Metaphysics // Fall 2024

Handout 2

Williams: Berkeley refuted?

Extensional interpretation. Idealism, as Williams construes it, amounts to this claim: 27

(2-1) Unperceived objects are logically impossible.

But this is problematic, at least for the reason that, according to Berkeley himself, minds are not perceived, yet are, of course, possible and actual. This quick disposal of idealism is not quite convincing, I think. ‘ Perception ’, for Berkeley, is often any class of mental operations. A better rendering of idealism should be:

(2-2) Unseen/unthought of/unimagined/… objects are logically impossible.

This statement is not refuted by the existence of unseen minds. In any event, Williams formulates another Berkeleyan question:

(2-3) Some unseen objects are visualised.

Though we might sense a contradiction in (2-3), there is a simple extensional interpretation to make it true, at least if ‘ visualising x ’ means ‘ thinking of oneself as seeing x ’:

(2-4) There is an object x, there is a perceiver y, there is a time t, such that: y visualises x at t, and for all z, x is not seen by z at t.

To use Williams’s example, an instance of (2-4) would be:

(2-5) Amundsen visualised (=thought of himself seeing) South Pole in 1900, and nobody saw South Pole in 1900.

Of course, (2-4) assumes the existence of unperceived objects, i.e. materialism. But as Williams remarks, that’s just the point. Berkeley can’t now use this claim to establish idealism: the materialist may simply dig in his heels.

Detour on essentiality. We can also interpret (2-3) intensionally. That is, we can bring the expression ‘… is unseen ’ within the scope of the visualisation operator. Evidently that is the 28
interpretation intended by Berkeley generally. It presents a difficulty. Instead of (2-5), say, we’ll have:

(2-6) Amundsen visualised an unseen (=unvisualised) South Pole.

That’s where a contradiction should arise. Right away, Williams pursues a complication about what he calls ‘ essentiality ’. I’m not sure that absolutely everything he says about his two examples is necessary for his argument, but let’s follow his presentation and his own examples.

Suppose I am asked to visualise an ideal girlfriend, and my resulting visual image turns out to have amazing resemblance to Claudia Cardinale (see *Once Upon a Time in the West*). There are two ways to account for what happened. First, I am a fan of Claudia Cardinale and, therefore, think of her as an ideal girlfriend. Then we say:

(2-7) Whilst visualising an ideal girlfriend, he visualised Claudia Cardinale: for him, Claudia Cardinale *is* an ideal girlfriend.

Claudia Cardinale or her image enter ‘ essentially ’ into my visualisation project (or: a thought about her is essential to my thought about/conception of an ideal girlfriend).

Second possibility: I have never heard of Claudia Cardinale, and the resulting image of an ideal girlfriend just happened to resemble Claudia Cardinale or perhaps her photograph. My visualisation project is different from the former case, but it’s not too clear how to register this difference. Williams eventually settles for a plausible diagnosis: 29

(2-8) Whilst visualising an ideal girlfriend, he visualised someone with a characteristic ϕ, and Claudia Cardinale is (uniquely?) ϕ.

But this solution doesn't work in what structurally seems to be an analogous case. Suppose that a man is asked to imagine and visualise assassinating the current British PM. To change the names and make the example a bit less extravagant, suppose that he falsely believes that Rishi Sunak is the current British PM. In reality, Keir Starmer is the current PM. Which of the following is true, under these circumstances:

(2-9) a. He imagined assassinating the current British PM.
b. He imagined assassinating Keir Starmer.
c. He imagined assassinating Rishi Sunak.

It seems that blandly asserting (2-9a) is misleading. The imaginer's false belief must be registered in our description of what he has done. Unlike the Claudia Cardinale case, moreover, the imaginer imagined a very specific person and meant to imagine him, rather than merely generating an image qualitatively similar to an actual person. Of course, (2-9b) is downright false: Starmer or his image were not part of the imagination output. By contrast, (2-9c) seems right: who else was imagined if not Sunak?

Williams, however, draws another distinction. Plausibly, when asked to imagine assassinating 30
the PM, the man focussed on the PM's security detail, 10 Downing St etc. Yes, he imagined a particular man (Sunak) being assassinated, but this element was incidental to the project. It was nothing personal, you see! He imagined ' whoever was the PM ', and Sunak, according to his false belief, fit the description. So for this man, (2-9c) is false. For it to be true, the man had to imagine assassinating someone with Sunak's personal characteristics, like the shape of his head. Only then he is said to ' imagine ' assassinating *Sunak*, and not just any person holding the office.

