

## Review

*New Interpretations of Berkeley's Thought.* Stephen H. Daniel, ed.  
Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2008. 319pp.

For a handle on these twelve papers on Berkeley, we might raise the anthology question: What connects the papers? To use early modern language, are they a unity or a pile? Not every useful anthology need exhibit a tight unity, but raising the anthology question provides a scaffold for reviewing the book as a whole. Here, the papers are ordered in an arc, from ontological issues dealing with mind and God's role in human existence, to the location of these issues in theological and ethical contexts. According to the editor, Stephen H. Daniel, all of the papers "hint at a theme that brings divine activity and human experience together, namely, the laws of nature" (15). Call this the hint. In addition, "objects in the world are linked to one another by means of the perceptions and affections whereby minds come into being" (15). Call this the link. How do the hint and the link relate? "The laws of nature reveal how objects are related to one another in a way that expresses the intelligibility of creation and explains why Berkeley insists that the very idea of a thing is unintelligible (and indeed impossible) apart from the mind" (15-16).

Standardly, Berkeley has been read in the tradition of Epicurean atomism. Here we get a reading of him in the competing Stoic tradition, in terms of which the hint and the link are taken to relate. "Instead of thinking of the physical world as a mere aggregate of disconnected bodies, he recommends that we see it as an integrated unity whose members are connected internally (e.g., by the laws of nature)" (22) (the hint). Moreover, there is an "inherent connectedness of minds with one another and their objects" (the link). In fact, all of the topics raised by Berkeley "make sense only if they can be shown to as inherently linked." The upshot, it would seem, is that there should be unities at three different levels: the world as Berkeley sees it, his work, and the papers here. This is a very interesting interpretation; does it carry? One awkward result would be that because "the present juxtaposition of essays . . . is intended as a hint of what such a project would require" (16), the topics heretofore have been, and still are, largely senseless. Do the papers at least contribute to the interpretative project? Only to some degree, but at least to that degree.

Some of the papers seem to support the interpretation very little or not at all. For example, the opening paper, by Charles McCracken, discusses Berkeley's realism, in particular his alleged "commonsense realism," the view that "things have the properties we perceive them to have, and that they exist, with those properties, whether we perceive them or not" (25), and to a much lesser extent his alleged "direct realism," the view that "what we immediately perceive are physical objects, not mental entities that represent physical objects" (25). Using the interpretations of Grayling, Yolton, and Pappas, he shows that Berkeley is a commonsense realist only in the Pickwickian sense that unperceived objects exist counterfactually in that if certain perceptual conditions were to obtain, they would be perceived. Only in the last paragraph is Berkeley conceded to be a

direct realist in that “he holds that bodies are collections of ideas and we directly perceive those ideas.” But even this concession seems too great, for we do not perceive the whole collection that the body is supposed to be. Somehow I don’t find warrant here for the Introduction’s claim that “our ideas, McCracken notes, are related to God’s ideas in terms of how they are linked to one another by divine decrees in the laws of nature” (16).

The most obvious application of the Stoic approach to Berkeley is to be found of course, in the editor’s own paper. One thing is clear from Daniel’s paper and that is that Berkeley rejects the reification of mind as a substance of the sort that interpreters generally attribute to Locke; certainly, he rejects the view that the mind is known as an idea. (On the other hand, for Locke, it seems to me, neither mind nor material things are known in this way either; ideas are the only appearances of both, neither of which is known except as it appears.) For Berkeley, the mind is not a substance really, or even conceptually, distinct from “its” activities, which are the “identification, differentiation, and organization of objects” (212). These objects are not pre-existent entities, but the effects of volition. (Once again, however, the contrast with Locke is not clear, for he too says that they are concomitant occurrences.)

There are issues of importance to Berkeley, perforce receiving scant treatment here (identity of mind, free will, and immortality), but the main difficulty is the conception of the will. What is it? Daniel sees Berkeley as proleptically rejecting the Humean bundle theory of mind in so far as the series of experiences is a *unity*. It is in this sense, Daniel continues, quoting the *Notebooks*, “that ‘the spirit, the active thing, that which is soul and God, is the will alone’ (NB 712)—specifically, the will *that* there be difference and identity (i.e., certain perceptions, thoughts, and volitions)” (215).

