“To be is to be deceived”: The Relation of Berkeley and Plato to Waiting for Godot

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Waiting for Godot has provoked a wide range of interpretations, respectively emphasizing Christian, Existentialist, Marxist, Freudian, Hobbesian, political, Cartesian, semiotic, and biographical elements (to cite only some better-known approaches).1 But perhaps the most recurrent—if not consensual—assumption made by critics regarding Waiting for Godot is that it concerns the universal plight of man, unprotected by earlier cultural assurances or belief systems. A seminal critic in this regard is Martin Esslin, according to whom the play reveals “the full horror of the human condition.”2 Indeed, the play itself suggests its own universality, as when Vladimir (a) identifies Pozzo’s fallen state with “all humanity” (p. 54L) or (b) attributes Everyman status to himself and Estragon: “But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not” (p. 51L).3


In her recent study of the play as an inversion of the extreme Nominalism of Bishop Berkeley, Norma Kroll offers a valuable reinterpretation of *Waiting for Godot* in these terms. According to Kroll, in *Waiting for Godot* Beckett “inverts [Berkeley’s] trust in God’s unwavering regard of his creation” such that God’s perception (represented by the absent Godot) is withdrawn “from the human predicament,” forcing humanity to contend with the resultant metaphysical “discontinuities.” In Kroll’s view, the play illuminates the problematics of human existence in terms of metaphysical factors beyond the control of its victims who, as individuals, are to be construed as “particular manifestations of the general fortune of mankind.”

The present study will pursue a contrary analysis of the play, replacing the notion of universality or irremediable human condition with the idea of deliberately sustained self-deception. In this context, the plight of Vladimir and Estragon is neither inherent nor inevitable, but doggedly devised. Underpinning this interpretation is a web of heretofore unnoticed allusions to or invocations of the works of both Berkeley and Plato—philosophers whose constructions of reality constitute, as we shall see, philosophical opposites whose polarity is crucial to a deeper understanding of *Waiting for Godot*. Moreover, the relation of Berkeley and Beckett we shall find is completely different from the one adduced by Kroll. For example, whereas according to Kroll, Godot symbolizes the absence of God who, in Berkeley’s system, is the sole guarantor of certainty, we shall discover that Godot justifies or excuses the perpetuation of uncertainty.

I. THE RELEVANCE OF BERKELEY TO *WAITING FOR GODOT*

As Lance St. John Butler (writing shortly before Kroll) notes (without commentary), the play invokes, in the course of Lucky’s stupendous speech, the name of “Bishop Berkeley” (p. 29L). But it has never before been observed that Lucky is also explicitly associated with Berkeley’s celebrated description of the intellectual confusion resulting from improper philosophical concepts. According to Berkeley, the uncertainty that

The letters, “L” and “R” after the page number refer to the left and right hand pages respectively.


arrests the mind in its progress toward certainty about the nature of reality stems, not from the unintelligibility of reality, but from the erroneous intellectual principles employed to understand “the nature of things.” Speculative reason stymies its own philosophical investigations by the mistaken ideas with which it thinks: “that fine and subtle net of abstract ideas, which has so miserably perplexed and entangled the minds of men.” The image of the intellectual net, which “stay[s] and embarrass[es] the mind in its search after truth,” explicitly recurs in the figure of Lucky who, just before the stupendously inconclusive act of thinking (“unfinished for reasons unknown,” p. 29L) in which he mentions “Bishop Berkeley,” does a dance depicting entanglement in a net: “The Net. He thinks he’s entangled in a net” (p. 27L). Both this phrase describing Lucky and Berkeley’s phrase describing intellectual perplexity deploy the words “net” and “entangled.” Indeed, Lucky’s declamation concerning the quandary in which man or, more precisely, his philosophical search for meaning “wastes and pines wastes and pines” (p. 29R) constitutes an unrivalled example of what Berkeley, in the famous inaugural paragraph of A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, terms “forlorn skepticism.”

