

Review

Keota Fields. *Berkeley: Ideas, Immaterialism, and Objective Presence*.
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In his book, *Berkeley: Ideas, Immaterialism, and Objective Presence*, Keota Fields suggests that rather than reading Berkeley's work as engaging chiefly from considerations in Descartes, Malebranche, or Locke, as is typically done, it would be fruitful to look to a different source: Arnauld. Fields' main thesis is that we ought to read Berkeley's philosophical views as emerging from Arnauld's philosophy of perception.¹ Specifically, he argues that, following Arnauld, Berkeley held an "act theory" of perception: a view on which ideas are identical to acts of perception, as opposed to being the objects of those acts.² This view is rooted in Arnauld's reading of Descartes' doctrine of objective presence, that is, the doctrine that ideas have objective reality in so far as their representative objects exist in the mind. As Descartes writes, "the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the intellect—not of course formally existing, as it does in the heavens, but objectively existing, i.e., in the way in which objects normally are in the intellect" (CSM 2: 75, cited on p. 25). In his sustained debate with Malebranche on the metaphysics of perception, Arnauld maintains—contra Malebranche's view that ideas must be entities in their own right—that there are only two kinds of beings involved in perception, namely, the mind and its purported perceptual object, and that the idea that represents that object is merely an act of perception, and not itself a being.³ Although (as far as I am aware) Berkeley does not ever explicitly mention Arnauld, Fields argues that reading Berkeley as holding an Arnauldian act theory can help to explain and clarify a number of Berkeley's arguments, including arguments in the NTV, arguments against abstraction, and arguments for immaterialism.

Fields recognizes that many scholars will find his claim that Berkeley is an act theorist to be at least *prima facie* quite surprising. After all, Berkeley typically uses object language when referring to ideas; moreover, he seems quite clearly to deny that ideas are modes of minds (see PHK 49), and Fields explicitly takes Arnauld to be committed to the view that ideas, *qua* acts, are indeed modes of minds (5). In chapter 2, therefore, Fields deftly clears away some of these *prima facie* objections to his reading of Berkeley. He notes, for

¹ In what follows, I use the following abbreviations for Berkeley's work: NTV for *New Theory of Vision*, PHK for *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, and DHP for *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*.

² Fields is not the first to suggest that Berkeley is an act theorist: see, for example, Margaret Atherton, "The Coherence of Berkeley's Theory of Mind," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43 (1983): 389-99. He is the first, however, to develop this claim to the extent that he does.

³ Fields' sustained discussion of the doctrine of objective presence as it is found in Descartes and interpreted by Arnauld can be found in his chapter 2, but elements of this discussion surface in virtually every subsequent chapter. Fields reads the doctrine of objective presence largely through J.W. Yolton [see, e.g., *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) among numerous other places].

instance, that the mere use of object terminology in reference to ideas is not sufficient to deny that Berkeley holds an act theory, since Arnauld also uses such terminology when he is talking of the representative aspect of ideas (18-19). With respect to PHK 49, Fields argues that it might not be possible to read this passage straightforwardly. For one thing, in this passage Berkeley also seems to reject a substance–mode ontology, though he seems elsewhere to be committed to such an ontology. Fields also suggests that there is an ambiguity in the term “mode” that may be exploited here: sometimes modes are meant to refer to *modifications*, but there is another use of the term “mode”—one that Locke sometimes appeals to—on which powers and activities can count as modes even though they are not modifications. Fields thus argues that PHK 49 involves a rejection of ideas as modes in the first sense, but not in the second, and hence that it is compatible with Berkeley’s holding an act theory (40).

In chapters 3-5, Fields turns his attention to Berkeley’s theory of vision. Here Fields’ main argument seems to be that the reading of Berkeley as an act theorist helps to make sense of many of Berkeley’s moves: in particular, Berkeley’s rejection of the geometrical theory of vision (chapter 3), and Berkeley’s discussion of the Molyneux thought experiment (chapter 4). Both Berkeley and his opponents accepted that strictly speaking, visual perception is two-dimensional; the question for both, then, was how to explain visual distance perception. On the geometric theory, the suggestion is that distance perception involves geometric calculation. Berkeley’s primary argument against this claim seems to be that we are not aware of making such calculations, and so we must provide an alternate explanation. Here Fields points out that Arnauld’s act theory also includes the claim that ideas (*qua* acts of perception) are “reflexive,” that is, that having an idea simultaneously involves having an awareness of the having of that idea. Given the reflexivity of ideas, it is reasonable for Berkeley to conclude that if we make geometric calculations then we must be aware of making them, and conversely, that if we are not so aware, then we must not be making them. Fields further explains that whereas a Cartesian might address the worry by proposing a priori geometrical knowledge (whether by means of Descartes’ innate ideas or Malebranche’s perception of the intelligible idea of extension) (80), that Berkeley’s use of the Molyneux thought experiment is meant to argue against the possibility of such a priori knowledge (100).⁴

To my mind, the main virtue of Fields’ discussion of the theory of vision is his work explaining the background to Berkeley’s NTV. In chapter 3 in particular, Fields engages in a very nice discussion of the Cartesian theory of sensory perception, and how that theory is further developed by Arnauld and Malebranche. I am not wholly convinced by Fields’ claim that Berkeley’s arguments in the NTV are due to his being an act theorist.

