

On George Berkeley's Alleged Letter to Browne: A Study in Unsound Rhetoric

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Abstract: Luce once declared that his and Jessop's interpretation of Berkeley is "reflected in our edition of the *Works*." The appearance of a recent article by Stephen Daniel draws attention to two examples of the implications of this interpretive model of editing. One is Luce's and Jessop's rejection of *Alciphron* as a reliable source for Berkeley's philosophy, because (they claim) we have access to his true philosophy elsewhere (W 3: 7), and "it is idle to turn to *Alciphron* for Berkeleianism," for he does not rest his case there "on his own philosophy" (W 3: 13). The other is the "correction" of *Alciphron* by incorporating an anonymous letter to Peter Browne "as a supplement" to Berkeley's work—something that Daniel criticizes for circularity and lack of scholarly accuracy. The question arises as to whether *Alciphron* is the only example of a text in the *Works* that is biased in favor of the editors' private interpretation.

Stephen H. Daniel recently criticized a paper that had been generally accepted for more than forty years.¹ That paper (the *Article* hereafter) was published in 1969 by A. A. Luce and two of his students.² They saw George Berkeley as the author of a letter to Peter Browne (the *Letter* hereafter) that had been published anonymously in a journal in 1745.³ Their thesis was that it should be understood as a "supplement" to Berkeley's *Alciphron*, to be incorporated as a new "addition to the *corpus* of Berkeley's writings." They end: "Professor Jessop concurs" (381, 385).

The close connection between the *Article* and the Luce-Jessop edition of *Alciphron* in *The Works of George Berkeley*⁴ adds an extra dimension to Daniel's criticism of the *Article*, which he accuses of circularity and lack of scholarly accuracy. His analysis draws attention to the unbridgeable generation gap between an old authoritative way of editing, represented by Luce and Jessop, and the "New Bibliography" with rigorous standards of critical-text editing that was developed in the early 20th century in English studies and that Peter H. Nidditch applied to the editing of philosophical texts no more than six years after the *Article* was published.⁵

Indeed, when Luce commented on his and Jessop's edition a few years before the *Article*, he frankly declared that "the interpretation, reached independently by Professor T. E. Jessop and myself . . . [is] reflected in our edition of the *Works*."⁶ Their edition of *Alciphron* is a good example of this interpretive model of editing. *Alciphron* did not fit in with what the editors

¹ Stephen H. Daniel, "Berkeley's Rejection of Divine Analogy," *Science et Esprit* 63 (2011), 149-61.

² Jean-Paul Pittion and David Berman, "A New Letter by Berkeley to Browne on Divine Analogy" with a "Note by A. A. Luce on the Contents and Style of the Letter," *Mind* 78 (1969), 375-92.

³ *A Literary Journal*, vol. 2, part 2 (1745), 153-67.

⁴ A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (eds.), *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne* (9 vols.: London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948-1957); hereafter *W*.

⁵ See *The Bibliographical Society 1892-1942: Studies in Retrospect* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1945); Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985); and Peter H. Nidditch's edition of John Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

⁶ A. A. Luce, *The Dialectic of Immaterialism. An Account of the Making of Berkeley's Principles* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963), 9. Bracketed insertion mine.

regarded as Berkeley's "true" philosophy. Guided by their interpretation, they stated in their editorial introduction that "it is idle to turn to *Alciphron* for Berkeleianism" (W 3: 7). In their view, *Alciphron* was "left to students of philosophy—quite wrongly, because these have his philosophy elsewhere" (W 3: 13). In another volume they add, "Being a philosopher, he must, it is assumed, have had an ethical system, and his *Passive Obedience*, alongside with his *Alciphron*, has been examined to find it." But the editors could not "find anything sufficiently developed to be called a system" (W 6: 7). Thus, by reference to their conception of "Berkeleianism" and what they style "an ethical system," they went so far as to ask "students of philosophy" to ignore Berkeley's *Alciphron* (W 3: 13).