It looks from this that we create our worlds in German idealist fashion. “When we perceive things, we perceive them as distinct from and related to one another. By that act we intend or will their differentiation.” But what of the passivity of perception that Berkeley insists upon in many central texts? Daniel’s gloss is that “we are not entirely responsible for the differentiation and relation whereby the things we experience are ordered” (223). In fact, maybe we have no responsibility. “Our experience of the world may be passive (in the sense that we do not determine the sequence of our ideas), but it is active in that *we* are the ones who experience the sequence” (224). This rather makes us passive observers, maybe even the mere empty theater of the Humean mind. The hint of a way out of this impasse comes from a footnote to Daniel’s claim, cited above, that mind or spirit is the will *that* there be differentiation and identity. “This incorporeal predication [i.e., the willing?] by which a body is perceived as a thing is what the Stoics call a *lekton*” (p. 228, n.30). Perhaps the unity in question is that of the Stoic narratological sort. After all, the point of the paper is to place Berkeley’s conception of the mind, and his philosophy generally, in the Stoic tradition (with a holistic logic of propositions as opposed to the logic of predication that readily reifies minds as substances.) The mind as the subject of discourse, as Daniel puts it, would be a storyteller, and we would experience the sequence of experiences as a story of our own telling.

This very original approach to Berkeley provides a powerful interpretive tool, offering hope of understanding how it is that Berkeley can claim as he does, that not only space in all three of its dimensions but also the things in space are constructions, and even that the individuation of the simple ideas deployed in the construction depend, in rather Quinian pragmatic fashion, upon us. The project is an exciting one, but one that would benefit from the sort of clarity and precision about Berkeley that one finds in the work of George Pappas, for example.

Whether after introducing his theory of notions, or independently of it, Berkeley thought we have consciousness of our own existence without an idea of it. How so? Talia Mae Bettcher argues that Berkeley departs radically from Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke, by denying that ideas are modifications of the mind, which has a single consciousness, and instead asserts a bifurcated consciousness of self on the one hand and ideas on the other. In the latter case, ideas are related to the mind in a way that leaves the two related with nothing in common, not even an unequivocal sense of existence.

Daniel and Bettcher disagree on at least three points: the self as an object of (inner) awareness, the self as an agent acting in the creation of ideas of imagination and passively receiving ideas of sense perception, and most importantly, the closeness of the relation between mind and idea (201-02, n15; 229, n.30). But despite Daniel's claim to the contrary, they seem to disagree, or at least do not explicitly agree, on a fourth point: "The awareness of the self is thus an awareness of being related to an object, not as another object, but *as the activity whereby objects in the world are related to one another*" (19, my emphasis). Nowhere in her article do I find Bettcher asserting the emphasized part of this claim.

Saussure took the relation between signifier and signified to be arbitrary, which initially might seem paradoxical, but which has the result that the transition between them involves no reasoning and in fact tends to go unnoticed. Jeffrey Barnouw seizes upon this to develop Berkeley's theory of signs in an explicitly Stoic direction (the Texas School of Berkeleyian interpretation?). The coherence of the world revealed by the language of the Author of nature is the divine providence that is indistinguishable from the Stoic *logos*, with the single qualification that the Stoic order of causes is replaced by the order of signs that must be contingent upon the will of the Creator. That order is *arbitrary* not in the sense of being fortuitous, but in the etymological sense that it expresses that will (*arbitrium*).

Curiously, Barnouw claims that the heterogeneity of the objects of vision and touch does *not* ground the working of the relation of signification between them (149). Yet in the period the only model for a necessary connection between things is identity (see Hume, who argues that cause and effect give us no idea of necessity simply because they are different). So, an important part of the semiotic and thus of the Stoic interpretation of Berkeley is the heterogeneity thesis after all, which is taken up by Robert G. Muehlmann.