⁴ Although Berkeley certainly rejected innate geometrical ideas (as well as the vision in God thesis), and although I agree with Fields that his answer to the Molyneux thought experiment is tied up with this rejection, nonetheless I worry a bit about Fields’ contention that Berkeley rejected a priori geometrical knowledge. The objects of geometrical proofs must certainly be acquired via experience—geometry, after all, is the science of tangible space, for Berkeley—but this is not to say that those proofs themselves rely on experience, and hence that our geometrical knowledge is itself acquired via experience. I am not at all sure that Fields can—or indeed, wants to—make the latter point, but it is part of what is implicated in his claim that Berkeley rejects a priori geometrical knowledge.

Fields is certainly right to point out that Berkeley must be committed to the claim that we are aware (or at least, can be aware) of all of our ideas, and that his being an act theorist would explain this commitment. But of course this is not to say that it is only Berkeley's being an act theorist that would explain it. Nonetheless, Fields has done us a true service in providing a fleshed out Cartesian background to Berkeley's work in NTV.

In chapter 6, Fields considers Berkeley's attack on abstraction. Much of the secondary literature on this attack centers around two questions: (i) whether Berkeley is successful in his attacks or—on the assumption that his primary target is Locke—whether he has misconstrued Locke's doctrine of abstraction, and (ii) what precisely the structure of the attacks might be. By reading Berkeley (and also Locke) through Arnauld, Fields provides a response to (ii) while also arguing, with respect to (i), that Berkeley's arguments might indeed hit their mark. Here Fields focuses on both the doctrine of objective presence and also on the causal "ex nihilo" principle that we are familiar with from Descartes' third Meditation, that there must be at least as much reality in the cause of an idea as there is in the idea. Fields notes that this principle constrains the objective reality of an idea, and in particular, that it constrains the objective reality of abstract ideas: they must not contain any more objective reality than the ideas from which they are abstracted.⁵ Fields further argues that Lockean abstract ideas violate the *ex nihilo* principle (131-132, 141): "there can be no causal explanation of the content of abstract ideas" (143).⁶

I admit that I am not quite sure what Fields has in mind here. I think he is quite right to point out that the *ex nihilo* principle constrains the content of abstract ideas, in that that content certainly cannot go *beyond* the content of the ideas from which they are derived. But even if Locke is committed to abstraction that involves separation as opposed to mere selective attention—as Fields argues he is (142-143)—still I cannot see why such separation would violate *ex nihilo*: the content of separated abstract ideas would surely be more *impoverished* than the content of the ideas from which they are derived, and so would not contain *more* objective reality. I wonder also whether this account can adequately explain why Berkeley focuses not only on the partiality of ideas but also on their indeterminacy. Lastly, I wonder whether Fields thinks that the Malebranchean idea of intelligible extension is among Berkeley's targets. Given that our perception of this idea is caused by God, it seems to me that this idea would certainly not violate *ex nihilo*. Berkeley argues that Malebranche "builds on the most abstract general ideas, which I entirely disclaim" (DHP 214); it is worth considering whether Fields' reconstruction of Berkeley's anti-abstractionism can explain this claim.

⁵ And those ideas, in turn, must not contain any more objective reality than the formal reality of their causes. Fields leans on this principle to explain Berkeley's attack on Locke's inconsistent abstract idea of a triangle, and ties this together with the interpretation of Berkeley as relying on the principle that impossibility implies inconceivability [see, e.g., Kenneth P. Winkler, *Berkeley: an Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).] The inconsistent triangle is impossible and hence it has no formal reality. It thus cannot (given the *ex nihilo* principle) cause in us an abstract idea with any amount of objective reality. This explains why impossibility implies inconceivability (140).

⁶ And since Fields also reads Locke as being committed to an Arnauldian act theory, and that Locke's account of abstraction mirrors Arnauld's account (128), he thinks that this criticism is apt.

