

## Berkeley's Ideas of Reflection

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Does Berkeley countenance what Locke called ideas of reflection?<sup>1</sup> A common answer is that he does not, indeed that he *cannot*,<sup>2</sup> given that ideas cannot represent minds or operations of mind.<sup>3</sup> Even the seeming reference to ideas of reflection in the opening sentence of *Principles*, Part I has been viewed as an accidental reference that does not represent Berkeley's considered position.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I show that a significant body of textual evidence suggests Berkeley was committed to the existence of ideas of reflection. I argue that Luce's claim, "One of his [Berkeley's] cardinal contentions, urged over and over again, is that there are no ideas of the mind and its operations."<sup>5</sup> is either trivially true or false, neither of which precludes a commitment to ideas of reflection. Finally, I argue that insofar as ideas are effects of

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<sup>1</sup> See John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II.i.2, p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> See G. A. Johnson, *The Development of Berkeley's Philosophy* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965, reprint of the 1923 edition), 143-44; T. E. Jessop, footnote to George Berkeley, *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Part I, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (9 vols.; London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948-1957), 2:41n1; and editor's introduction, *Works*, 2:8-9. Cf. A. A. Luce, *Berkeley's Immaterialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945), 39-40; James W. Cornman, *Perception, Common Sense, and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 104; A. C. Grayling, *Berkeley: The Central Arguments* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1986), 50; David Berman, *George Berkeley: Idealism and the Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 21; George Berkeley, *Philosophical Works: Including the Works on Vision*, ed. Michael R. Ayers (London: Dent, 1975), 89n1; Robert Merrihew Adams, "Introduction" to his edition of George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1979), xxiv; and William McGowan, "Berkeley's Doctrine of Signs," in *Berkeley: Critical and Interpretative Essays*, ed. Colin Turbayne (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 232. This position is not universally granted. See G. Dawes Hicks, *Berkeley* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1932), 108; J. O. Urmson, *Berkeley*, in John Dunn, J. O. Urmson, and A. J. Ayer, *The British Empiricists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 109; and George Pappas, *Berkeley's Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 106.

<sup>3</sup> See Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, 25, 27, 89, 135, 139, 142, in *Works*: 2:51-52, 52-53, 79-80, 103, 104-105, and 106; and George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, in *Works*, 2:231-234; *Philosophical Commentaries* 684, in *Works*, 1:83. Further references to the *Principles*, Part I (PHK) will be made parenthetically by section, as will references to the Introduction to the *Principles* (Intro.), the *New Theory of Vision* (NTV) and the *Theory of Vision Vindicated* (TVV). Parenthetical references to the *Three Dialogues* (DHP) will be to page numbers in volume 2 of the *Works*; and references to the *Philosophical Commentaries* (PC) will be by entry number.

<sup>4</sup> E. J. Furlong, "An Ambiguity in Berkeley's Philosophy," *Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1964): 334-44; and I. C. Tipton, *Berkeley: The Philosophy of Immaterialism* (London: Methuen, 1974), 71-79.

<sup>5</sup> Luce, *Berkeley's Immaterialism*, 40.

immaterial substances, there would be a strict parity between ideas of sense and ideas of reflection. Taken together, these provide good reason to believe that the common claim that Berkeley rejected ideas of reflection (the negative thesis) is false.

The opening sentence of *Principles*, Part I, reads:

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

To anyone who approaches Berkeley from a Lockean context, it is natural to read “such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind” as an allusion to ideas of reflection. If this were the only place Berkeley seems to allude to ideas of reflection, it might be plausible to suggest it was an accidental or ambiguous allusion. But there are other places where he explicitly refers to ideas of reflection.<sup>6</sup> In *Principles* 25, where he is discussing the passivity of ideas, Berkeley writes, “But whoever shall attend to his ideas, whether of sense or reflexion, will not perceive in them any power or activity; there is therefore no such thing contained in them.” In PHK 35 he alludes to *apprehension* “by sense or reflexion.” In PHK 68, where Berkeley is arguing that the notion of material substance proposed by the occasionalist is unintelligible, he says, “Now I would fain know how any thing can be present to us, which is neither *perceivable* [my emphasis] by sense nor reflexion, nor capable of producing any idea in our minds, nor is at all extended, nor hath any form, nor exists in any place.” Similarly, there seems to be an allusion to ideas of reflection in PHK 74: “For what is there on our part, or what do we perceive amongst all the ideas, sensations, notions, which are imprinted on our minds, either by sense or reflexion, from whence may be inferred the existence of an inert, thoughtless, unperceived occasion?” In PHK 89, where Berkeley is discussing the idea of his own mind, he writes, “We comprehend our own existence by inward feeling or reflexion, and that of other spirits by reason” (cf. DHP 233, NTV 23). The allusions to “apprehension” and “perception” suggest that what is perceived is an idea, which could only be an idea of reflection. The allusion to an “inward feeling or reflexion” suggests one is concerned with what Locke called ideas of reflection, since it is on the basis of such ideas that Locke claimed the mind and its states are known.