In fact, on closer inspection, that inaugural paragraph provides a remarkably penetrating gloss on the opening situation in Waiting for Godot, where Estragon is seen “sitting on a low mound,” by the side of “[a] country road” (p. 7L). After a prolonged and futile struggle to “take off his boot,” he lapses, “giving up again,” and declares his frustration: “Nothing to be done” (p. 7L). Berkeley’s inaugural paragraph displays the same imagery regarding a figure seated by a road, in a state of dejected futility. But in Berkeley’s passage, that sense of futility is caused by intellectual, not physical, frustration. The seated figure, perplexed by the efforts of reason to illumine “the nature of things,” has given up the attempt to ascertain truth by philosophic “speculation,” and succumbed to “a forlorn skepticism”:

Yet so it is, we see the illiterate bulk of mankind that walk the high road of plain common sense, and are governed by the dictates of nature, for the most part easy and undisturbed. To them nothing that is familiar appears accountable or difficult to comprehend. They complain not of any want of evidence in their senses, and are out of all danger of becoming skeptics. But no sooner do we depart from sense and instinct to follow the light of a superior principle, to reason, meditate, and reflect on the nature of things, but a thousand scruples spring up in our minds concerning those things which before we seemed fully to comprehend. Prejudices and errors of sense do from all

parts discover themselves to our view; and, endeavouring to correct these by reason, we are insensibly drawn into uncouth paradoxes, difficulties, and inconsistencies, which multiply and grow upon us as we advance in speculation, till at length, having wandered through many intricate mazes, we find ourselves just where we were, or, which is worse, sit down in a forlorn skepticism.11 (my emphasis)

The goal of the present analysis is to clarify the perplexity and frustration that encumber life in Waiting for Godot. We can take our first step toward that end by examining Berkeley’s solution to the problem of speculative reason perplexing itself by its own thinking. According to Berkeley, the mind knows reality only through the ideas of it formed by sense perception: “we hold indeed the objects of sense to be nothing else but ideas which cannot exist unperceived.”12 In this context, the term “ideas” includes sensory qualities such as colour, size, smell, taste, etc. Just as pain exists only in the awareness of suffering it, so external objects exist only as ideas in the mind perceiving them: “All things that exist, exist only in the mind, that is, they are purely notional.”13 To Berkeley, as Cassirer notes, “[t]he reality of perception is the only certain and utterly unproblematical—the only primary—datum of all knowledge.”14 Hence, to be is to be perceived (esse est percipi): that is, to be is to be an idea or complex of ideas in the mind. By this reasoning, according to Windelband, Berkeley “demolished the conception of corporeal substances.”15 Cassirer elaborates: “Thus Berkeley summons inner experience to battle against outward experience, psychology against physics.”16

Unlike Berkeley who seeks to overcome “forlorn skepticism,” Vladimir and Estragon devote their lives to sustaining it. But whereas, for Berkeley, the skepticism to be overcome concerns the nature of reality, for Vladimir and Estragon the skepticism to be prolonged concerns the meaning and purpose of life. The primary ideas they entertain concern their own thwarted state of uncertainty: “Nothing is certain when you’re about” (p. 10R); “No, nothing is certain” (p. 35R). By prolonging perplexity regarding purpose (“What do we do now?” p. 49L), they ultimately render purpose irrelevant. The only certainty they know is the necessity of waiting: “Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come—” (p. 51R). But, at bottom, that waiting awaits the

arrival of purposelessness, so that there will be no need for purpose ever
again to disturb them or make them suffer boredom in its absence: “You’d
rather be stuck there doing nothing?” “Yes” (p. 45R). To transpose
Vladimir’s words from a different context, they wait “[i]n anticipation of
some tangible return” (p. 51L) which, in this case, concerns the shelter
of their own perplexity. By this means, they are absolved of the responsi-

bility to fulfill their own freedom (“We’ve lost our rights?” “We got rid of
them,” p. 13R), and determine their own meaning—a project similarly
rejected by Hamm and Clov in Endgame: “Mean something! You and I,
mean something! Ah! that’s a good one!”17

In this regard, the relation between Godot and the primary couple
(Vladimir and Estragon) is especially instructive. Conventionally, Godot
is interpreted as a reification of the ideal plenitude or sufficiency of be-
ing which “humanity” (p. 54L) lacks but insconsolably yearns for. To
Knight, for example, the play concerns “the dilemma of man who, hav-
ing projected his best qualities onto an external and abstract being, is
rendered impotent when that abstraction does not come to save him from
his self-induced anxieties.”18 Yet, though critics tend to regard Godot as
an ideal exempt from the failings of his adherents, this figure, whose func-
tion is to explain purpose, is himself explicitly associated with postponement
of purpose. For he is expected to delay response to “supplication”: “he’d
have to think it over” (p. 13L).

