He argues, however, that we can speak about things of which we have no precise mental image, not (as Descartes claims) because the understanding has

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² See Berkeley, *Notebooks* [N] 582, in *Philosophical Works*, ed. M. R. Ayers (Rutland, Vt : Charles E. Tuttle, 1992) : “The having ideas is not the same thing with perception. A man may have ideas when he only imagines, but then this imagination presupposeth perception.”


⁴ See PHK 5, in W 1: 43. “For my part, I might as easily divide a thing from itself. I may indeed divide in my thoughts or conceive apart from each other those things which, perhaps, I never perceived by sense so divided. Thus I imagine the trunk of a human body without the limbs, or conceive the smell of a rose without thinking on the rose itself.”

⁵ Berkeley, N 641: “We find in our own minds a great Number of different Ideas. We may Imagine in God a Greater Number, i.e. that Our’s in Number or the Number of ours is inconsiderable in respect thereof.”

⁶ Berkeley to Molyneux (8 Dec 1709), in W 8: 25.
adequate ideas of them, but because (or at least insofar as) we can talk about things for which
have words:

We may very well, and in my opinion often do, reason without ideas, but only the words
used, being used for the most parts as letters in algebra, which, tho they denote particular
quantities, yet every step do not suggest them to our thoughts, and for all that we may reason
or perform operations intirly about them. Numbers we can frame no notion of beyond a
certain degree, and yet we can reason as well about a thousand as about five, the truth on’t is
numbers are nothing but names. Hence you may reason about a chiliagon with regard to the
number of its sides and angles, tho the idea you have of it be not different from that of a
figure of 999 sides. (W 8: 25-26)

If imagination is indeed a representational faculty (as it is for Descartes and Locke), there are
limits to such representation. A given sensible quality may be imaginatively abstracted from a
given perceived object—for example, one may imagine the color red without thinking of a cherry,
but imagination cannot identify a general abstract idea of a quality of the sensible world. 7 In this
latter respect, the Berkeleian concept of imagination differs from that of Descartes and Locke; but
in terms of its representational character, it is more or less traditional. For Berkeley, imagination
plays a supplementary role to the understanding, notably in mathematics where it abets the work
of reason; 8 but reason has the final say in all matters that go beyond perception (as with the
possibility of an absolute space without body—a question he tackles in De Motu). 9 Like other
modern thinkers, Berkeley notes that imaginary ideas are differentiated from sensible ideas based
on their liveliness and coherence. As though to confirm how the immaterialist position on this
point is by no means original, Philonous explains to Hylas in their third dialogue that

the ideas formed by the imagination are faint and indistinct; they have besides an entire
dependence on the will. But 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. There is therefore no danger of confounding these with the
foregoing: and there is as little of confounding them with the visions of a dream, which are
dim, irregular, and confused. And though they should happen to be never so lively and
natural, yet by their not being connected, and of a piece with the preceding and subsequent
transactions of our lives, they might easily be distinguished from realities. In short, by

7 PHK 5, W 2: 43: “For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible
objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived? Light and colours, heat and cold,
extension and figures, in a word the things we see and feel, what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas or
impressions on the sense; and is it possible to separate, even in thought, any of these from perception? For my part I
might as easily divide a thing from itself. I may indeed divide in my thoughts or conceive apart from each other those
things which, perhaps, I never perceived by sense so divided. Thus I imagine the trunk of a human body without the
limbs, or conceive the smell of a rose without thinking on the rose itself. So far I will not deny I can abstract, if that
may properly be called abstraction, which extends only to the conceiving separately such objects, as it is possible
may really exist or be actually perceived asunder. But my conceiving or imagining power does not extend beyond the
possibility of real existence or perception. Hence, as it is impossible for me to see or feel anything without an actual
sensation of that thing, so is it impossible for me to conceive in my thoughts any sensible thing or object distinct from
the sensation or perception of it.”

8 See Berkeley, Analyst, qu. 54, in W 4: 101.

9 See Berkeley, De Motu 53, in W 4: 45.
whatever method you distinguish things from chimeras on your own scheme, the same, it is evident, will hold also upon mine.¹⁰

But in making all imaginary ideas dependent upon prior perceptions, immaterialism confers quite a special duty on the imagination, on two different levels. First, if to be is to perceive or to be perceived—if a thing’s existing rests on the fact of its being a mental perception or production—then the ideas produced by the imagination, insofar they are being perceived (by the mind), have a unique ontological status and are not merely reducible to fictions. On this point Berkeley is quite conscious of the novelty of his position, as evidenced in two successive remarks in his Notebooks:

You ask me whether the books are in the study now when no one is there to see them. I answer yes. You ask me, are we not in the wrong for imagining things to exist when they are not actually perceived by the senses. I answer no. The existence of our ideas consists in being perceived, imagined, thought on; whenever they are imagined or thought on, they do exist. Whenever they are mentioned or discoursed of, they are imagined and thought on; therefore you can at no time ask me whether they exist or no, but by reason of that very question they must necessarily exist. But say you then a chimaera does exist. I answer it doth in one sense, i.e. it is imagined. But it must be well noted that existence is vulgarly restrained to actual perception, and that I use the word existence in a larger sense than ordinary. (NB 472-73)

Second, if imagining presupposes some perception having preceded it, then material substance, which is never sense-perceptible, can never produce any image in the mind.¹¹ It is within this analytical framework that one must understand Berkeley’s famous argument in the Principles which concludes that matter, being unimaginable, does not exist. Staying with the representative function of the imagination: the difference between materialism and immaterialism does not rest on the nature of the difference between sensible and imaginary ideas, but on the question of knowing to what ideas of things perceived outside the mind could refer. The materialist thinks that ideas refer to material objects, the existences of which are taken to be absolute, independent of all perception. Of course, Berkeley rejects this view because (for him) objects exist only insofar as they are perceived—that is, only where a mind thinks or imagines them (PHK 33):

But, say you, surely there is nothing easier than to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them. […] This therefore is nothing to the purpose: it only shows you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind; but it doth not shew that you can conceive it possible the objects of your thought may exist without the mind: to make out this, it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest repugnancy. When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas. (PHK 23; also DHP 200, 235)

¹º Berkeley, Three Dialogues between Hylas et Philonous [DHP], in W 2: 235.
¹¹ Berkeley, PHK 37, in W 2: 56. “It will be urged that thus much at least is true, to wit, that we take away all corporeal substances. To this my answer is, that if the word substance be taken in the vulgar sense, for a combination of sensible qualities, such as extension, solidity, weight, and the like; this we cannot be accused of taking away. But if it be taken in a philosophic sense, for the support of accidents or qualities without the mind: then indeed I acknowledge that we take it away, if one may be said to take away that which never had any existence, not even in the imagination.” The same idea is found in NB 517.
Yet at this level there is still only a difference of degrees between Berkeley’s position and that of Descartes and Locke. The real difference involves Berkeley’s notion of the active side of the imagination: what makes its role essential for him is its creative power, not its representational one. He gives two important examples of this. In the first place, it is imagination, and not only reason, that Berkeley presents as the faculty by which humans are distinct as a species from other species of animal: the decisive difference is that humans can go beyond mere perception and join together ideas lacking any apparent causal connection, as with a horse and a horn joined together to make a unicorn, a being with no existence outside the mind. More broadly—and bearing witness to the richness of our interior lives—human beings are characterized above all by our prodigious capacity to associate and combine ideas far surpassing how they are found at the sensory level. Second, as the creative faculty that reveals genuine ontological freedom and a quasi-infinite capacity for invention, imagination, even more so than reason, brings us closer to God:

Why may we not conceive it possible for God to create things out of nothing. Certainly we ourselves create in some wise whenever we imagine. (NB 830)

If the human will is where Descartes found traces of the divine, Berkeley also assigns this role to the imagination, that faculty in which is witnessed our liberty by the strange fact that we are not reduced, as animals are, to forming ideas only of that which is perceived. In its freedom to depart from the spatial and temporal present, the human imagination is the faculty of forecasting and anticipating, and thus the source of both the happiness and the misery of human beings, since they are permanently subject to those imaginary ills and delights to which they imagine themselves subject. This permanent capacity for imagination, for projection into the future and recall of the past, constitutes a veritable mystery, as Berkeley recognizes, since the possibility of imagining is the possibility of effecting a rupture with the causal order of the physical world:

Mem: to enquire diligently into that strange mistery, viz., How it is that I can cast about, think of this or that man, place, action when nothing appears to introduce them into my thoughts when they have no perceivable connexion with the ideas suggested by my senses at the present. (NB 599)

This human capacity of imagining to our liking things that are totally disconnected from reality is an important element in favor of human freedom, something which we can feel but not prove, since, as Berkeley remarks in the last dialogue of Alciphron, its existence is impossible to prove demonstratively. The question is always what ought to be done with such liberty—and therein

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12 NB 753: “Qu: whether Composition of Ideas be not that faculty which chiefly serves to discriminate us from Brutes. I question whether a Brute does or can imagine a Blue Horse or Chimera.” On Berkeley’s conception of animals, see Sébastien Charles, “The Animal according to Berkeley,” in S. Parigi (ed.), George Berkeley: Religion and Science in the Age of Enlightenment (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), forthcoming.

13 See Berkeley, Querist 307, in W 6: 130: “Whether the total sum of all other powers, be it of enjoyment or action, which belong to man, or to all mankind together, is not in truth a very narrow and limited quantity? But whether fancy is not boundless?”