Although he does not cite the "main part and pillar" passage, Muehlmann holds that "heterogeneity is *and must be* at the very core of [Berkeley's] idealism" (p.123). This is

because, as Muehlmann sees it, heterogeneity undercuts the act–object distinction on which realism rests. Numerical or “weak” heterogeneity is insufficient, because it affirms at least the possibility, and perhaps the fact, that there is a single quality such as shape that we both see and touch. “Since the same quality is perceived both visually and tactually, that difference can be ontologically grounded only by supposing that there are (two modally different) perceptions of that one quality” (141). However, the upshot would be that while there is only one object, the shape, with two perceptions of it, which is to say that the act(s) and the object cannot be the same, and realism threatens. To block it, Berkeley must therefore argue for specific (i.e., qualitative) or “strong” heterogeneity, which denies that there is any such quality common to sight and touch. How does Berkeley do so? By assuming as a key premise that visible shape and tangible shape are of different ontological kinds: visible shape is *mind-dependent*, but tangible shape is *mind-independent*. That is, Berkeley assumes what in *Principles* 44, he calls the “vulgar error,” which Muehlmann thinks Berkeley believes to be an error even at the time of the earlier *New Theory*. A problem with this interpretation is that it requires Berkeley to be dissimulating, or at least misleading his readers over the “vulgar error.” (No Ontario School of Berkeley Interpretation here.)

One of the most promising texts for a Stoic reading of Berkeley comes from *Siris*. Consider section 266, where Berkeley extols those ancients who “had a notion of the true system of the world. They allowed of mechanical principles, but actuated by mind or soul. . . . They saw that a mind infinite in power, unextended, indivisible, immortal, governed, connected, and contained all things.” An immediate problem is that the ancients whom Berkeley identifies are not the Stoics, but the Pythagoreans and Platonists. The larger problem is that by anybody’s account *Siris* is a strange book, difficult of interpretation, as is attested by Timo Airaksinen’s catalogue of competing accounts of the work. His own view is that the arguments of the work progress “as if by means of proto-Hegelian dialectics” (p. 276). On the other hand, the aim of the work, as Airaksinen makes clear, is to establish a causal connection between God and creation in terms of a “celestial, divine, occult, and living” vehicle, which is fire and light—thus the special status of tar water, botanically produced from this fire or light (267, 278-79). This seems to be not very different from the Stoic notion of *pneuma* as the vehicle of *logos*.

Does Berkeley think he immediately sees physical objects? Unless he does, then skepticism looms; but he also thinks that only the elements of physical objects such as colors are immediately perceived. Partially agreeing and disagreeing with Pappas and Pitcher, Margaret Atherton has it both ways. Immediate is proper perception (e.g. color), but mediate perception of objects is still *perception* of *them* if it is understood as “predictive representationalism” (117). Perhaps a better term would be “expectational representationalism,” for the idea is that the immediately perceived elements *suggest* to us what other elements to expect the perception of. This process is, for instance, by way of contrast to the non-perceptual inferences we draw in causal reasoning. Even so, the basis for the suggestion lies with the laws of nature, and here Daniel has his connection to the Stoic levels of unity: both objects and the perceptions composing them are connected by the laws of nature (18). (Before Hume, it seems, Berkeley was already the Newton of the mind.)

In *The Analyst*, Berkeley sought to show that no infidel practitioner of the infinitesimal calculus should reject Christianity because of its mysteriousness. Douglas Jesseph details his famous argument that the calculus concepts of fluxions, infinitesimals, and evanescent increments are internally contradictory, this by contrast to the religious, physical, and mathematical concepts of God, force, and negative square roots, which though mysterious in the sense that no idea attaches to them, are at least consistent. According to Daniel's abstract, religious truths "can be fleshed out only by noting how they provide an ontological justification for practical activity. Since claims about purely mathematical (demonstratively known) entities are not claims about the existence of things that are needed to make our lives meaningful (as are claims about God and religious mysteries), they must be limited only to what can be clearly and rigorously understood"(21). But the difference cannot be a matter of practical activity or what makes our lives meaningful, for while both negative square roots and the calculus have practical application, the former is retained on instrumentalist grounds by Berkeley while the latter is explained away by the theory of compensating errors. The difference lies in the consistency of the former. Jesseph gives Daniel ground for his interpretation by insisting on two standards of instrumentalist acceptance where there seems to be only one: consistency (257-59).