This is in line with Daniel's criticism of the *Article* for circularity. First they identify their own interpretation with Berkeley's "true" philosophy. Then, as *Alciphron* is not compatible with this, they conclude that because Berkeley does *not* "rest the case [in this book] . . . on his own philosophy," we can neglect it (W 3: 13, bracketed insertion mine).

Besides circular arguments, the unique feature of the *Article* is its frequent use of *ad hoc* hypotheses. Thus the authors found convincing evidence that Berkeley is *not* the author of the *Letter* and gave themselves the task of explaining away this unwanted evidence. Daniel highlights Luce's attempt at reversing unfavorable evidence to make the opposite point, as when Luce observes the *lack of stylistic similarities* (it "is not quite like anything Berkeley published") but takes this, as well as the *lack of doctrinal parallels* between *Alciphron* and the *Letter*, to support Berkeley's authorship. In Luce's own words:

Lastly, there are the *missing* parallels—a strong, though paradoxical, argument [. . .]. There is no parallel in that dialogue for: [Here follows the four main points of the *Letter*⁷ which are "missing" in *Alciphron* IV but should be included in this work according to the *Article*.]

This new letter, as Professor Jessop remarked to me, is not quite like anything Berkeley published; and as an addition to the *corpus* of Berkeley writings, it is all the more welcome on that account. (*Article* 385, emphasis original, bracketed comment mine).

Daniel's comment: "This is scholarship run amok"!

The contrast with modern editors and librarians is striking. They are trained to take a step back, looking at texts as *facts*, and use strict empirical methods, leaving matters of interpretation to the reader. When members of the old interpretive school of editors turn into apologists for a certain "true" interpretation of the text, basic methods in textual scholarship become foreign to the purpose.⁸ Consider for example the two *ad hoc* hypotheses by Luce that Daniel does not mention

⁷ The four points which, if included in Berkeley's *Works*, would "save" *Alciphron* from being excluded from "true" Berkeleianism are summarized by Luce as follows: "There is no parallel in that dialogue [*Alciphron* IV] for: (1) the powerful *veracity* argument (p. 161), or for (2) the definition of wisdom in terms of means to an end, which is used *six* times in the letter, or for (3) the striking term 'divine, human wisdom', the focus of a masterly refutation of Browne's position (p. 162), or for (4) the challenge to 'explain one single power... independently of its effects, and by its true internal nature' (p. 166)." (Emphasis original, bracketed addition mine.)

⁸ When Luce says (384), for example, "I had some doubts about 'pitch upon' (p. 155), till I found it in a letter of Berkeley's," he disregards basic criteria of relevance and frequency. As the *Letter* is a piece of seven pages, we could (in principle) divide all Berkeley's works into seven-page portions and decide exactly how

explicitly. They deserve a study of their own by experts in rhetoric.

Luce opens his note as follows:⁹

The letter has three parts—the introduction (pp. 153-154), the main argument (pp. 155-165), and the conclusion (pp. 165-167). Each several part has the strong and independent links with Berkeley's thought and phrasing, detailed below, and the whole is in Berkeley's best style at the height of his controversial powers.

In the introduction the author poses as a docile pupil, seeking instruction from Browne. When I first read it, I noticed a good deal in the Berkeley manner; but I could not believe that the words "I'll give up the hateful word *idea*", and "no sawcy idea of mine" came from Berkeley's pen. On reading further into *Browne* I soon saw that in the circumstances Berkeley just *had* to say those things. Browne accepted Locke's ideas of sense *con amore*; but he hit out passionately at ideas of reflection (*e.g. Proc.* pp. 68, 71, "a labyrinth of ideas, . . . this empty noise and gingling of ideas"). The "sawcy idea" is Berkeley's way of getting a bit of his own back. The phrase alludes to a passage in Browne's attack on *Alciphron*. *Alciphron*, Browne says in effect (D. A. p. 478), contains "a very little substantial food", but is "stuffed with forcemeats, and brimful of unwholesom and pernicious *sauces*" (*Article* 381, italics and ellipsis in original).