The function of Godot can be clarified by reference to the function of
God in Berkeley’s metaphysics. For Berkeley, as we have seen, to be is to
be perceived: “the objects of sense [are] nothing else but ideas which
cannot exist unperceived.”19 But there is an obvious distinction between
(a) ideas which belong to the internal world of imagination only, and are
susceptible to instantaneous change or disappearance, and (b) ideas which
pertain to the external world of things, and do not change or disappear
according to the vagaries of the mind perceiving them.

For Berkeley, the greater constancy and clarity of ideas pertaining to real
things (as opposed to imaginary ones) is due to the action of God: “The
ideas imprinted on the senses by the Author of Nature are called real things;
and those excited in the imagination, being less regular, vivid, and con-
stant, are more properly termed ideas or images of things which they copy
and represent” (original emphasis).20 Windelband elaborates: “The reality
of bodies consists, therefore, in this, that their ideas are communicat-

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ed by God to finite spirits, and the order of succession in which God habitually does this we call *laws of Nature* (original emphasis).21

Unlike Berkeley’s God whose function is to guarantee the distinction between reality and illusion, Godot is an agency of indeterminacy. Indeed, his emissary, the Boy, repeats the statement, “I don’t know, Sir,” five times in the course of the play. Just as Berkeley’s God sustains ideas of real things in human minds, so Godot sustains the idea of waiting in the minds of Vladimir and Estragon. Through this waiting, Vladimir and Estragon are relieved of the need to determine their own reality independently. For them existence is no more than an illusion, not to be taken seriously: “We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?” (p. 44R). More precisely, they construe their existence as the suffering of excruciating futility which can never mean more than enforced endurance: “I can’t go on like this.” “That’s what you think” (p. 60R). In this context, the significance of the recurrent inability to confirm experience emerges: “Do you not remember?” “You dreamt it” (p. 39L); “I tell you we weren’t here yesterday. Another of your nightmares” (p. 42R). Whereas Berkeley’s God assures the distinction between reality and illusion, waiting for Godot assures that nothing has more reality than the need to avoid the disturbance of recognizing the truth: “At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying. He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on” (p. 58R).

Yet, despite appearances to the contrary, for Vladimir and Estragon avoidance of truth and perpetuation of “forlorn skepticism” is a demanding exercise that requires exhausting intellectual effort: “Use your intelligence, can’t you?” (p. 12R). For in this case, reason must labour to conceive distractions that hamper its own activity:

In the meantime let us try to converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.

You’re right, we’re inexhaustible.

It’s so we won’t think. (p. 40L)

To hamper thought and ensure its inability to move forward, Vladimir and Estragon engage in interminably inconclusive dialogue. The use of dialogue to avoid truth parodies the Socratic use of dialogue to achieve truth. In fact, in addition to invoking Berkeley’s *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge,* *Waiting for Godot* also refers frequently to the Platonic dialogues. Later in our inquiry, we shall examine the implications of Beckett’s fusion of Berkeley and Plato. But first we must identify and interpret the Platonic allusions which on their own—whether or not we can confirm Beckett’s direct citation in each case—function as

lenses by which to focus our thought on and illumine an important stratum of meaning in the play.

II. THE RELEVANCE OF THE PLATONIC DIALOGUES TO *WAITING FOR GODOT*

Before embarking on this phase of our inquiry, it important to follow Aristotle’s advice (in Book B of the *Metaphysics*), and draw up the aporia: that is, anticipate the intellectual obstacles or, more literally, obstructions of passage we might encounter.22 Unlike our earlier project in discussing Berkeley, our enterprise now cannot always rely on direct internal evidence in order to demonstrate that a given utterance or dramatic situation explicitly invokes an external, philosophical text. Though we shall, in at least one instance, be able to confirm Beckett’s deliberateness of citation, and though in other cases the evidence will at least be preponderant, there are other instances where the relevance of a particular section of a Platonic dialogue to *Waiting for Godot* cannot be confirmed or supported on purely textual grounds. But by the time we conclude our consideration of the Platonic dialogues, we shall have established that they contain striking metaphors and situations which can deepen the signification of the play, whether through Beckett’s deliberate intention or simply fortuitous correspondence.

