

Drink on, the jolly prelate cries

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The 18th century philosopher and Anglican bishop, George Berkeley, is chiefly known to posterity for advocating the radical thesis that there is no unthinking stuff in the world. According to Berkeley, bar stools, kegs, mugs and the all paraphernalia of ordinary life (plus everything else) are merely ideas and have no existence outside the mind of those seated on the stools, tapping the kegs, and drinking from the mugs. What is less well-known is that Berkeley devoted much of his energy in later life to promoting the use of a concoction he called tar-water for the treatment of a wide variety of health ailments. Fortunately, Berkeley thought that many of the same virtues were found in some beers. It may seem paradoxical that one and the same man could both claim that beer only exists as an idea in the minds of those consuming it and that it could cure all known afflictions. Berkeley's resolution of this paradox will be explored and it will be seen that it is possible to both appreciate and benefit from beer even if it is only an idea.

1 Tar-water

1.1 The recipe

A curious letter appeared in the Dublin Journal for May 8-12, 1744. It is titled, "Directions for the making and using tar-water" and the author credit is, "By the author of Siris." It begins with a recipe:

To prevent mistakes in the making tar-water, the public is desired to take notice that Norway tar, which is liquid and of a brown colour, is fittest for this purpose. Four quarts of cold water having been poured on a quart of this tar, and strongly stirred together with a flat stick for three or four minutes, must, after it has stood eight and forty hours to settle, be poured off and kept for use either in battles or other vessels corked up. The same tar will not do well a second time, but may serve for other uses. Water drawn off the tar the second or third time, if long stirred, may be as strong as the first water, but has not that spirit, and is more disagreeable to the stomach.

It finishes with a description of the point of making this disgusting concoction:

Of tar-water one pint a day may do in chronical cases, drunk on an empty stomach either at two or four doses, to wit, night and morning and two or three hours after dinner or breakfast; but to children it should be given in less quantity. It may be drunk cold or warm, as anyone likes best, but in acute cases, as fevers of all kinds and pleurisies, it should be drunk warm and in bed, as much and as often as the patient can bear. For instance, half-a-pint or even a whole pint every hour, which will be made easy by the heat and thirst of the patient. I never knew it fail in the most threatening fevers. For outward fomentations or for beasts to drink, it may be made much stronger by infusion of warm water. I am persuaded tar-water may be drunk with great safety and success for the curing of most diseases, particularly all foul cases, ulcers and eruptions, scurvies of all kinds, nervous disorders, inflammatory distempers, decays, etc.

1.2 The mission

The author of this eccentric missive, as most readers of the Dublin Journal would have known, was George Berkeley, Anglican Bishop of Cloyne, an obscure diocese in the south of Ireland. Berkeley was Ireland's most distinguished philosopher but he was also an enthusiastic amateur physician. Much of his energy in later life was devoted to promoting the virtues of tar-water which he considered capable of curing an amazingly wide range of illnesses. Berkeley's interest in tar-water was obsessive. He wrote one long book of philosophy, several poems and innumerable letters promoting its use and extolling its virtues. He was an enthusiastic consumer of tar-water himself and inflicted it on his family, friends and those unlucky inhabitants of his diocese whose ills happened to come to his attention. For one brief example of how enthusiasm can cloud judgment, consider the opening lines of the best known of the poems:

On Tar

Hail vulgar juice of never-fading pine!
Cheap as thou art, thy virtues are divine.

The poem continues on for another 28 lines dragging God, Nature and the Great Chain of Being into the description of the virtues of water infused with congealed pine sap. Although the writings on tar do reflect Berkeley's

philosophical interests and sophistication, his interest in tar-water was intensely practical. He wanted to reduce the amount of human suffering in the world and he thought he had found a cheap and effective means of doing so.

