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## *The ‘Empty Amusement’ of Willing: Berkeley on Agent Causation<sup>1</sup>*

Nancy Kendrick

**Abstract:** Some aspects of Berkeley’s view of volitional causation would be unobjectionable to his contemporaries. That minds are efficient causes and that their causal power consists in volition would be troubling to neither Descartes nor Locke, since both recognized that through the power of will, minds could create ideas. But Berkeley’s view is not that agent causation is *one* kind of causal power, it is that it is the *only* kind, and few of his contemporaries would have found that claim acceptable. Malebranche is an exception: he also thought agent causation the only genuine causation. Many commentators link Berkeley with Malebranche in supposing that both treated necessary connection as the defining feature of causation. I argue that this is mistaken: a “true cause” for Berkeley, is not, as it is for Malebranche, such that the mind perceives a necessary connection between it and its effects. A true cause is a volitional cause. This is a claim about what causation *is*, not a claim about *where* necessary connections are located (in the will rather than in the world). Berkeley’s view of agent causation offers an alternative to causation understood as necessary connection; it does not provide an alternative *place* for necessary connections to occur. This reading of Berkeley permits him to hold that both an infinite spirit and finite spirits are genuine causes.

Some aspects of Berkeley’s commitment to volitional causation would not be objectionable to many of his contemporaries. That minds are efficient causes and that their causal power consists in volition would be upsetting, for example, to neither Descartes nor Locke, since both recognized that through the power of will, one could create ideas. Descartes even thought that minds had the power to bring about changes in bodies.<sup>2</sup> But Berkeley’s view is not that agent causation (understood in terms of volition) is *one* kind of causal power; it is that it is the *only* kind: “it is plain philosophers amuse themselves in vain, when they inquire for any natural efficient cause, distinct from a *mind* or *spirit*” (PHK 107).<sup>3</sup> Few of Berkeley’s contemporaries would have found acceptable this insistence on the unique status of volitional causation.

Malebranche was one exception, of course, since he thought agent causation the only genuine causation; consequently, Berkeley’s views about causation are often discussed in connection with Malebranche’s. Malebranche was, however, stricter than Berkeley, claiming that God is the only causal agent, while Berkeley admitted both finite spirits and God to be causes. Berkeley’s more generous stance with respect to the kinds of causal agents has led many commentators to claim that Malebranche’s view fares better for the following reason: while God’s omnipotence guarantees that whatever God wills must occur—that is, a necessary connection exists between God’s will and its upshots—finite spirits enjoy no such omnipotence, and no such necessity in their volitions. Strictly

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<sup>1</sup> This essay won the 2015 Colin and Ailsa Turbayne International Berkeley Essay Prize Competition. I express my appreciation to the Turbayne family and the philosophy department at the University of Rochester.

<sup>2</sup> See Daniel Garber, “Descartes and Occasionalism,” in *Causation in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Steven Nadler (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 9-26.

<sup>3</sup> *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, eds. A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop (9 vols.; London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1948-57).

speaking, finite spirits are not agents. Berkeley's insistence, then, that finite spirits *are* genuine causes appears quite perplexing.<sup>4</sup> Another reason Berkeley's views on causation are often considered in a Malebranchean context is that both thinkers believe that the absence of a necessary connection between material properties entails that there is no causal connection between them either. It is assumed that this conclusion drove both Berkeley and Malebranche to locate causal power in spirits—more specifically, in the volitions of spirits—and the result has been to invoke the Humean criticism against both thinkers: necessary connection—the criterion for causation—is no more discoverable in the will than it is in the world.<sup>5</sup>

What these lines of analysis and criticism have in common is the belief that Berkeley shared with Malebranche the view that necessary connection is the defining feature of causation. But as I argue below, a “true cause” for Berkeley, is not, as it is for Malebranche, “such that the mind perceives a necessary connection between it and its effects.”<sup>6</sup> A true cause, for Berkeley, is a volitional cause. This is a claim about what causation *is*, not a claim about *where* necessary connections are located. Berkeley rejects material (or non-volitional) causation not by relocating necessary connections from material relations to volitional ones, but by denying necessary connection as essential to causation. As Berkeley advances it, volitional causation offers an alternative to necessary connection causation; it does not provide an alternative *place* for necessary connections to occur.