Do these allusions to ideas of reflection show that Berkeley countenanced a distinction between ideas of sensation and ideas of reflection? No. It is possible that Berkeley, who is generally known for his care in expression, inadvertently or intentionally suggested a

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<sup>6</sup> Berkeley does not use “reflection” and “reflexion” univocally. Sometimes it refers to a property of light (cf. NTV 30). Sometimes it is synonymous with “thinking about” or “reasoning about” (cf. PC 656, 670, 724; NTV 20 51, 80, 131, 135; TVV 56, 63; Intro. 18; PHK 22, 50, 51, 149; most uses of “reflexion” in the *Dialogues* are in this sense; see, for example, DHP 197, 205, 212, 231, 248, 261). Sometimes, when he explicitly alludes to “ideas of reflection,” he seems merely to be matching his verbiage to the Lockean model he is discussing (cf. PC 571, 585; PHK 13). These I discount.

distinction he did not accept. So the fact that Berkeley alludes to ideas of reflection at several points is, perhaps, only an anomaly for which the proponent of the negative thesis must provide a plausible account.

Proponents of the negative thesis correctly acknowledge that Berkeley regularly claims that we have no ideas of minds and their operations. Luce put it this way: “One of his cardinal contentions, urged over and over again, is that there are no ideas *of* [my emphasis] the mind and its operations.”<sup>7</sup> But what does this mean? What is the sense of “of”? Is it the “of” of identity, the “of” representation, or the “of” of signification?

If one is concerned with the “of” of identity, Luce was certainly correct. If one sees a red apple, the redness of the idea is identical with the redness of the apple insofar as the idea is a constitutive part of the apple (cf. PHK 1). In this sense, Berkeley clearly denies that one can have ideas of minds, insofar ideas are passive and minds are active (PHK 25 and 27). So, if there are ideas of reflection, they cannot be constitutive parts of minds; the “of” cannot be the “of” of identity.

If one is concerned with the “of” of representation, Luce’s claim is true but uninteresting. The likeness principle (PHK 8) maintains that an idea can be like nothing other than an idea. Since Berkeley construed ideational representation in terms of resemblance (cf. Intro. 11-12), the likeness principle is applicable across the board: Ideas of sensation can represent nothing other than ideas of sensation—indeed, ideas of the same kind of sensation—and if there were ideas of reflection, they could represent nothing other than resembling ideas of reflection. So, if Luce’s claim concerns the “of” of representation, it is true but uninteresting: It tells one nothing that is peculiar to ideas of reflection.

On the other hand, if Luce was concerned with the “of” of signification, there is reason to believe his claim is false. Only an idea of sight can resemble—and thereby represent—another idea of sight. But, as we learn from the *New Theory of Vision*, although ideas of sight and touch are distinct in kind, they can be associated in such a way that an idea of sight *signifies* an idea of touch. Indeed, there is little question that ideas of sensation, for example, can be taken to signify passions. For example, blushing can signify shame (NTV 65; cf. NTV 10, 23, Intro. 20). This suggests that the signification relation is quite broad. For example, effects of causal relations properly so called (as well as “occasional” relations, PHK 65) can signify their causes (cf. DHP 223, 231-232). So, if Berkeley countenanced ideas of reflection, they could *signify*, even if they could not represent, operations of mind.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Luce, *Berkeley’s Immaterialism*, 40.

<sup>8</sup> Typically Berkeley construes signification as a relation among ideas. Ideas of sight and touch are experienced together. As a result of this temporal association, ideas of sight are taken to signify ideas of touch. The same holds regarding the ideas of words and the objects they signify. If there are ideas of reflection, the signification relation rests on a different ground, since there are no ideas that are identical with operations of the mind. Nonetheless, if there is a necessary (causal) connection between ideas of reflection and operations of the mind, that should be sufficient for a signification relation, since the relation is stronger than temporal association.

But the fact that the signification could provide an unproblematic relation between ideas of reflection and a mind does not, in itself, show that Berkeley countenanced ideas of reflection. If we must discount the textual allusions to ideas of reflection in the *Principles*, is there any remaining evidence that Berkeley granted that there are ideas of reflection?