1.3 Changing the subject

Tar-water is not an altogether pleasant subject to contemplate. A reasonable simulation of its flavor, although not its yellowish color, can be obtained by diluting turpentine with tap-water. (Only trained philosophers should undertake this experiment since turpentine is toxic and experienced beer drinkers will understand the dangers of drinking undiluted water.) Its central importance in Berkeley's personal health regimen was the relief of constipation. Fortunately for us, Berkeley himself offers a more appealing alternative. In a letter to his good friend Thomas Prior, Berkeley makes an interesting and revealing observation. He claims:

The virtues of wood-juices shew themselves in spruce-beer, made of molasses and the black spruce-fir in the northern parts of America; and the young shoots of our common spruce-fir have been put to malt liquor in my own family, and make a very wholesome drink.

Berkeley shows himself here not just as a quack, but in addition as a home-brewer and someone who finds malt liquor "wholesome." It is Berkeley the master of obscure lore about the brewing habits of Americans and the consumer of beer for medicinal purposes that we will focus on, leaving the purveyor of toxic alternative medicine behind.

2 The problem of successful drinking

2.1 Berkeley's other mission

Berkeley's desire to benefit mankind was not restricted to the concerns of the body. His first, and best known, humanitarian mission was directed towards philosophical and spiritual concerns. As a young man still in his teens, Berkeley became concerned with the skepticism and atheism that he saw as characterizing the intellectual culture of his times. As Berkeley saw it, the accepted philosophy led to the absurd consequence that the sight of a mug of ale gave no reason to believe that any beverages were present and that this doubt led to the even

worse practical consequence that one never had a reason to reach out one's hand for a brew. Added to this was the further claim that one had no reason to thank God for creating a world containing malt and hops, since there is no reason to think that there is a God. In other words, the principles of the philosophers stood in the way of both the pleasures of the tavern and the consolations of religion. Philosophers, according to him, were in the unfortunate position of, "...doubting of those things which other men evidently know, and believing those things which they laugh at, and despise." (*Dialogues* preface) This struck the budding philosopher as both wrong and harmful. Fortunately, Berkeley thought he had a solution to these problems. To understand his solution, however, we need to look a little more closely at the problem Berkeley was attempting to address.

2.2 Grabbing a brew

Consider the following scenario. You are sitting at a bar with a fresh glass of Guinness in front of you. Wanting a sip of beer you reach out your hand, grasp the glass and bring it to your lips. If all goes well you will be rewarded with a creamy mouthful of stout. This basic pattern is displayed many times over on a good day. We are so familiar with the sequence; want something, do something, get what you want; that we rarely reflect on what a complicated affair this actually is. We'll leave to one side for now the problem of how it is that our wants are actually within our grasp and focus on how it is that we know what to do in order to satisfy those wants. Exactly what you need to do in order to get your beer depends on where it is in relation to you. If it is in front of you, you will need to extend your arm forward. If it is to the side you will need to reach to the side. We've all had the experience of watching others, who may have enjoyed one too many, miscalculate and fail at this essential task. In order to succeed at your goal, taking a drink of your beer, you need to know that there is a beer on the bar and exactly where it is in relation to you. If you are wrong about where it is you will miss the glass (or worse, knock it over). If you are wrong about what is on the bar you may succeed in grasping it and bringing it to your lips but you could end up gagging on a mouthful of Chablis instead of enjoying your stout.

There is no mystery, at least prior to the intervention of philosophers, about how you find out that it is stout, not Chablis, and that it is in front of you, not to the side. You know what is there and where it is by looking. In general, it is by using our senses that we gain the knowledge that we need in order to

successfully drink (or do anything else). Success in obtaining a drink depends on the properties and relations of the things around us and it is perception that gives us knowledge of those properties and relations. Without perception we could not intelligently guide our behavior and, even in a target rich environment like your neighborhood tavern, random reaching movements are unlikely to procure your desired beverage (and if you are unlucky may lead to terrifying results such as drinking diet pop). Fortunately we are equipped with senses that provide us the information about the world around us that we need in order to behave in ways that are likely to lead to the results that we desire. We can summarize this explanation of why we often succeed in obtaining what we want in two principles:

- 1) the success of our actions depends on the properties and relations of the things around us; (For example, where the mugs, bottles and glasses are and what's in them.)
- 2) our senses give us knowledge of the properties and relations of the things around us.