The dramatic emphasis in *Waiting for Godot* on removing boots (“Estragon, on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot,” p. 7L) or putting them on (“Come on, give me your foot,” p. 44R) refers directly to a section of the *Theaetetus* (193 c-d). In that dialogue, Plato analyzes the problem of true and false judgment of objects in terms of correct and incorrect matching of present perception with the corresponding memory impression or “imprint” obtained by past identification of that object.23 Correct identification of the perceived object is compared to the action of putting one’s foot into the correct boot (or memory impression). Mistaken identification of the object is analogous to putting one’s foot in the wrong boot:

It remains, then, that false judgment should occur in a case like this—when

22. Joseph Owens provides an etymology of the term: “The vocabulary of the Aristotelian aporia is based on the Greek ‘poros’, meaning ‘passage’. The privative alpha gives the signification ‘lack of passage’. In an aporia the intellect has no passage. It can make no headway. Something is holding it back,” (*The Doctrine of Being in the Aristotelian Metaphysics* [Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1951], p. 214).

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I, who know you and Theodorus and possess imprints of you both like seal impressions in the waxen block, see you both at a distance indistinctly and am in a hurry to assign the proper imprint of each to the proper visual perception, like fitting a foot into its own footprint to effect a recognition, and then make the mistake of interchanging them, like a man who thrusts his feet into the wrong shoes, and apply the perception of each to the imprint of the other. (193 c-d, my emphasis)

There appears to be no question that the references in Beckett’s play to removing or donning boots do indeed invoke this passage; for in Watt (an earlier Beckettian text) an explicit linking of problematic perception with mismatching footwear occurs. After describing Watt’s mismatched footwear (“a boot, brown in colour, and a shoe, happily of a brownish colour also”), the narrator addresses Watt’s futile attempt to identify a perceived object: “So Watt waited with impatience, for the figure to draw very near indeed.”24 However, Watt is no more concerned with objective identification of the object than he is with correct matching of foot with footwear. He simply wants to clarify what the object appears to be, not what it actually is: “For Watt’s concern, deep as it appeared, was not after all with what the figure was, in reality, but with what the figure appeared to be, in reality” (Watt, p. 227).

Watt’s indifference to reality and his concern with mere appearance inverts the Platonic metaphysics, where the goal of knowledge is to ascend from the shifting illusions of opinion to the unchanging truth of the Ideas or Pure Forms. In the Beckettian universe, the only truth is knowledge of its irrelevance. The paradoxical Beckettian answer to the problem of distinguishing appearance from reality is that nothing is real because, as Malone writes in his paraphrase of the Pre-Socratic philosopher, Democritus of Abdera, “Nothing is more real than nothing” (Malone Dies, original emphasis).25 There are many analogues of this claim in Waiting for Godot: “In an instant all will vanish and we’ll be alone once more, in the midst of nothingness!” (p. 52L); “There’s no lack of void” (p. 42R). In psychological and moral terms, the primacy of nothingness means that life is reduced to awareness of triviality (“This is becoming really insignificant,” p. 44L), boredom (“We wait. We are bored,” p. 52L), and futility (“Noth-

ing to be done,” p. 7L). For Vladimir and Estragon, life is a verbalized version of “the soundless tumult of the inner lamentation” expressed in Watt (p. 217), a reiterative complaint about the pointlessness of living: “I can’t go on!” (p. 58R). There is “[n]othing to be done” (p. 7L), because there is only the absence of purpose in which to do it.