In *Alciphron* VII, Berkeley attempts to refute the minute philosopher's denial of human freedom based on materialistic determinism, the determinism of the will by judgment, and divine foreknowledge. In the end, his argument involves a practical faith based upon introspection of one's agency. Initially, the question is whether one acts willingly (presumably, according to preference), which is Locke's question of voluntariness. But then an additional question arises as to whether one has the power to act as one wills, which is Locke's question of freedom. In the latter case, according to Geneviève Brykman, Berkeley's view emerges as not very different from the views of the Stoics, Shaftesbury, Collins and even Spinoza, whom he was trying to refute. According to Daniel's précis, this rapprochement comes about as a result of Berkeley's "reframing the discussion of freedom into a critique of how minds are mistakenly considered as abstractions from their actions" (20). Now while consideration of agency clearly plays a role here, the role of abstraction alleged by Daniel cannot be correct because the result is not supposed to be a *mistake*.

Was Berkeley read in the period as a Stoic? Sébastien Charles shows that for the French Enlightenment, Berkeley was viewed as a skeptic or, to use Addison's term for solipsist that was taken over the Channel, an egoist. In one instance, Berkeley's attempted refutation of perceived *libertinage* in *Alciphron* was viewed, by Pierre Desfontaines, (297) as a dissimulating ruse. On the other hand, attempts to refute Berkeley by such notables as Voltaire, Turgot, Rousseau, and Condillac, are adjudged here to be failures. Only Diderot comes close, by appealing to a practical dimension. Here is Daniel's account: "with a few exceptions (e.g., Diderot) thinkers of the French Enlightenment failed to understand how Berkeley's explanation of our knowledge of the physical world is guaranteed not by appealing to an ad hoc belief in God or a sense of the undeniable immediacy of physical objects but by relying on our *practical* apprehension of the world"

(300). Maybe so. But this is not Charles's account. He merely cites Diderot's own assessment at the end of his life: "Berkeley is still waiting for an answer."

In a previously published paper, Daniel Flage has argued an epistemically based ontology in the *Principles*. Here, he deploys the same concept for a "guided tour" through the *Three Dialogues* (p.73, n.24). Very little of the tour causes any problem, but one would like to know more precisely how his approach qualifies under the rubric of the "new interpretations" of the volume's title. It would have helped to know how Berkeley differs from the realist Descartes, for example. In any case, Flage is worked into the Stoic mix in that "he notes that such a relation between [mind and ideas] has a moral component that is consistent not only with Berkeley's laws of nature and the divine coordination of ideas in different perceivers, but also with his conclusion that immaterialism is more successful than materialism in dealing with skepticism" (17). I do not see any moral component noted by Flage as consistent in this way.

Berkeley famously rejects Locke's representative theory of perception. Martha Bolton considers two proposed reasons for his doing so. One is that cognitively we are, as commonsense would have it, in immediate contact with physical objects. But this only shows that his conception of an idea differs from Locke's. A second reason is that Locke's theory leads to skepticism. But the conception of an idea that Berkeley uses in his worries over skepticism is not Locke's but his own, hence those worries do not engage Locke's theory. Instead, Bolton proposes that Locke's conception of a simple idea as intentional violates the empiricist anti-innatist convictions. Despite this (very deep) difference, Daniel sees a (Stoic) convergence in that "Berkeley's repeated claims that nature exhibits an order and harmony indicate how he and Locke might ultimately agree on how claims about reality are justified" (17). But who wouldn't agree in this sense?

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