If both principles are true, then what we need for successful drinking is knowledge of what kind of drinks are where and our senses provide us this knowledge. Unfortunately this simple explanation of our successful imbibing has satisfied very few philosophers. In particular, the truth of the second principle has been doubted by troublemaking, wine-drinking, philosophers since antiquity.

2.3 The relativity of perception

A variety of reasons have been given for doubting that the senses provide us directly with accurate knowledge of the world, but most of these reasons fall into two basic categories. First, there is the undeniable fact that what the senses tell us about the world can change even while the relevant parts of the world remain unchanged. My beer looks darker viewed through the green or amber glass of the bottle than it does after being poured into a clear mug. The flavor of my beer changes depending on exactly which delicacies I've consumed from the bowl of munchies on the bar. Second, there are "unusual" situations in which the senses generate obviously false information. Hallucinations and other gross disturbances of our perceptual faculties are examples of this kind of situation. Other, much more common, examples are the double vision and the spinning

sensation that afflict those who over imbibe.¹ One important influence on Berkeley was the great French philosopher René Descartes who discusses these arguments in his book, *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Berkeley, himself, has an extensive discussion of these kind of considerations in his most widely read book, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. Both agree that these kind of considerations lead to the conclusion that the senses don't provide us with any kind of direct contact with an independently existing world outside our minds. Berkeley, unlike Descartes, further argues that the senses do not provide evidence of any kind regarding the existence or nature of a world outside our minds. What we learn from the smooth cold feel of the bottle in hand concerns only our *experience* of the bottle and not the properties of objects that exist independently of us. The experience of the insipid flavor of Knickerbocker Natural Light informs you only of the experience and provides no reason to believe that there is such a travesty of the brewers art that exists independent of your experience.² If what we need to know in order to act sensibly concerns the properties and relations of things that exist external to us then, according to Berkeley, the senses will be no help. Philosophical reflection has led us into a dead end by offering us an explanation of the possibility of successful action and then undermining one of the crucial components of that explanation.

3 Berkeley's solution

3.1 The beer is in the mind

Fortunately for tavern owners everywhere, Berkeley had a solution to the problem of successful drinking. The solution is one sense very simple. Berkeley denies that bottles and cans (and the beer contained in them) exist independently of being perceived. Your idea of lager and the stuff itself are the very same thing. This solves our problem because our experiences and ideas are perfectly known

¹ A more subtle example that crosses categories is the undeniable fact that the more beer one drinks the better it tastes. This basic case is, of course, closely related to the (temporary) increase in conversational brilliance and physical attractiveness that is directly correlated with the number of brews consumed.

² My bachelor party focused not on strippers or pornography but rather on cheap beer. Paradoxically, the beer I remember best out of thoroughly detestable lot was the Knickerbocker Natural Light and what I remember is its truly amazing lack of flavor. Fill a glass with beer, pour out the beer and, without rinsing, fill it with water. You will have created a liquid indistinguishable in taste from Knickerbocker Natural Light. What I have never understood was the point of this beverage.

by us. It may be possible to doubt that there is anything in the external world that corresponds to the sight of freshly filled glass of Guinness (extra chilled) with foam running down its sides but it is not possible to doubt that it looks that way to me. By moving the Guinness inside your mind Berkeley eliminates the possibility of error. The glass of Guinness is, according to Berkeley, neither more nor less than an idea in your mind and like all of your ideas it exists whenever you have it and it is exactly as it seems to you. Berkeley's fundamental insight is so simple that he managed to express it in a three word Latin slogan: *Esse est percipi* (To be is to be perceived). The problem of perceptual error flows from the gap between our knowledge of the nature of our experiences and the world that exists independently of being experienced. Berkeley solves the problem by denying that there is a world that exists independently of being experienced. The prevailing philosophical view in Berkeley's time held that there are two basic kinds of stuff in the world, mind and matter. Matter was unthinking while mind was immaterial and did the thinking. Berkeley denies the existence of unthinking stuff, matter, and claims that all that exists is minds and their ideas. There are bottles of beer but they exist only as ideas in some mind or other. The beer that you drink is in your mind in the same way that your idea of the taste of a perfect pale ale is in your mind. Both exist because they are perceived and both are exactly as you perceive them to be. What is much more complicated is to understand how an apparently sane young man could have taken this idea seriously.