Whereas the celebrated purpose of Platonic dialogue is to clarify truth by disclosing error, the Beckettian dialogue in Waiting for Godot cannot distinguish truth from falsehood, because it has lingered so long in doubt: “You think so?” “I don’t know.” “You may be right” (p. 51R). The situation in the play is exactly opposite to that described in the Allegory of the Cave—the most famous Platonic myth in the Republic and one which Brian Duffy has already linked to The Unnamable.26 In that allegory, the requisite intellectual movement is from the flickering shadows of illusion, inside the cave, toward the radiantly constant light of truth shining outside. Through this movement, as Jaeger indicates, the soul turns “away from the realm of becoming, until it can bear to look at the brightest pinnacle of reality.”27 Plato’s analogy for this movement from the ignorance of mere opinion to the certainty of true knowledge concerns the sudden transition from blindness to the gift of sight: “inserting vision into blind eyes” (Republic 518b6, my emphasis). In contrast to Socratic dialogue, whose purpose is illumination, the purpose of Beckettian dialogue is to sustain “idle discourse” (p. 51L), so that reason might thereby be protected from the risk of clarification and the difficult decisions which would follow from it. In this context, darkness is preferable to light: “But has it [‘our reason’] not long been straying in the night without end of the abyssal depths?” (p. 51R). And blindness is preferable to vision. Indeed, the movement into deeper darkness, instead of toward greater illumination, is epitomized by the transition of Pozzo from vision to blindness: “I used to have wonderful sight” (p. 54R).

Yet, though “confusion” (p. 51R) brings its reward, it also entails frustration at not being able to know the truth—and, more fundamentally, not being able to know why truth remains inaccessible: “I don’t know why I don’t know!” (p. 43R). Ironically, the Boy, who encourages waiting for Godot, is the figure on whom Estragon physically vents his frustration at not being able to know the truth—or, conversely, to prove that a claim is false:

That’s all a pack of lies. (Shaking the Boy by the arm.) Tell us the truth!

Boy: (trembling). But it is the truth, Sir! (p. 33L, original emphasis)

Estragon’s rage at the human inability to determine the truth epitomizes the predicament of philosophical reason in the world of the play. In the philosophies of both Berkeley and Plato, reason can successfully establish certainty, though it does so in opposite ways: either, with Berkeley, by postulating the primacy of sense perception or, with Plato, by postulating the primacy of the non-sensory Ideas. But in the world of the play, reason is epistemologically challenged. It cannot achieve certainty (“Tell us the truth!”), because its only available principle of verification is doubt or uncertainty. In other words, as Estragon demonstrates, nothing is as certain as conviction in ignorance: “I don’t know why I don’t know!” Or, as Lucky exemplifies, nothing is certain but the inability of reason to understand its own limitations—to understand, that is, the reason for its own incompleteness of thought: “left unfinished for reasons unknown” (pp. 28R–29L).

In this context, the deeper significance of Estragon’s physical abuse of Lucky emerges, along with another Platonic allusion. Just as, when shaking the Boy, Estragon was venting frustration at the human inability to achieve certainty, so, when furiously “kicking” (p. 56R) the fallen Lucky, Estragon is again, by implication, venting his consternation at the futility of thought. To begin with, in kicking Lucky, Estragon abuses the figure conspicuously associated with the hapless predicament of thought: “Think, pig!” (p. 47L). But the full resonance of Estragon’s outburst emerges in the context of another Platonic dialogue (the Protagoras), where Socrates refers to knowledge or the reasoning faculty as a slave “which is kicked about” by unrestrained emotions:

Most people . . . do not think of knowledge as a force, much less a dominant or ruling force; they think a man may often have knowledge while he is ruled by something else, at one time anger, at another pleasure or pain, sometimes love, very often fear; they really picture knowledge as a slave which is kicked about by all these other things. (Protagoras 352bc, my emphasis)28