This reading of Berkeley highlights an important difference between his view of causation and Malebranche's by showing the different roles that power and purpose play in their respective understandings of agent causation. It also illuminates Berkeley's criticism of necessity as it appears in another part of his philosophy, namely, in his dismissal of the ontological proof for God's existence. My aim in this essay is not to provide a defense of Berkeley's commitment to the exceptionality of volitional causation, but to show that his rejection of necessary connection provides a plausible and interesting alternative to Malebranche's version of agent causation.<sup>7</sup> In Sections I and II, I consider the arguments that show that Berkeley ultimately rejects necessary connection as a “real power” because it entails blind agency. I show that benevolence, not omnipotence, is

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<sup>4</sup> See Nicholas Jolley, “Berkeley and Malebranche on Causality and Volition,” in *Central Themes in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. J.A. Cover and Mark Kulstad (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990), 227-44.

<sup>5</sup> For further articulations of this criticism and a defense of Berkeley against it, see Kenneth Winkler, “Berkeley on Volition, Power, and the Complexity of Causation,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 2 (1985): 53-69, and Winkler, *Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 105-117. For a defense of Malebranche against this objection, see Steven Nadler, “Malebranche on Causation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, ed. Steven Nadler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 112-38.

<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth*, eds. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), VI, 2, iii, 450. Hereafter SAT, book, part, chapter, page number.

<sup>7</sup> Winkler also argues that necessary connection does not play a part in Berkeley's account of causation, but he sees this as a problematic oversight on Berkeley's part. I see it as a position Berkeley advanced mindfully, one that has beneficial consequences for other aspects of his philosophy. See Winkler, “Berkeley on Volition,” 64-67, and Winkler, *Berkeley*, 104-36.

what grounds his conception of God's causal agency and that this allows Berkeley to consistently hold that both finite spirits and an infinite spirit are causal agents. In Section III, I turn to Berkeley's dismissal of the ontological argument and show that he rejects it on the grounds that logical necessity cannot be coherently identified with existence.

### I. Volitional Causation and Berkeley's Rejection of Non-volitional Causation

Though Berkeley nowhere advances a *theory* of volitional causation, he does hold two general theses with respect to causation. The first is that spirits are causes in virtue of their volitions: "[a] proper active efficient cause I can conceive none but Spirit; nor any action, strictly speaking, but where there is Will."<sup>8</sup> The second thesis is that volitional causation is the only kind of causation there is: "to suppose any efficient or active cause . . . other than spirit, is highly absurd and unreasonable" (DHP 217). What are the arguments for these claims?

Berkeley's first thesis is divided into two parts: first, that spirits are causes; second, that their causal agency is a matter of volition. Berkeley argues that spirits are causes by dismissing two other possible causal candidates, ideas and supposed non-mental "originals" alleged to resemble ideas. Ideas cannot be causes (of other ideas) because ideas are both passive and inert. Ideas are "acted upon [or] suffer [. . .] actions from outside," and are therefore passive. As Geneviève Brykman notes, "they are void of any power of action, motion or resistance" and are therefore inert.<sup>9</sup> Because they are inert, "it is impossible for [ideas] to do anything, or, strictly speaking, to be the cause of anything" (PHK 25). The second candidate—non-mental resembling originals—cannot be a cause either. Berkeley asserts that these supposed originals are either perceivable or they are not. If they are perceivable, then they are ideas. But ideas, he has already argued, cannot *do* anything and thus cannot be causes. If they are imperceivable, then they do not resemble ideas (which are perceivable) and, invoking the likeness principle of *Principles* 8, cannot cause them. Berkeley concludes, then, that the cause (of ideas) must be "an incorporeal active substance or spirit" (PHK 26).

Berkeley secures the second part of his first thesis—that it is in virtue of volition that spirits are causes—in two ways. First, he simply stipulates that the productive aspect of mind is volition, claiming that a spirit is "one simple, undivided, active being: as it perceives ideas, it is called the *understanding*, and as it produces or otherwise operates about them, it is called the *will*" (PHK 27). Second, he appeals to experiential evidence of the mind's volitional activity:

I find I can excite ideas in my mind at pleasure, and vary and shift the scene as oft as I think fit. It is no more than willing, and straightway this or that idea arises in my fancy: and by the same power it is obliterated, and makes way for another. (PHK 28)

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<sup>8</sup> Berkeley to Samuel Johnson, Nov. 25, 1729, in Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Jonathan Dancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 173.