Besides such authoritative statements as "the whole is in Berkeley's best style" (which remains to be proved), there are two passages in the *Letter* that do not seem to be by Berkeley, "I'll give up the hateful word *idea*" and "no sawcy idea of mine." But, instead of examining texts known to be by Berkeley to determine how probable it is to find such passages in a seven-page letter by him, Luce ignores Berkeley's texts completely.

In the first case he observes that Browne did not accept Locke's ideas of reflection, and that the author of the *Letter* was prepared to give up the term "idea" entirely. Then the conclusion is that Berkeley (who is not even mentioned in the premises) *had* to be the author of the *Letter*.

In the second case Luce found, *not* the adjective "sawcy" but the noun "sauces," *not* in a book by Berkeley but in one by Browne. Luce's idea is, so far as I can see, that Berkeley *might* have noted the noun "sauces" in Browne's 180-page comment on *Alciphron*, that he *might* have associated "sauces" with the adjective "sawcy," that he *might* have decided to use "sawcy," because he *might* have thought that Browne *might* have made the association from "sawcy" in

frequent a certain term is relative to a seven-page text by Berkeley. But this "exactness" is delusive. A comparison between the vocabulary in the *Letter* and Berkeley's works should be evaluated against a considerable margin of error; and even if the frequency matches, it would be irrelevant to the authorship question, if all potential authors used this term as frequently as in this case. Therefore, we would have to identify a representative group of 18th century theologians, who have written about subjects dealt with in the *Letter*, before we could identify what terms are and are not relevant for including an author as a potential writer of the *Letter*. There are also other difficulties, such as the possibility of significant differences in style between different kinds of contexts, etc.

⁹ When Luce promises a comparison of the style of the *Letter* and of Berkeley's works "detailed below," he probably refers to his "list of verbal parallels" (384, n. 1). But, again, to evaluate stylistic resemblances and differences, we need a control group of potential authors to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant observations.

the *Letter* to “sauces” in his comment on *Alciphron*, etc. Whatever chain of fanciful conjectures Luce had in mind, the conclusion is supposed to be that “Berkeley just *had* to say those things.”

In both cases the conclusion is presented as being true without a shadow of doubt, although it appears out of the blue, without any logical connection with the premises. Jean-Paul Pittion and David Berman use a similar kind of rhetoric in their contribution to the *Article*.¹⁰

They base their argument on a passage quoted from a letter by Berkeley to Johnson dated 4th April 1734, where Berkeley maintains that he has taken “no public notice” of either Peter Browne or Andrew Baxter. They argue as follows:

The phrase “no public notice” [. . .]¹¹ cannot exclude our letter, because it was not made public. Berkeley is well known for not multiplying words unnecessarily. Therefore his qualification “public” seems to imply that he *did* take some *private* notice. And this could only be our letter. (378, emphasis original.)

It [the *Letter*] was written, though, before April 1734 because in Berkeley’s letter to Johnson “no public notice,” as we have already pointed out, implies that our letter was already written. It is likely, therefore, that it was written in 1733. (379, bracketed addition mine.)

Pittion and Berman claim to prove both *that* and *when* Berkeley wrote the *Letter*. Their unique method is to examine what message there might be concealed in the three terms “no public notice.” Even if Berkeley did not take public notice of Browne and Baxter, he *might* have taken private notice of them. From the possibility that this *might* have happened, they conclude that “he *did* take some *private* notice” to Browne, thus begging the question (378, italics original).¹² And from the false assumption that “this could only be our letter” they draw the unsound conclusion that Berkeley wrote the *Letter*, and that he did so before 1734, in 1733 (378-79).¹³ If this were a sound line of argument, then Berkeley “must have” written a private letter in 1733 to Baxter as well, but they did not consider this option.