There is perhaps no more succinctly penetrating evaluation of the mentality embodied by the primary couple than these words of Socrates. Vladimir and Estragon cannot achieve certainty (“No, nothing is certain,” p. 35R), because they know nothing but their own feelings, the most persistent of which is self-pitying boredom: “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful!” (p. 27R). They allow emotion to overcome thought, just as Estragon allows emotion to provoke him into violence against Lucky—the incarnation of thinking. Indeed, obsession with their own feelings is precisely the factor that perpetuates

their plight. Vladimir’s reprehension of the blind Pozzo ironically rebounds upon himself: “He can think of nothing but himself!” (p. 53L). So does his subsequent pity: “Let him alone. Can’t you see he’s thinking of the days when he was happy” (p. 55R). Indeed, the fallen Lucky whom Estragon kicks also represents the primary couple’s own mentality; for the useless burden of “sand” (p. 57L) under which he collapses epitomizes their own preoccupation with the “misery” (p. 41R) of futility. Hence, it is appropriate that Estragon “hurts his foot” (p. 56R) when kicking Lucky; for he is confronting his own—and Vladimir’s—refusal to know anything but the pathos of purpose: “alas alas abandoned unfinished” (p. 29R).29

The negation, in Waiting for Godot, of conviction in the purpose of life is illumined by another Platonic dialogue: the Phaedo. This dialogue contains three powerful and consecutive metaphors which recur, in distorted form, in the play. Though the correspondence of any one them to an element in the play might be merely fortuitous, the correspondence of all three to respective elements strongly suggests that Beckett deliberately designed the parallels.

The first of these metaphors concerns the guard post. In the Phaedo, the watch or guard post is associated with the task of enduring life without deserting one’s post through the act of suicide: “The allegory which the mystics tell us—that we are men put in a sort of guard post, from which one must not release oneself or run away—seems to me to be a high doctrine with difficult implications” (p. 62b).30 In Waiting for Godot, the task of standing guard is debased to keeping an appointment every evening with a party who never arrives: “We have kept our appointment and that’s an end to that” (p. 51R). Here, watching—the act on which security of life depends—is demoted to waiting, and waiting, in turn, is demoted to the procrastination of suicide: “We’ll hang ourselves tomorrow. Unless Godot comes” (p. 60R).

Whereas in the Phaedo death is not to be pre-empted or prematurely induced, in Waiting for Godot it is the status quo. For life itself is construed as a posthumous exercise, doomed by “habit” (p. 58R) to recapitulate innumerably the same experience lived before: “To have lived is not enough for them.” “They have to talk about it” (p. 40R). Indeed, Vladimir and Estragon are already pseudo-spectral, revisiting each evening the same futility, unable to impinge their action upon it. In fact, they perceive their

29. In the context of the allusions in Waiting For Godot to the Platonic dialogues, the subtitle of the play, “a tragicomedy in two acts,” gains further significance; for Socrates himself refers to “the whole tragicomedy of life” (Philebus 50b). See Plato, Philebus, trans. R. Hackforth, in The Collected Dialogues of Plato, pp. 1087–150.
environment as a “charnel-house” or, to interpolate a phrase from “For To End Yet Again,” a “[p]lace of remains”: “Where are all these corpses from?” “These skeletons” (p. 41L). In Waiting for Godot, life is over when it begins: “They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more” (p. 57B). As in “Afar a Bird,” the only response to living is to “g[i]ve up before birth.” The only possible accomplishment is “to grow old” (p. 58L). The image of human enterprise is the death’s-head: “the skull fading fading fading” (p. 29R).33

The same passage in the Phaedo which construes life as a vigil at the guard post also foregrounds two more important metaphors. Just before the reference to the guard post, Socrates links the time before death with sunset and contemplation of the life after death or “the future life”: “What else can one do in the time before sunset?” (61e). Then, immediately after the guard post reference, Socrates associates the notion of suicide with the action of fleeing a good master: “a stupid person might get the idea that it would be to his advantage to escape from his master” (62d). Of course, both sunset and the possibility that a slave will flee from his master figure prominently in Waiting for Godot. Pozzo delivers a set speech on the sunset. Moreover, Pozzo also has a slave who, far from running away, tries to prevent his master from dismissing him: “He imagines that when I see how well he carries I'll be tempted to keep him in that capacity” (p. 21L).

In each case, the moral earnestness implicit in the Socratic metaphors is debased. The sunset contemplation of the eschatological relation between the life to come and the life to end becomes a discourse on the irrelevance of preparation: “night is charging and will burst upon us pop! like that! just when we least expect it” (p. 25R).34 The metaphor regarding the temptation to flee a good master (i.e., to commit suicide) is inverted to concern the project to “cod” (p. 21L) the master into keeping the slave, as if intensification of suffering, instead of prompting suicide, could become the reason for living. This strategy, of course, epitomizes the plight of Vladimir and Estragon who reduce life to excruciating futility in order to escape the responsibilities of purpose. Indeed, Lucky provides a gloss on their predicament: “labours abandoned left unfinished” (p. 29R).