<sup>9</sup> Geneviève Brykman, "Pleasure and Pain versus Ideas in Berkeley," *Hermathena* 139 (1985): 128.

Spirits, then, are causal agents, and their agency is a matter of volition. Berkeley concludes that “when we talk of unthinking [causal] agents, or of exciting ideas exclusive of volition, we only amuse ourselves with words” (PHK 28).

Berkeley’s reasons for holding the second thesis—that spirits are the *only* causal agents—consist in three reasons for rejecting non-volitional causation. Several commentators have supposed that Berkeley’s rejection of material causation is grounded in our recognizing some power in ourselves that we fail to recognize in natural events.<sup>10</sup> But this is to take the experiential claim in *Principles* 28 as committing Berkeley to more than that passage actually says. Kenneth Winkler has correctly noted that the passage shows only that we recognize our volitions, not that we perceive some *power* in ourselves that we fail to perceive elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, the emphasis on the *Principles* 28 passage supposes (incorrectly) that Berkeley rested his arguments for the exceptionality of volitional causation merely on experiential claims. But he offers an additional reason for this view: non-volitional causation is “highly absurd” and “unreasonable” because we can “conceive [no] action besides volition” (DHP 217). The absurdity of non-volitional causation rests, in part, on the arguments Berkeley has already given against material causation. For example, in the *Second Dialogue*, Hylas grants that an “act of will or spiritual efficacy” is one kind of cause, but asks why there could not be other causes, whose power is not a matter of will, but whose action consists in motion (DHP 217). Philonous responds that since motion is nothing but a sensible quality, it is an idea, and like all ideas, it is passive and inert. In identifying motion with an idea, Berkeley returns to the view that all ideas are inert, and therefore, do not *do* anything. It is impossible for ideas to be causes. Another reason Berkeley advances for the absurdity of non-volitional causation is that it entails blind agency. I discuss this more fully in Section II.

The second reason Berkeley rejects non-volitional or material causation is that he thinks the explanations it provides are question begging.<sup>12</sup> He complains that to invoke “*attraction*” as an explanation for why “a stone falls to the earth, or the sea swells toward the moon” is to signify nothing but the effect itself. But “as to the manner of the action whereby it is produced, or the cause which produces it, these are not so much as aimed at” (PHK 103). He often notes with some glee (e.g., PHK 19) that materialists themselves cannot say how it is that mechanical causes are supposed to work.

Berkeley’s third reason—and his most important—for rejecting non-volitional causation is that he denies that the natural world operates in accordance with any kind of *natural* necessity. Denying that properties flow out of essences the way conclusions flow out of premises, Berkeley rejects “the current opinion that every thing includes within it self the cause of its properties: or that there is in each object an inward essence, which is the

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<sup>10</sup> See Grayling, for example, who writes “we recognize ourselves as agents—as active beings capable of starting and intervening in trains of events—in a way which contrasts with our failure to detect agency in trains of natural events themselves.” A. C. Grayling, *Berkeley: The Central Arguments* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1986), 193.

<sup>11</sup> Winkler, “Berkeley on Volition,” 57.

<sup>12</sup> See Winkler, “Berkeley on Volition,” 64-67, for a discussion of the connection between causation and explanation.

source whence its discernible qualities flow, and whereon they depend” (PHK 102). This rejection of natural necessity provides the basis for understanding Berkeley’s more general rejection of necessary connection as the defining feature of causation. It is to this issue that I now turn.

## II. Necessary versus Arbitrary Connection

While it is recognized by all Berkeley commentators that Berkeley’s distinction between an arbitrary and a necessary connection is meant to show that natural relations are to be understood as a sign/signified connection rather than a cause/effect connection, it is not generally recognized that this distinction also explains why Berkeley thinks relations that *are* genuinely causal are not relations of necessary connection. It is this second point that distinguishes Berkeley’s position from Malebranche’s. Both Berkeley and Malebranche held that the absence of a necessary connection in natural events entails that no causal link exists between them either.<sup>13</sup> But Malebranche took this to imply that a necessary connection had to be somewhere other than the natural world, and he places it in God—in the link between God’s will and its upshots. Unlike Malebranche, however, Berkeley does not reason that, because a necessary connection cannot be found between natural events, it therefore has to be found somewhere else. His strategy is to separate causation from necessary connection altogether. He does this by arguing that the necessary connections of supposed natural causal relations constitute a “fatal necessity” (PHK 93) and that such necessity is at odds with the purposive ends of genuine causation. Necessary connections—whether in the will or the world—are viewed by Berkeley as a constraint, not as a power.