14 Berkeley, Alciphron VII. 18, in W 3: 314. “It is no less evident that man is a free agent: and though, by abstracted reasonings, you should puzzle me, and seem to prove the contrary, yet, so long as I am conscious of my own actions, this inward evidence of plain fact will bear me up against all your reasonings, however subtle and refined.”
lies the great problem posed by imagination as a creative faculty. How is one to reckon with the
fictions that one continuously produces and which make up a world of which oneself is the only
master? How is the power of the imagination to be put, not in the service of the senses, which are
forever trying to endear themselves to it, but in the service of reason?  

As such questions make clear, the Berkeleian conception of the imagination also necessarily
raises questions of morality and education. Taking the tripartite division of the Platonic soul as his
inspiration, Berkeley insists that the imagination must be put in the service of reason rather than
of the senses, and that all manner of natural pleasure must be subordinated to those of a higher
order:

As our parts open and display by gentle degrees, we rise from the gratifications of sense to
relish those of the mind. In the scale of pleasure, the lowest are sensual delights, which are
succeeded by the more enlarged views and gay portraiture of a lively imagination; and these
give way to the sublime pleasures of reason, which discover the causes and designs, the
frame, connexion, and symmetry of things, and fills the mind with the contemplation of
intellectual beauty, order, and truth.  

But what are the pleasures of the imagination? To hear Berkeley put it, they are primarily those
mental images that artists make use of, whether in order to suggest and captivate, as poets and
rhetoricians deploy them, or to plan and create, as they are used by sculptors and architects. And
in addition to having such pleasures of its own, imagination is also the only faculty to intensify
the pleasures of the senses and reason, and to create further pleasures not inscribed in human
nature (e.g., the love of money or glory). These latter are surely unnatural, since they do not
correspond to either the desires of the body, which are easy enough to satisfy, or those of reason.
Inversely, natural pleasures furnished by imagination can be condemned no more than can those
of the senses, at least so long as the superiority of those furnished by the mind is acknowledged.

This is why imagination has a significant role to play in science and philosophy, since it can
provide audiences with images that help them better grasp the issues in question. Plato is the
paradigmatic example of a philosopher who unites the creativity of the imagination with the
vivacity of the intellect through his use of myths that steer readers toward truths they might
otherwise never have grasped if the treatise had not been a dialogue rich in imagery. Imagination is also important to theology, for theologians as well can express and reveal Christian
tenets with imagery and thereby convince those who would never have been convinced by reason,
for images have the power to raise emotions where words would have had no meaning—a
phenomenon not unlike that captured in Berkeley’s so-called theory of emotive meaning. Yet
Berkeley is also quite aware of the need for vigilance when it comes to religious imagery because
of the idolatry to which emotions can lead. In Berkeley’s eyes, such idolatry is the first step

\[\text{15 See Berkeley, Querist 309, in W 6: 131: “Whether the ignis fatuus of fancy does not kindle immoderate}
\text{desires, and lead men into endless pursuits and wild labyrinths?”}
\[\text{16 See Berkeley, “Public Schools and Universities,” in W 7: 209.}
\[\text{17 See Berkeley to Alexander Pope, 22 October 1717, in W 8: 107, as well as the first of his Guardian essays}
\text{devoted to the pineal gland, in W 7: 185-87.}
\[\text{18 See Alciphron II.14 and 16, in W 3: 85-86, 89; and Berkeley, “Short-Sightedness,” in W 7: 211.}
\[\text{19 See Alciphron VII.13-14, in W 3: 306-7. On the power of Plato’s imagination, see also Berkeley, Siris § 360.}
\[\text{20 For example, see what the evocation of Jesus Christ on the cross produces in Sermon IV, in W 7: 51.}
toward the kind of fanaticism and superstition of which Catholics have so often been guilty. In turn, as Berkeley cautions periodically in the *Alciphron*, this raises further delicate issues regarding inspiration and prophesy.

It is on this latter point that Berkeley’s opposition to the free thinkers plays itself out. The free thinkers take issue with the religious imagination as part of their larger atheistic struggle against Christian prejudices, the greatest of these certainly being the existence of God. They argue that because the senses reveal nothing of such a divinity, the notion of God must be a fiction of the imagination. But Berkeley counters that such claims are themselves based on prejudice: his immaterialist position holds that the one substance his adversaries retain, matter, is vulnerable to the same form of argumentation, it too being not only imperceptible, but even unimaginable. To those free thinkers for whom believers are enthusiasts, fanatics, and idolaters with overly lively imaginations, Berkeley responds that theirs are the overactive imaginations, since it is they who imagine that they know of a material substance that they can neither perceive, nor imagine, nor conceive; they are thus hardly in a position to argue their case. Indeed, he reproaches them for tying the imaginary to the sensible too closely—that is, for being excessively imaginative in this context—and for separating the imaginary too greatly from the rational—the consequence, he suggests, of an impoverishment of the imagination.