Yes. In PHK 27 (all editions) Berkeley writes, “Such is the nature of *spirit* or that which acts, that it cannot be of it self perceived, but only by the effects which it produceth.” The general topic of PHK 27 is knowledge of mind. The sentence appears after Berkeley explicitly claims that one cannot have an *idea* of mind, and before he claims one cannot have so much as a relative *idea* of mind.<sup>9</sup>

If Berkeleian ideas of reflection are the *effects* of operations of the mind, they parallel Lockean ideas of reflection. As Locke wrote:

In time the mind comes to reflect on its own operations about the ideas got by sensation, and thereby stores itself with a new set of ideas, which I call ideas of reflection. These are the impressions that are made on our senses by outward objects that are extrinsical to the mind, and its own operations, *proceeding from powers intrinsical and proper to itself*; which when reflected on by itself, become also objects of its contemplation, are, as I have said, the original of all knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

What does that mean? If there is a Lockean parallel, then a particular kind of mental state or operation produces a particular kind of idea of reflection: Distinct operations of mind produce what Hume later called different “feelings or sentiments.”<sup>11</sup> For example, being angry feels different from being in love. If there are ideas of reflection, they are distinct from, but parallel to, ideas of sensation: Ideas of sensation are effects of a mind or minds<sup>12</sup> other than one’s own; ideas of reflection are only effects of one’s own mind.

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Indeed, the Berkeley of the *Theory of Vision . . . Vindicated* suggests that it is: “In certain cases a sign may suggest its correlate as an image, in others as an effect, in others as a cause” (TVV 39; cf. DHP 223).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. PC 712, TVV 18, PHK 145, 147, DHP 240. In the second edition of the *Principles*, this is followed by the remark that we have notions of mind. I have argued elsewhere that such notions might well be relative. See Daniel E. Flage, *Berkeley’s Doctrine of Notions: A Reconstruction based on his Theory of Meaning* (London: Croom Helm, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> *Essay* II.i.24, p. 141, emphasis added. He later identifies some of the modes of ideas of reflection as “Remembrance, Discerning, Reasoning, Judging, Knowledge, Faith” (*Essay* II.vi.1, p. 159).

<sup>11</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 623-624, cf. 636; David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary Norton, Oxford Philosophical Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Appendix para. 2, p. 396, cf. para. 22, p. 401. Cf. Berkeley, PHK 89.

<sup>12</sup> Whether Berkeley held that finite minds can produce ideas in other finite minds is an issue that is beyond the scope of this paper.

If Berkeley's position is that minds are known *only* by their effects, then ideas of reflection are immediately known, and minds—whether one's own or the minds of others—are only mediately known. One's notion of a mind or activity of a mind is that which causes  $x$ , where  $x$  is an idea or series of ideas. It is this type of consideration that Berkeley cites as the basis for introducing the notion of immaterial substance in *Principles* 26. There he is concerned with the cause of the succession and order of ideas of sensation. If one's own mind is also known only by its effects, then one's notion of a certain state of one's own mind is "the cause of  $x$ ." where  $x$  is an idea of reflection.<sup>13</sup>

But it is one thing to say there is room in Berkeley's system for ideas of reflection insofar as they are caused by and signify operations of the mind. It is something else to claim that Berkeley was committed to the existence of ideas of reflection. Here are three points that favor attributing ideas of reflection to Berkeley. (1) If there were ideas of reflection, it would yield a parallelism between knowledge of external causes and knowledge of internal states as causes. As in Locke's philosophy, ideas of sensation would causally correlate to states of external substances, while ideas of reflection would causally correlate to internal states; unlike Locke, both causes would be immaterial.<sup>14</sup> (2) It would explain why Berkeley was frequently willing to use the expression "ideas of reflexion." even why in the *New Theory of Vision* he went so far as to claim, "And yet no sooner shall he behold that colour to arise in the face of another, but it brings into his mind the *idea of that passion* which hath been observed to accompany it" (NTV 23, emphasis added).<sup>15</sup> And, (3) it would yield a strictly ideational reading of the opening sentence of

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<sup>13</sup> I have long been puzzled by Berkeley's remark at PHK 30 that "The ideas of sense are more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the imagination" and comparable allusions to degrees of force and vivacity in Hume. How can ideas, which are inherently inactive (PHK 25), be strong or lively? As far as I know, Berkeley never answers that question. Nonetheless, if Berkeley countenanced ideas of reflection, I believe there is a plausible answer to that question. The clue comes from Hume.

As I have shown elsewhere [Daniel E. Flage, *David Hume's Theory of Mind* (London: Routledge, 1990), 68-86], Hume's descriptions of his favorite mental state, belief, change between the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*. While in the *Treatise* he *generally* takes force and vivacity to be a characteristic of a perception, in the *Enquiry* he suggests that it is a feeling that accompanies or is annexed to an idea of sensation or reflection. It is the idea of reflection marking belief—or, perhaps, a number of resembling impressions of reflection, which correspond to degrees of belief—that constitute the "force and vivacity" of the idea.

If Berkeley countenanced ideas of reflection—distinct ideas that correspond to distinct operations of mind—this could provide the basis for giving an account of the liveliness and strength of an idea. Notice that such ideas would be distinct from ideas of sensation that might *also* accompany ideas of sensation, e.g. kinesthetic sensations when the eye focuses or the pressure in one's finger that occurs when one picks up a book.