To make this point clear, let’s review Berkeley’s reasons for preferring the analysis of natural events in terms of signs rather than causes. In PHK 65 he says:

the connexion of ideas does not imply the relation of *cause* and *effect*, but only of a mark or *sign* with the thing *signified*. The fire which I see is not the cause of the pain I suffer upon my approaching it, but the mark that forewarns me of it. In like manner, the noise that I hear is not the effect of this or that motion . . . but the sign thereof.

According to Berkeley, these connections and others like them—that “food nourishes, sleep refreshes, and fire warms us”—are known “not by discovering any *necessary* connexion between our ideas” (PHK 31, my emphasis), but by discovering an *arbitrary* connection between them. Berkeley addresses the difference between a necessary and an arbitrary connection in the works on vision, where his professed aim is to consider “how one idea comes to suggest another . . . whether by likeness, by necessary connexion, by geometrical inference, or by arbitrary institution” (TVV 14), and he argues that the connection is by arbitrary institution. Berkeley does not mean by this that the connection

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<sup>13</sup> The claim that a necessary connection could never be discovered between natural objects (or events) was advanced before Berkeley, Malebranche (and Hume) by medieval Islamic theologians and philosophers. See Steven Nadler, “‘No Necessary Connection’: The Medieval Roots of the Occasionalist Roots of Hume,” *The Monist* 79 (1996): 448–66, and Tad M. Schmaltz, *Descartes on Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 15.

is capricious; rather he is advancing the following three claims: the connection depends on something *external* to the ideas themselves, it is contingent, and it is (as expressed in the OED) “to be decided by one’s liking; dependent upon will or pleasure.”<sup>14</sup>

In evaluating the concept of necessary connection in the works on vision, Berkeley has two aims, one epistemological, the other ontological. Anticipating Hume’s insight that alleged causal connections are not discoverable *a priori*, Berkeley writes “there is no discoverable necessary connexion between any given visible magnitude and any one particular tangible magnitude; but . . . it is intirely the result of custom and experience” (NTV 104). His main concern, however, is ontological. In the section immediately following, he claims that no necessary connection exists between the visible and the tangible because nothing in the nature of one brings about the other:

it is plain the visible figure of any part of the body hath no necessary connexion with the tangible figure thereof, so at first sight to suggest it to the mind. . . . whence it follows that no visible magnitude having *in its own nature* an aptness to suggest any one particular tangible magnitude, so neither can any visible figure be inseparably connected with its corresponding tangible figure. (NTV 105, my emphasis)

And in NTV 64, he writes:

it is manifest that as we do not perceive the magnitudes of objects immediately by sight, so neither do we perceive them by the mediation of any thing which has a necessary connexion with them. Those ideas that now suggest unto us the various magnitudes of external objects before we touch them, might possibly have suggested no such thing: Or they might have signified them in a direct contrary manner: so that the very same ideas, on the perception whereof we judge an object to be small, might as well have served to make us conclude it great. Those ideas being *in their own nature* equally fitted to bring into our minds the idea of small or great, or no size at all of outward objects; just as the words of any language are in their own nature indifferent to signify this or that thing or nothing at all. (my emphasis)

In both passages, Berkeley makes clear that a necessary connection could exist between visible and tangible ideas only if the former contained in themselves the power to bring about the latter, and this would be the case only if a visible figure were internally and

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<sup>14</sup> Oxford English Dictionary online, accessed 3/25/13. Berkeley uses “arbitrary” in this last sense in both the published and non-published works: “The reason why we can demonstrate so well about signs is that they are perfectly arbitrary & in our power, made at pleasure” (NB 732). To will is to “excite ideas in [oneself] at pleasure” (PHK 36). Some ideas are “out of [our] power to determine at pleasure,” and must therefore be attributed to a will other than our own (DHP 214). Most commentators (including Luce and Jessop) emphasize only the contingent nature of the connection and that it is discovered experientially. They write, “[t]he connections are arbitrary; they might have been otherwise; there is no necessary connection between, say, this color and this texture; the one is not *like* the other, and if they are connected, we cannot know it till we learn it by experience” (*Works* 1: 152). I’m emphasizing the *pleasure* aspect of willing. See also Tom Stoneham, *Berkeley’s World: An Examination of the Three Dialogues* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), chapters 5 and 6, and note 19 below.