3.2 I refute it thus

When Berkeley published these ideas the initial reaction was, to put it mildly, hostile. His theory was not so much refuted as ridiculed and its easy to see why. The central objection was vividly put by Samuel Johnson, a noted British intellectual and the compiler of the first real dictionary of English. Johnson, on having Berkeley's solution to the problem of perceptual error explained to him, walked over to a large rock and kicked it hard enough that he bounced backward saying, "I refute it thus." Johnson's point being, presumably, that ideas are not the sort of thing that one can bounce off of. We can put the point slightly differently. When I grab the glass before me, it resists the pressure of my hand. When I tip it into my mouth the amber liquid flows down my throat. After my second or third glass my conversation becomes more animated. Mere ideas

cannot resist pressure, flow down my throat and cause me to become intoxicated. Beer that existed only in the mind would be beer that failed to do any of things that beer does. The difference between ideas and the objects with which they are associated is that objects cause effects on us and other things while ideas are merely the passive contents of our minds. Berkeley, perhaps under the influence of spruce beer, has made a serious philosophical blunder. His solution to the problem of perceptual error leaves us without any account of successful drinking. What I want, after all, is not to have ideas of beer but to have the effects of beer. I want not only to experience it visually but I want to be able to act on the basis of that experience to accomplish my goals. If what I see is something that exists merely in my mind how can I use what vision tells me to pick up the beer and get a drink. I can't grab ideas and I certainly can't drink them. What is the point of the error-free perception of beverages that Berkeley guarantees if it doesn't allow me to drink them.

3.3 The possibility of successful drinking

To see why we cannot just dismiss Berkeley's solution to the problem of perceptual error as silly we need to look again at what is involved in successful action. In every case when you desire a drink of beer there is some situation that you are in. In some of those situations reaching out your arm and performing a coordinated set of movements of your mouth, hand and arm will result in a refreshing drink of fine malt beverage. In other situations that same sequence of movements will result in a disgusting mouthful of Red Bull and vodka. In yet other situations you will be merely making a pointless sequence of motions that results in nothing entering your mouth. In some situations reaching a little to the right or in others reaching a little to the left will result in the desired drink. Depending on which situation you are in the very same action can produce any of a variety of results and any of a variety of actions can produce the desired result. In order to achieve your goal you must know which of these situations you are in; how results are connected to actions. In other words, what you need to know are action-experience connections. If I perform one movement I will experience the taste of Pilsner Urquell, if I perform a different movement I will experience the taste of white Zinfandel. If I know the prevailing action-experience connections I can get the experience of a smooth, although slightly bitter beer and avoid the cloying sweetness of the wine. If I don't know the

prevailing action-experience connections then I will be fumbling about at random with no idea how to get what I want nor any means to predict what I get.

According to Berkeley, perception tells us what the prevailing action-experience connections are. The sight of a tall glass of amber fluid with white foam on top allows me to predict the experience I will have if I reach out my hand and bring it to my mouth. The sight of small glass full of pinkish liquid allows me to predict a different experience from performing the same action. Although, according to Berkeley, both glasses are merely ideas in my mind they serve as signs of the prevailing connections between movements and future experiences. The beer that I see does not cause the taste that I experience, since ideas don't cause anything, but that doesn't matter as long as it is a reliable sign of the drinking experience I will have as result of grasping the glass and bringing it to my mouth. As long as my perceptual ideas are a reliable guide to the results of action then it doesn't matter that the things that I perceive are ideas in my mind rather than objects that exist independently of being perceived.

And perception is a reliable guide to the prevailing action-experience connections. Although Johnson may have been correct that the idea of a stone didn't cause him to rebound backwards, the perception of a stone is a reliable indicator that the situation is one in which forceful kicking movements will produce the experience of pain and falling backwards. Berkeley's point is that as long we can successfully predict the results of our actions then we don't need to know their causes. Perceiving a bottle is a sign that we learn to interpret, a sign that predicts the results of various courses of action. What is important is that there be regular connections between perceptual experiences, actions, and future experiences. As long as those connections, which Berkeley calls the laws of nature, exist then we can happily go about our drinking. That the signs are merely ideas in our minds is not a problem as long as the signs do their job.