Chapter 7 is the longest of the chapters. Here Fields looks at the arguments for immaterialism. He produces what he calls a “transcendental” argument for realism on Locke’s behalf, which he links quite closely with Descartes’ argument for the existence of the external world and hence with the *ex nihilo* causal principle. Fields sees Berkeley’s immaterialist argument as having this transcendental argument as its primary target. But what Berkeley scholars might find of greater note here is that Fields produces a new reading of PHK 4 in light of his claim that Berkeley is committed to an act theory. In PHK 4, Berkeley writes that “all sensible objects . . . [are] things we perceive by sense,” but also that what we perceive are ideas that depend on minds for their existence. As Fields points out, commentators often read this as a transitive argument for immaterialism: since sensible objects are perceived by sense, and since what is perceived by sense are mind-dependent ideas, then sensible objects are just (collections of) mind-dependent ideas. But Fields argues that reading Berkeley through the lens of Arnauld helps to show that what Berkeley really has in mind here is just the doctrine of objective presence: it is not that Berkeley is identifying sensible objects with ideas; instead, he is claiming that ideas are those sensible objects as they exist in our minds. “When Berkeley asks what are houses, mountains, and trees but what we perceive by sense, and what do we perceive by sense other than our own ideas, he makes a claim quite similar to Descartes’ claim that the idea of the sun is the sun itself existing in the mind, or Arnauld’s similar claim” (180). This then leads him to reread the likeness principle as also being motivated by the doctrine of objective presence and the *ex nihilo* principle (187-88). Whether or not one accepts Fields’ reasoning here, this is a truly original contribution to the debate surrounding the likeness principle, and as such deserves our attention.

Fields’ book should be embraced by Berkeley scholars as presenting a largely novel and tremendously rich reading of Berkeley in light of his philosophical predecessors. There are certainly some parts of the book that I might have liked to see expanded or clarified. I was surprised to note, for instance, that Fields has relatively little to say about the pain analogy in DHP, though that analogy is often taken to support reading Berkeley as an act theorist. I also thought he might have spent more time discussing PHK 5, in which Berkeley seems to claim that one cannot—at pains of engaging in illegitimate abstraction—separate ideas from acts of perception. Moreover, Fields’ focus is often on showing how reading Berkeley as an act theorist can explain certain elements of his view, but he does not always spend much time considering alternate explanations. Arguments stemming from phenomenological/introspective considerations might do at least as good a job in some cases, for example, in explaining some of Berkeley’s views about distance perception, or in explaining why Berkeley objects to the indeterminacy of some abstract ideas. Plus, Fields largely glosses over such explanations in favor of causal explanations, which fits in with his focus on objective presence. He explains that “early modern theories of ideas . . . sought causal explanations for ideas” (112).

Now, there is something *prima facie* a bit curious about this focus on causal explanations within the Berkeleian context specifically. Arnauld and Malebranche’s quarrel about the doctrine of objective presence is over whether we perceive objects by means of ideas that are representative beings, or whether those ideas are just acts by which we immediately

perceive the objects. This certainly makes sense within the Cartesian realist context, in which—generally speaking—our ideas represent a mind-independent world. Until the reader gets to chapter 7, however, she is left wondering just exactly how this is supposed to transfer to a Berkeleian idealist context, in which there is no such mind-independent world, but our sensible ideas are caused by God.

Given this context, prior to chapter 7, some of the arguments that Fields attributes to Berkeley *qua* follower of Arnauld seem a bit misplaced. As an example, Fields notes that Malebranche's argument against our visually perceiving things at a distance relies on the rejection of action at a distance (70). He then suggests that Berkeley appeals to just this sort of argument to motivate the epistemic superiority of tactile sensations over visual ones, which superiority then figures into his discussion of the Molyneux experiment: "there is an epistemic asymmetry between objects of sight and touch for both Locke and Berkeley . . . ideas of touch are directly caused by the objects they represent because those objects come into direct local contact with somatic organs. . . . But distance is mediately perceived by sight because objects at a distance do not come into local contact with the eyes" (103). There is something strange about attributing to Berkeley an argument that relies on whether or not objects come into contact with our sense organs.

Now in chapter 7, Fields does provide some explanation as to how to transfer the doctrine of objective presence into the immaterialist context: he suggests that the objects of our idea are divine ideas, and further, that perhaps we can make sense of the differing content of our ideas by reference to differing degrees of reality in divine ideas (178). I would have liked to see Fields explore this suggestion quite a bit more than he does. I would have been particularly interested in a possible rereading of Berkeley's cryptic remarks on divine archetypes, and his argument against divine suffering, in light of this suggestion. But perhaps more importantly, I am not quite sure how to read this claim back into (for example) the explanation for epistemic asymmetry. Some guidance from Fields might be helpful here. All this said, however, Fields' book presents a wonderful contribution to Berkeley scholarship, at least in so far as it opens up a number of new and interesting questions for readers of Berkeley to explore.

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