intrinsically connected with a tangible figure. This connection is what Berkeley denies. Instead, he holds that the connection between the visible and tangible ideas depends on something external to the ideas themselves. In NTV 147 Berkeley announces that God is responsible for the establishment of the “correspondence” between the ideas, and that these correlations constitute “an universal language of the Author of nature” (NTV 147). The language analogy is used in the NTV to make the epistemological point that the words of God’s language, like the words of other languages, “do not suggest the things signified by any likeness or identity of nature, but only by an habitual connexion that experience has made us to observe between them” (NTV 147). But in the TVV, Berkeley uses the language analogy to return to the question of the nature of the connection itself and to God’s role in establishing it. A theory of vision, he says, “may be reduced to this simple question, to wit, How comes it to pass that a set of ideas, altogether different from tangible ideas, should nevertheless suggest them to us, there being *no necessary connexion* between them? To which the proper answer is, That this is done in virtue of an *arbitrary connexion*, instituted by the Author of nature” (TVV 43, my emphases).

In making the connection between sensible ideas arbitrary, Berkeley is insisting that the connection is imposed from without, extrinsically instituted rather than intrinsically determined. He is also emphasizing that the connection is dependent on the will or pleasure of the extrinsic agent. Berkeley explains God’s will in the *Principles* not in terms of omnipotence (as Malebranche does), but in terms of benevolence. Though Malebranche would agree that the connection between sensible things “is not the result of any immutable habitudes or relations between things themselves,” he would not agree that the connection is the result “only of God’s *goodness* and *kindness*” (PHK 107, my emphasis).

In holding that the connection between sensible things is to be understood as correlation, not necessary connection, Berkeley denied what most of his contemporaries accepted—that the world evidenced a natural necessity. Locke, for example, thought the laws of physics could be deduced from the attributes possessed by bodies only if these attributes were linked by an internal and intrinsic necessity. He thought that such natural necessity existed but was as yet undiscovered, explaining in the *Essay*: “I doubt not but if we could discover the Figure, Size, Texture, and Motion of the minute Constituent parts of any two Bodies, we should know without Trial several of their operations one upon another, as we do now the Properties of a Square or a Triangle.”<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Descartes, Galileo, and Newton all conceived of causal relations between natural events as analogous to the logically necessary relations of deductive procedures. As Colin Turbayne points out: “[b]oth [Descartes and Newton] thought that physical causes produce the existence of their effects, and that the effects necessarily follow from the causes . . . . Nature, it was concluded, obeys the logic of the deductive method.”<sup>16</sup> Berkeley’s position is not the Lockean one that natural causal relations are hidden or perhaps even undiscoverable by us, and it is not the Cartesian one that natural causal relations mirrored logical ones. It is

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<sup>15</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), IV.iii.25.

<sup>16</sup> Colin M. Turbayne, *The Myth of Metaphor* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970, revised edition), 47.

that if natural causal relations were grounded in an intrinsic necessity, then natural necessity would be equivalent to “fatal necessity” (PHK 93), and fatal necessity would be equivalent to blind agency.