3.4 The divine bartender

There are two problems that still face Berkeley's theory. First, not all ideas are alike. Stuck at the college reception forced to choose between apple juice and sparkling water, I imagine instead that there is a cold bottle of Goose Island on the table. When I imagine the bottle of beer it exists as a bottle in my mind. But this is the only way any bottle of beer exists according to Berkeley. The

imaginary beer and the “real” beer are exactly alike in this way: both are nothing more than ideas in my mind. But the beer that I see is a useful guide to the action-experience connections while the beer that I merely imagine is not. Reaching out for imaginary brews, even at a college reception, does not quench ones thirst and can produce an unfortunate reaction from onlookers. Since both beers exist according to Berkeley, he can’t account for the difference between them in terms of which one is really there and which is not.

This problem suggests a second, even more pressing one. We have seen that perception often is a good guide to the prevailing action-experience connections, but it seems that Berkeley can offer no explanation of this fact. The common sense solution, that the consequences of action are determined by the properties and relations of the objects around us, is not available to Berkeley. He cannot explain why drinking from a glass filled with beer tastes different from drinking from a glass filled with milk by appealing to the nature of the contents of the two glasses. The glasses, being mere ideas, have no contents and thus can’t be the cause of the taste sensations we experience. Berkeley instead appeals to the regular connection between seeing glasses filled with amber fluid, the action of drinking, and the taste of beer. Yet why is there this regular connection?

The last piece of Berkeley’s puzzle provides his solution to both these problems and finally allows us to see the future Bishop’s philosophical framework completed. The missing piece is the existence of an all-powerful, all-knowing being who always acts to produce the best possible result, i.e. God. We won’t concern ourselves with Berkeley’s attempts to argue that God exists but instead examine the role God plays in Berkeley’s explanation of action and perception. Consider again the difference between the imaginary brew and its real counterpart. When I imagine the cold bottle in my hand what I imagine is up to me. If it is Guinness I want it is Guinness I get. If I prefer Foster’s then it is an oversized can in my hand. If I wish to avoid Lucky Lager then I can do so. Other ideas I have are not up to me. When I look at the container on the table in front of me I don’t get to decide what I see. The ideas of sense are not under my control and if Lucky Lager is my fate then it is Lucky Lager that I see, no matter how much I wish it were Guinness. These ideas, the ideas that come from the senses, are caused by God, not by me. It’s God that sets the rules for what I see, touch, hear, taste and smell. It’s also God that determines the action-experience connections which obtain in any circumstance. Because God is benevolent, wants only the best, He causes ideas in us according to certain regular patterns. When

we see a bottle and reach for it we will get one kind of touch experience. When we see a can and reach for it we will get a different kind of touch experience. By establishing regular connections among experiences, actions, and further experiences God makes it possible for us to engage in successful action. By choosing based on the signs given to us by God we are able to predict the future experiences we will have. God underwrites the associations between ideas that allows for successful action and the ideas of real things are the ideas caused in us by God. As Berkeley puts the point:

The ideas of Sense are more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the imagination; they have likewise a steadiness, order, and coherence, and are not excited at random, as those which are the effects of human wills often are, but in a regular train or series, the admirable connexion whereof sufficiently testifies the wisdom and benevolence of its Author. Now the set rules or established methods wherein the Mind we depend on excites in us the ideas of sense, are called the laws of nature; and these we learn by experience, which teaches us that such and such ideas are attended with such and such other ideas, in the ordinary course of things.