Remark 1. Williams's discussion may usefully be compared to the distinction between referential and attributive use of definite descriptions. For a classical discussion see Donnellan (1966). There is also a somewhat related discussion in aesthetics on the conditions when a given portrait, say, counts as a representation of a particular individual. Williams protests against the full analogy between arts and imagination in page 37, but I am not convinced.

BACK TO BERKELEY. Williams now compares two narrations: 31

(2-10) a. A tree stands on an utterly deserted island; no one has ever seen it or will see it. It is a green deciduous tree, flowers on one side of it, etc., etc.
b. I see in the middle distance a tree. As I get nearer I see it is green. Moving round, on the far side I glimpse some flowers. This tree has never been seen by anyone and never will be.

That an imaginative project should be associated with a narration has already been assumed in page 30. Williams, therefore, judges it obvious that in the first narration the speaker/thinker imagines an unseen tree: that is, the man imagines a tree with the characteristics $\phi, \chi, \psi \ldots$, one of which is ' x is unseen ', a fact reflected in the narration. This man, however, does not imagine *himself* seeing the tree. This, I 32
think, is for the same reason that the characteristic ' I, so-and-so, am seeing the tree ' is not mentioned in the narration. Looking now at the second narration, we conclude that it *is* incoherent, precisely because ' I see it ' is part of the narration.

Question 2. How convincing is Williams's argument, in and by itself, here?

VISUALISATION. If we make imagination a matter of a narration, the counter-argument against Berkeley seems way too simple. Perhaps, then, the right Berkeleyan thesis is that imagination is 32
instead linked to visualisation. Now visualising an unseen tree is impossible. Visualisation of x involves essentially a thought of seeing x oneself. Hence, necessarily, you can't visualise an unseen tree, and hence, can't imagine one, either.

Williams's example of a bath is meant to undermine the proposed link. Sometimes my visualisation 33
is unreliable due to some quirk or a rather plain limitation. In such cases, we are likely to say that narration trumps visualisation. Suppose, e.g., you say:

(2-11) Imagine a terror attack in Louvre.

It would be a poor response to protest:

(2-12) But I can't visualise Louvre!

It is, in fact, not clear what visualising Louvre should involve in the first place. Should I visualise all of its buildings? most of them? inside and outside? The worry, explored later by Peacocke (the King's College example), is whether my visual image should have special criteria of resemblance and adequacy generally for it to count as an image of the actual object. This, then, provides another 34
response to Berkeley: even if one can't visualise an unseen tree, one is allowed to imagine one, since his failure is just like the other irrelevant failures of visualisation.

THE SELF IN IMAGINATION. Visualisation troubles mirror the troubles with artistic representation. The tight link between what is ' really ' imagined and what is visualised is undermined by the same considerations that undermine the requirement that Caesar's portrait, say, must resemble—therefore, be an image of—Caesar himself. Williams doesn't address this connection, but he does turn to arts to mount a more radical response to Berkeley. In a nutshell, the claim is that the self, the ' I-subject ' of 35
the imaginative project, need not be part of the project at all, and that theatre and cinema in particular supply us with plenty of evidence that the I-subject drops out entirely from the thing represented.

The key observation is that, as spectators, whether in watching a film or a play on stage, we are 36
not part of what is represented. In the case of theatre, we have some external relations, including spatiotemporal relations, to the actors on stage. Yet this doesn't mean, at least not generally, that we are part of the play. With cinema, there are more complex relations still. But the upshot is the same, that we are not part of the film either, and it is not our point of view that's represented in the film. Nor can we say straightforwardly that it is the director's point of view. It may indeed become the director's 37
point of view, but then some special effect must be introduced to make it so. Williams concludes, paradoxically, that in these visual arts the action is conducted from no-one's point of view.

Thus although ' visualising x ' may be equivalent to ' thinking of myself as seeing x ', this does not entail that the point of view of the visualiser is within the visualised scene. Thus there is no contradiction in saying that he visualised the unseen tree.

But there is a final interesting problem, whether visualising must always involving thinking of 38
' myself ' as seeing something. That this is not so can be determined at once by looking at Schlick's fallacy.

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