It is *this* reason for rejecting natural necessity that makes Berkeley’s view of agent causation different from Malebranche’s. For Malebranche, the concept of causation is intimately connected to the concept of logical necessity. If A causes B, then it is logically impossible—that is, entails a contradiction—for B not to occur if A does. But Malebranche also holds that the necessity of the causal connection must be grounded in a *real power* in A to bring about B.<sup>17</sup> Causal necessity, for Malebranche, is logical necessity made *real*, actual, or instantiated, and he holds that such necessity could be instantiated *only* in the will of God: the only true necessary connection is “between the will of God and the thing He wills” (SAT, VI, 2, iii, 450). The power to *do* something—to bring something about—is an *omnipotent* power. It is because of God’s omnipotence that the criterion for causation—logical necessity—is met. As Malebranche says, it is “a contradiction that [an omnipotent being] should will and that what He wills should not happen” (SAT VI, 2, iii, 450). This emphasis on infinite power explains why, for Malebranche, God is the only causal agent. With respect to the relation between a material property (e.g., motion) and a sensory state (e.g., heat) or the relation between two material properties (e.g., two motions), Malebranche denies a necessary connection for two reasons: first, it is possible to conceive (without contradiction) of the one without the other; second, the power of finite material things is, by definition, limited. These reasons apply as well to the (alleged) volitions of finite spirits: no contradiction arises in conceiving an unactualized volition of a finite spirit; furthermore, finite spirits, like any finite substance, are not omnipotent. Malebranche emphasizes that “our idea of cause or of power to act . . . represents something divine” (SAT VI, 2, iii, 446), namely, infinite power. There are no agents, no *do-ers*, strictly speaking, besides God. As Malebranche points out, even God “cannot make true causes of [his creatures].” To do so would be to “make them Gods” (SAT VI, 2, iii, 451).

Berkeley’s arguments from the works on vision show that he agrees with Malebranche that there is no necessary connection between natural events, because there is no intrinsic power in the one to bring about the other. But Berkeley does not share Malebranche’s determination to tie causation to logical necessity and therefore to locate causal power in an infinite will, given that it cannot be located in the natural world. Though he endorses the view that no necessary connection exists between natural events—that is, there is no natural necessity—Berkeley denies what Malebranche accepts—that necessity is the criterion for causation. Malebranche reasons that since there is no natural (causal) necessity, there must be supernatural (causal) necessity. Berkeley reasons that since there is no natural (causal) necessity, necessity is the wrong category for a proper analysis of causation.

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<sup>17</sup> Nadler, “Malebranche on Causation,” 113-14.

Berkeley rejects Malebranche's attempt to identify the metaphysics of causality (a "real power") with the logic of causality (necessary connection).<sup>18</sup> He rejects this identity with respect to natural causal relations, claiming that insofar as these are understood as logically necessary connections, "the whole series of [natural] events is either [a matter of] blind chance or fatal necessity, arising from the impulse of one body on another" (PHK 93). But Berkeley is making a point not only about *natural* causal relations; he is making a point about *all* causal relations. The "blind chance" on the one hand or "fatal necessity" on the other would arise not because the alleged connections are in impulses rather than somewhere else, say, in the will. The blindness and fatalism are in the supposed intrinsic and internal connections, that is, in the supposed logically necessary connections. Thus, while Malebranche rejects necessary connections in natural events and in the wills of finite spirits because neither could claim omnipotence, Berkeley rejects necessary connections in natural events because he views this necessity as a *constraint*, not as a *power*. Necessary connections do not, for Berkeley, become a "real power" by being moved out of the natural world and into the will. On the contrary, logically necessary connections, whether instantiated in material properties or in wills (finite or infinite) epitomize Berkeley's conception of blind agency. A blind agent is, for Berkeley, no agent at all: "in truth," he writes in the *Notebooks*, "a blind Agent is a Contradiction" (NB 812). Thus, to conceive of causation in terms of necessity is to make causal agency absurd.

This reading of Berkeley frees him from the dichotomy that forces volitional causation to be understood either as a necessary connection, which then excludes finite spirits from causal agency, or as an arbitrary connection, which then excludes an infinite spirit from causal agency.<sup>19</sup> If, on the one hand, the relation between a volition and its upshots were one of logically necessary connection, then Berkeley would be forced to deny that finite spirits are causal agents since, obviously, it is not the case that whatever a finite agent wills must occur. If, on the other hand, the relation between a volition and its upshots were one of arbitrary connection, then Berkeley would be forced to deny that an infinite spirit is a causal agent since the relation between God's will and its upshots would be imposed by something external to God in accordance with that other agent's will or pleasure. This would entail both a theological problem (viz., God would become subject to the will of another agent) and a logical problem (viz., an infinite regress). This dilemma can be bypassed by recognizing that Berkeley's commitment to volitional causation offers not an alternative *location* for necessary connections (i.e., in the will

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<sup>18</sup> Nadler ("Malebranche on Causation," 115) provides the following summary of Malebranche's view: "While the logic of causality involves a necessary connection between events, the metaphysics of causality involves power. These two aspects of causality are intimately related. The necessity of the connection has to be grounded in a real power or nature in the agent."