This gives us a sort of foresight which enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life. And without this we should be eternally at a loss; we could not know how to act anything that might procure us the least pleasure, or remove the least pain of sense. That food nourishes, sleep refreshes, and fire warms us; that to sow in the seed-time is the way to reap in the harvest; and in general that to obtain such or such ends, such or such means are conducive- all this we know, not by discovering any necessary connexion between our ideas, but only by the observation of the settled laws of nature, without which we should be all in uncertainty and confusion, and a grown man no more know how to manage himself in the affairs of life than an infant just born. (*Principles*, 30-31)

God serves the drinks, but does so in response to our orders and according to a menu established by him. Our job is to use the hints he gives us to figure out what is on the menu so that our orders will satisfy our desires.

3.5 Successful drinking at last

All the elements to Berkeley's solution to the problem of successful action are now before us. The problem of perceptual error is solved by getting rid of matter. Beer, and everything else that we perceive, exists only as an idea in the mind and not independently of the mind. Since we know our ideas perfectly we also know that the beer is just as we perceive it to be. A new explanation of successful action is now necessary and Berkeley supplies it. Successful action depends on

knowledge of action-experience connections and not the properties of material things existing independently of us. The action-experience connections are guaranteed by God and he causes in us sensory ideas that serve as signs of the prevailing action-experiences connections, signs that we can learn from experience. Here's how it works in a more concrete case. I want a drink and I walk to the kitchen and open the refrigerator. God causes in me visual ideas of the contents of the refrigerator. He gives me the idea of a can of diet root beer on the top shelf. He gives me the idea of bottle of Beck's on the bottom shelf. I have learned from experience that one sort of reaching motion will procure the root beer and a different sort of reaching motion the Beck's. Depending on which action I perform He will then give me either the idea of grasping a can or a bottle. Further actions will result in experiencing either the taste of artificial sweeteners or the taste of beer. Although the beer *is* in the mind that is no obstacle to obtaining and drinking it. In fact, according to Berkeley, this account of action is the only workable one and if only it were to be adopted great benefits of all kinds would be obtained. In one of his more grandiose moments he describes the benefits to mankind that will follow on acceptance of his theory:

If the principles, which I here endeavor to propagate, are admitted for true; the consequences which, I think, evidently flow from thence, are, that atheism and skepticism will be utterly destroyed, many intricate points made plain, great difficulties solved, several useless parts of science retrenched, speculation referred to practice, and men reduced from paradoxes to common sense. (Preface to *Three Dialogues*)

We don't need to share his enthusiasm, he was a very young man when he wrote this, but we can still appreciate his cleverness and ingenuity in pursuing his mission.

4 Conclusion: Berkeley's missions

Berkeley saw no conflict between his practical interest in brewing beer and improving health and his speculative interest in convincing philosophers that the concept of matter was unhelpful (and incoherent). Although the only things in the world are minds and ideas we can still eat and drink and cure illness. Berkeley recognized that it seems odd to say that, "we eat and drink ideas and are clothed with ideas." (Principles 38) As Berkeley points out, however, sounding odd is not an obstacle to truth. As I take a bite of my liverwurst and

onion sandwich which I wash down with a drink from my tall glass of weissbier I would not think to describe what I am doing in Berkeley's terms. There is hardly anything in the world less ethereal, with the possible exception of tar-water, than a liverwurst and onion sandwich and to say that it is an idea seems odd indeed. Berkeley's ideas, however, can be just as pungent as liverwurst or just as smooth and tart as weissbier. To eat liverwurst and drink weissbier is just to have some sensory ideas and adding independent existence doesn't make the sensory experience any more vivid or concrete. Once the importance of action-experience connections is properly understood then my later bad breath and mild buzz are also adequately explained. And if we can explain bad breath in this way then we can also explain the healthful effects, if any, of tar water in the very same way. As long as God is around to impose appropriate punishments (the smell of liver and onions) for misguided culinary decisions and appropriate rewards (lack of pain in the gut) for drinking disgusting concoctions, there is no need for matter in the world. God and ideas we can't deny but matter is unnecessary, and indeed, the idea of it is intellectually harmful. A world without matter is according to Berkeley, just the world as we experience it. Although it may seem odd to *say* that we eat and drink ideas there is nothing odd at all about actually eating and drinking ideas. Whenever you munch a pretzel or chug a brew you are doing nothing more nor less than eating and drinking ideas.