34. According to Paul Davies, The Ideal Real: Beckett’s Fiction and Imagination (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1994), p. 205, sunset “offers rest to the tired physical eye, so that imagination can free itself of the material world to which it is tied during the day.”
Further consideration of Plato will clarify Waiting for Godot. In the Meno (97e–98a), Socrates employs the metaphor of the “tether” to distinguish between knowledge from mere “opinion” (a term used by Vladimir in his first speech and a little later by Estragon, pp. 7L, 10R). Knowledge can be relied upon, while opinion is prone to abscond:

True opinions are a fine thing and do all sorts of good so long as they stay in their place, but they will not stay long. They run away from a man’s mind; so they are not worth much until you tether them by working out the reason. That process, my dear Meno, is recollection, as we agreed earlier. Once they are tied down, they become knowledge, and are stable. That is why knowledge is something more valuable than right opinion. What distinguishes one from the other is the tether.” (my emphasis)35

The image of the tether is, of course, prominent in Waiting for Godot; for Lucky is tethered to Pozzo “by means of a rope passed round his neck” (p. 15L), while Vladimir and Estragon, by their own admission, are tethered psychologically to Godot: “Tied to Godot! What an idea! No question of it” (p. 14R). Closer examination of the Meno passage perhaps strengthens the connection between the tether in that Platonic dialogue and the tether in Beckett’s play. For Socrates introduces the notion of the tether by reference to “the statues of Daedalus” which, if left “untethered,” will slip away “like a runaway slave” (p. 97d, my emphasis). Lucky, Pozzo’s tethered slave, does indeed seem associated with this distinction between knowledge and mere opinion; for his supreme function is “to think” philosophically (p. 27R) about the meaning of “man” (p. 29L).

We can conclude our consideration of Platonic allusions in Waiting for Godot with discussion of Godot’s emissary, the Boy, who enters near the end of each Act with the message that, though Godot “won’t come this evening,” he is sure to “come to-morrow” (p. 58R). The figure of the Boy in Waiting for Godot entrains a celebrated Platonic antecedent, even if the connection is only fortuitous. Early in Plato’s Republic, Socrates and his companion are instructed by a boy to await the arrival of his master:

After we had said our prayers and seen the spectacle we were starting for town when Polemarchus, the son of Cephalus, caught sight of us from a distance as we were hastening homeward and ordered his boy run and bid us wait for him, and the boy caught hold of my himation from behind and said, Polemarchus wants you to wait. And I turned around and asked where his master was. There he is, he said, behind you, coming this way. Wait for him. (my emphasis)36

1.327b. Further references to the Republic will be cited parenthetically, and pertain to this translation.
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The great dialogue on justice that ensues after the brief waiting requested by the boy (Polemarchus’s slave) contrasts starkly with Vladimir and Estragon’s ever-renewing but inconclusive dialogue on their situation: “Yes, now I remember, yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular: That’s been going on now for half a century” (p. 42R, my emphasis). Whereas to Socrates, the purpose of dialogue is to train thought to recognize and overcome its own ignorance, for Vladimir and Estragon dialogue serves only to distract themselves from responsibility for effective thinking.