This dating serves the purpose of explaining away a difficulty in attributing the *Letter* to Berkeley, namely “the rather extensive use of the word ‘conception’ [in the *Letter*] (Berkeley usually preferring the term ‘notion’)” (379, bracketed addition mine). Nonetheless, assuming that Berkeley did write the *Letter* in 1733 he *might*, they speculate, have changed his vocabulary in this one year. As this was the year when Berkeley prepared *The Analyst*, the frequency of “conception” and “notion” *might* be the same in *The Analyst* as it is in the *Letter*—as should be

¹⁰ As I leave out matters of interpretation, I have nothing to say about the attempt by Pittion and Berman at identifying the group of potential authors and eliminating them one by one until only Berkeley is left (375-378). Daniel criticizes this part of the *Article* as a network of circular arguments (“this environment of enthusiasm”) based on the “true” (Luce-Jessop) interpretation (159). According to Daniel, the author of the *Letter* is one John Jackson.

¹¹ The left out passage runs: “must mean that Berkeley’s brief remark in *The Theory of Vision Vindicated* does not refer to the *Divine Analogy*. On the other hand it . . .”

¹² What “seems to” imply the wanted conclusion on the one page (378) does imply it on the next (379).

¹³ Daniel expresses the same criticism in slightly different terms. He adds correctly that this (“that spurious dating strategy,” as he calls it) is not the way we date documents in historical research (159-60).

the case if Berkeley did write the *Letter* in 1733. From the possibility that it *might* be so, they concluded that it *is* so. But they forgot to check the evidence,¹⁴ because it is *not* the case that “conception,” compared to “notion,” “is profusely used” in both *The Analyst* and the *Letter* (379). They are distributed as follows:¹⁵

	The <i>Letter</i>	<i>The Analyst</i>
“Conception”	12 (60%)	5 (21%)
“Notion”	8 (40%)	19 (79%)

The false statement that “conception” and “notion” are distributed in a similar way in the *Letter* and *The Analyst* draws attention, once again, to two different approaches to editing.

Textual scholarship is primarily a descriptive assignment confined to presenting a historically correct basis for research work on a text and its author or authors, thus focusing exclusively on historical and textual facts. But when these authors act as editors in presenting *Alciphron* or introducing a new “addition to the *corpus* of Berkeley’s writings” (385), they rather act as apologists with the end in view to teach “true” Berkeleianism. This made them ignore plain textual facts (as in the conception/notion case) or ask others to ignore texts incompatible with the “true” interpretation (as in *W 3*: 7, 13).

I am talking about *scholarly* editions. There are also *other* kinds of editions, intended to deepen the reader’s acquaintance with different aspects of the text. In *these* kinds of editions, the interpretive aspect is valuable and important. Scholarly editions “only” serve the purpose of providing readers with reliable, unbiased texts—which is a very different task.

It would be interesting if experts in rhetoric would investigate by what “logic” the arguments of the *Article* receive their persuasive power. Even without such an examination of the Luce–Jessop or the Pittion–Berman rhetoric, Stephen Daniel’s criticism of the *Article* raises the pressing question, is the destructive presentation of *Alciphron* in the *Works* an isolated case or just the tip of the iceberg?¹⁶

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¹⁴ On page 379, they add a footnote saying, “See *Analyst*, especially sections 41 and 93-94.” What “especially” means is hard to understand, particularly as “conception” appears only once in section 41 and “notion” not at all. 100% “conception” would not support the thesis of a similarity in vocabulary. And as there are only 50 sections in *The Analyst*, apparently the reference to “sections 93-94” is really to pp. 93-94.

¹⁵ *The Analyst* consists of 50 numbered sections in which there are 5 mentions of “conception” and 15 references to “notion,” followed by 67 queries with 4 mentions of “notion” and no mentions of “conception.”

¹⁶ I wish to express my gratitude to John Rogers for valuable comments.