<sup>14</sup> This might explain the entry in Berkeley's notebooks: "Mem: To begin the 1st Book not with mention of Sensation & Reflection but instead of those to use perception or thought in general" (PC 571).

<sup>15</sup> Notice, this passage suggests an idea of *sense* signifies an idea of the passion. If there are ideas of reflection, "the idea of that passion" would be understood as the idea arising as an effect of a certain passionate state of mind. If there are not ideas of reflection, it is difficult to understand what could be meant by the passage.

the *Principles*, Part I. While none of these singly might be a sufficient reason to attribute ideas of reflection to Berkeley, they conjointly provide at least good circumstantial evidence that he was committed to the existence of ideas of reflection.

Some are still likely to raise objections. One such might go as follows:

Virtually everything you have said was based on the *New Theory of Vision* and the *Principles of Human Knowledge*. Comparable references to “ideas of reflection” are conspicuously missing in the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. Indeed, there Philonous is made to say, “I ... know, that I who am a spirit or thinking substance, exist as certainly, as I know my ideas exist. Farther, I know what I mean by the terms *I* and *myself*; and I know this immediately, or intuitively, though I do not perceive it as I perceive a triangle, a colour, or a sound” (DHP 231). This passage suggests that ideas of reflection are *not needed* to know oneself and one’s states. Hence, there is still good reason to doubt that Berkeley was committed to ideas of reflection.

There are two distinct issues here. The first concerns the *Dialogues* in general. The second concerns a specific passage from the *Dialogues*.

If Berkeley was committed to the existence of ideas of reflection, why were they not mentioned in the *Dialogues*? One answer is that it might well have been beyond the scope of his interests to do so. If the *Dialogues* are nothing more than a popular reworking of the *Principles*, then one might expect the same distinctions would be found in the *Dialogues* that were found in the *Principles*.<sup>16</sup> But there is some reason to believe that Berkeley’s focus was narrower in the *Dialogues* than in the *Principles*. In the “Preface” he indicated that the topics covered “are farther pursued, or placed in different lights, and other points handled, which naturally tend to confirm and illustrate them” (DHP 169) in the *Principles* and the *New Theory of Vision*. Further, his explicit objective was, in Philonous’ words, to “examine which of us it is that denies the reality of sensible things, or professes the greatest ignorance of them; since, if I take you rightly, he is to be esteemed the greatest sceptic” (DHP 173). That topic does not require a discussion of ideas of reflection.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Given other popular rewritings, however, such an expectation might be unwarranted. For example, although the distinction between perceptions of sensation and perceptions of reflection was prominent in Hume’s *Treatise*, the distinction is all but ignored in the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. See David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), I.ii.5, p. 64; David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford Philosophical Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), VII.1.9, p. 137. Hume’s other allusions to “reflection” concern thinking about.

<sup>17</sup> I have supported such a narrow reading of Berkeley’s objective in the *Dialogues* in “Berkeley’s Epistemic Ontology: The *Three Dialogues*,” in *New Interpretations of Berkeley’s Thought*, ed. Stephen H. Daniel, Journal of the History of Philosophy Book Series (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, forthcoming).

As to the passage quoted, there is nothing that precludes a commitment to ideas of reflection. If there is a necessary (causal) connection between ideas of reflection and states or operations of the self, then the existence of the idea as known entails the existence of a state of the knower.<sup>18</sup> The second sentence is ambiguous. If it assumes a description of the properties and actions of the mind, these could be known by their effects, that is, ideas of reflection, which are perceived but not “as I perceive a triangle, a colour, or a sound.”<sup>19</sup> If it is concerned with the nature of mind as substance, it would still need to be substance under a certain description, e.g. that which knows, and its existence follows directly from the existence of something known.<sup>20</sup>

So, we have seen that while Luce and others are correct in claiming that there cannot be Berkeleian ideas of reflection that are identical with operations of an immaterial substance or represent immaterial substance and its operations, it is entirely consistent with the Berkeleian texts to suggest that there are ideas of reflection that are caused by and signify operations of the mind.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. PHK 2, where Berkeley introduces a knower given the existence of ideas as objects of human knowledge. One might also notice that it is only in the second edition of the *Principles* that Berkeley adds a passage to PHK 89 that includes minds as objects of knowledge.

<sup>19</sup> This would yield a description comparable to, although more complex than, Descartes' description of himself in Meditation II: “But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions.” René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, vol. 2 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 19.

<sup>20</sup> Any attempt to give a description of Berkeley's theory of the nature of substance is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that it is *not* a classical theory of substance and modes, since Berkeley *denied* that ideas are modes of a mind (see PHK 49; DHP 237).