III. THE JUXTAPOSITION OF PLATO AND BERKELEY IN WAITING FOR GODOT

The preceding interpretation of Waiting for Godot, enabled by the allusions to Berkeley’s Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge and the Platonic dialogues, diverges from the popular reading inaugurated by Martin Esslin and reaffirmed frequently afterwards. According to that view, Waiting for Godot dramatizes the Absurdity of the “human” (p. 19R) condition, unfolding helplessly in a universe with neither intrinsic meaning nor purpose.37 An overlooked but extremely competent formulation of this prevailing view is offered by John J. Mood: Indeed, “If there is anything Beckett is serious about, will not be disingenuous about, will not dissemble, it is this matter of helplessness” (original emphasis).38 But as we have found, there is abundant evidence that the plight of existence in the world of the play reflects, not a universally objective condition, but a subjective attitude or perspective which prefers to perpetuate faith in futility. At the deepest level, the helplessness which afflicts Vladimir and Estragon is not generic, but carefully planned. They wait for that which will never arrive because they are certain that it will never come. Their waiting awaits only its own continuation: “waiting for . . . waiting” (pp. 51R, 50L). They wait because it is all they know of life (“All my lousy life I’ve crawled about in the mud!” p. 39R), and all they choose to know: “You’d rather be stuck there doing nothing?” “Yes” (p. 45R).

That Vladimir and Estragon wait only on the condition that Godot will never come is indicated by their questioning of his emissary, the Boy, who arrives at the end of each evening to advise that, as Vladimir puts it, “[Godot] won’t come this evening . . . [b]ut he’ll come to-morrow” (p.


When the Boy arrives on the first evening, Estragon asks: “What kept you so late?” (p. 32R). His query clearly shows that the object of the celebrated waiting is the Boy, not Godot. This emphasis on waiting for the Boy, instead of waiting for Godot, can be clarified by the insistence on the Boy’s role as witness: “You did see us, didn’t you?” (p. 34L); “You’re sure you saw me, you won’t come and tell me to-morrow that you never saw me!” (p. 59L). The proximate cause of this anxiety about not being seen is the fact that each evening a different boy arrives with Godot’s message. Hence, each new Boy has no recollection of any previous meeting: “This is your first time?” “Yes, Sir” (p. 33R). “This is your first time.” “Yes, Sir” (p. 58R).

Ironically, this situation suits Vladimir and Estragon perfectly, as further reference to Berkeley’s metaphysics can clarify. As discussed earlier, the hallmark of Berkeley’s philosophy is the proposition that to be is to be perceived. That is, objects exist only as ideas in the mind perceiving them. If Vladimir and Estragon remain uncertain about being perceived, they remain uncertain about their own existence: “Do you think God sees me?” (p. 49R). But the project of Vladimir and Estragon is to remain uncertain of their own existence, to prove that existence is only an illusion which they themselves control: “We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?” (p. 44R, my emphasis). Indeed, on hearing the approach of intruders, Estragon’s initial reflex is to hide behind the tree: “Your only hope left is to disappear” (p. 47R). Here avoidance of being seen indicates the wish to exist only in terms of the perplexity which they sustain for each other: “That’s the idea, let’s contradict each other” (p. 41L).

We are ready now to explicate the fusion of Plato and Berkeley in Waiting for Godot. To begin with, these two philosophers uphold contradictory doctrines concerning the nature of reality. For Berkeley, reality is founded on sense perception which, in turn, is a complex of ideas in the mind. For Plato, sense perception concerns only inconstant appearances, whereas genuine reality is to be founded on the changeless self-identity of the Ideal Forms which remain “always constant and invariable, never admitting any alteration in any respect or in any sense” (Phaedo 78d). Cassirer formulates the contrast between Plato and Berkeley compactly: “In order to affirm the reality of its objects, classical epistemology had to degrade sensation to subjective appearance, and ultimately set it down as a mere name. Now [with Berkeley] the opposite thesis is upheld: sensation has become the sole reality and matter is a mere name.”

Waiting for Godot conflates these two appraisals of reality. Here, reality is founded on perception, as in Berkeley’s metaphysics, but perception always concerns “this immense confusion” (p. 51R). Hence, unlike Ber-
keley’s system where perception is “the only certain and utterly unproblematical . . . datum of all knowledge” (Cassirer, II, 23), perception in the play confirms only a changeless indeterminacy which defies certain knowledge: “Nothing very definite” (p. 13L). Hence constancy (“The essential doesn’t change,” p. 14B), instead of entailing truth, as in the Platonic metaphysics, simply confirms deception: “That’s all a pack of lies” (p. 33L). In Beckett’s universe, to be is to be deceived. It is to believe, despite available alternatives, that there is “[n]othing to be done” but continue the same futility, nothing to be known but the same perplexity: “What do we do now?” (p. 12L).