It is particularly in the second of Berkeley’s essays of the *Guardian*, devoted to the pineal gland, that he advances his arguments on the unruliness of the imagination of the free thinker. In this amusing work of fiction, Berkeley takes malicious pleasure in describing the mind of the free thinker in detail, dwelling especially on his imagination. The free thinker’s imagination, he claims, is surely more encompassing than his skimpy understanding; but due to the free thinker’s having remained too remote and superficial, and having not taken the proper time to study the Christian religion seriously, he is prejudiced against the Christian religion and full of deformed images of it. In the fifth dialogue of the *Alciphron* Berkeley extends this analysis of the free thinker’s imagination with a consideration of the case of Lysicles, whose unbridled imagination leads him to see an inquisitor behind every churchman and the tools of political domination behind all Christian dogma (here recalling the radical libertine theses of the famous clandestine *Traité des trois imposteurs*). In both the *Guardian* and *Alciphron* discussions, Berkeley presents the imagination of the free thinker as something perturbed, full of prejudices and systematic deformations of all things religious—where believers are imagined as fanatics, priests as those who thirst after power and material wealth, the Church as criminal—with the inevitable consequence that the free thinker’s judgments about anything religious are perverted and his mind narrowed by his inability to find any room for religion.

In Berkeley’s view, imagination has an important place in the service of religion, not only so that pastors can produce an emotional effect on their audiences during sermons, and make them change their behavior and model themselves on Christ, but also so that philosophy can provide

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22 See *Alciphron*’s discourse in favor of atheism in *Alciphron* I.9, W 3: 44, in which he makes the notion of God nothing but a fiction of the imagination.
itself the weapons it needs to prove the superior plausibility of Christian religion over free thought. Thus, on the difficult question of the immortality of the soul, Berkeley thinks it possible to provide a similar image that would assist reason by showing, if not the total certainty, at least the strong probability of such immortality. Rather than viewing it as a prejudice transmitted through education, or as the fruit of a sprawling imagination—as the free thinkers do, in claiming that nature’s course makes the credibility of such a thing impossible, and that empiricism must surely deny its possibility given the great unlikeliness of an existence deprived of body, and thus, of any sensations—Berkeley moves instead to establish the genuine plausibility of the immortality of the soul by using reason and the imagination as tools. At the demonstrative level, he leans most heavily on two arguments: universal consent—the quasi-unanimous agreement of ancient and modern philosophers on the issue—and the desire of each man for immortality—a natural desire that is, like all natural desire, proportionate to a precise end.

If reason grants plausibility to such a hypothesis, imagination can portray it still more captivatingly, notably by means of the analogical reasoning developed in Berkeley’s famous Guardian essay entitled “The Future State.” In his account, someone deaf and blind from birth who, as an adult, loses his three remaining senses at the very moment that he acquires the other two (sight and hearing), would perceive a harmonious concert unfolding in a superb landscape. In like manner, at that very moment of being deprived of all corporeal sensation with the body’s death, our souls will be furnished with perceptions of a new kind. Our new perceptions might only be “some distant representation, some faint and glimmering idea of the ecstatic state of the soul in that article in which she emerges from this sepulchre of flesh into Life and Immortality.”

The imagination can therefore alternately serve or disserve reason depending on which notions it helps represent. If the imagination is perturbed, it is above all because reason is as well, and to Berkeley such disruptions are due largely to two failures of education. First, among the likes of Lysicles in Alciphron, the pleasures of the senses had been exalted to the detriment of those of reason, and this privileges any fictions that satisfy the former, thereby leading people away from philosophy, theology, and more broadly any authentic moral life. Second, for those like Alciphron, the aristocratic education championed by contemporaries such as Shaftesbury merely diverts the individual inward in a personal struggle of philosophic asceticism, neglecting consideration of the essentially collective dimension of education.

In sum, for Berkeley, the free thinkers fail to appreciate the significant role of imagination in not only how we represent the world but also why we do so. In this way they are at fault both by default or excess. In seeking to rid themselves of Christian prejudices and replace them with others they find more plausible, and in preferring topical discussions over the lessons of tradition and the aridity of university studies, they resolutely wish themselves to be skeptically modern, as if modernity were necessarily the mark of truth. By contrast, Berkeley wants to preserve the gains made by Greek philosophy and the Christian religion, and thus opens up a space for both a representative and a creative, constitutive function for imagination in reasoning. In this sense, he stands in the eighteenth century as one of the last heirs of Christian humanism, having as his aim the further reconciliation of faith with reason that free thinkers had dismissed as out of date.

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