<sup>19</sup> Stoneham considers this in terms of necessity and contingency, which leads him to provide an analysis of Berkeley that situates him between Malebranche—who sees the connection between the will of a finite agent and its upshots as contingent—and Hume—who thinks there is no logical connection at all. But Berkeley's own categories of necessary and arbitrary better distinguish internal and intrinsic connections from externally imposed connections, and they emphasize that the externally imposed connections are to be understood in terms of an agent's will or pleasure. Cf. Stoneham, *Berkeley's World*, 147-53.

rather than the world). Instead, it offers an alternative to the idea that causation is to be analyzed in terms of the relation of logical necessity altogether.

Still, we may ask the following question: if the efficacy of volitional causation is not a matter of necessary connection, what does Berkeley think it is a matter of? Returning to the relations between pain and fire, or motion and heat, though these are arbitrarily instituted, that they are what they are is the result of God's volitions. God institutes the connections in the way he does for the sake of the well-being of his creatures.

Accordingly, these connections instruct us

how to regulate our actions in order to attain those things that are necessary to the preservation and well-being of our bodies, [and] also to avoid whatever may be hurtful and destructive of them. It is by their information that we are principally guided in all the transactions and concerns of life (NTV 147).<sup>20</sup>

Berkeley's notion of volitional causation draws attention to purposive ends; in this way it is distinguished from Malebranche's notion of volitional causation understood as necessary connection. It is not God's *omnipotence* that grounds God's causal agency; it is God's *benevolence*. The efficacy of volition lies in its being purposively and benevolently directed, not in mapping on to a model of logically necessary connections actualized through God's omnipotence. For Malebranche (as his *Dialogues on Metaphysics* character Aristes remarks), "Nothing is more sacred than power. Nothing is more divine."<sup>21</sup> But for Berkeley, God does not institute the natural connections merely because he is powerful enough to do so; God institutes the connections because they are most conducive to his creatures' well-being. Though the arbitrarily instituted relations are contingent—they could have been instituted by God differently—they could not have been instituted so as to bring about the creature's ill-being, that is, contrary to God's benevolence. The omnipotence of Berkeley's God is constrained by his benevolence and wisdom.<sup>22</sup> Though the correlations are instituted by God's will or pleasure, God's pleasures are not whimsical. God's volitions are causal acts, then, because they are purposively and benevolently directed. They are not "empty amusements" (NTV 86).

Berkeley's position amounts to the claim that there is no genuine distinction between God's final and efficient causality, and this position makes it possible for finite spirits to

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<sup>20</sup> Descartes advances a similar argument about the senses in the Sixth Meditation. This has prompted several commentators to note his failure to completely abandon notions of final causation. See Alison J. Simmons, "Sensible Ends: Latent Teleology in Descartes' Account of Sensation," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39 (2001): 49-75; Margaret J. Osler, "From Immanent Natures to Nature as Artifice: The Reinterpretation of Final Causes in Seventeenth-Century Natural Philosophy," *The Monist* 79 (1996): 388-407, and Schmaltz, *Descartes on Causation*, 136.

<sup>21</sup> Nicolas Malebranche, *Dialogues on Metaphysics* VII.14, tr. Willis Doney (New York: Abaris, 1980), 165; cited in Winkler, "Berkeley on Volition," 60.

<sup>22</sup> Jacqueline Broad notes the role this divine constraint plays in Mary Astell's rejection of John Norris's occasionalism. See Jacqueline Broad, "Adversaries or Allies? Occasional Thoughts on the Masham-Astell Exchange," *Eighteenth-Century Thought* 1 (2003): 135-36.

be causal agents in just the same way that God is.<sup>23</sup> Finite spirits are by definition limited, but the way in which they are limited for Berkeley does not keep them from being causal agents. Recall that for Malebranche, it is impossible for a finite spirit to be a cause because its limited power (that is, its non-omnipotence) means that no necessary connection can ever exist between its volitions and the upshots of those volitions. Linking causal necessity to omnipotence, as Malebranche does, precludes anything but God from being a causal agent. But for Berkeley, finite spirits can be causes despite not being omni-benevolent (or omniscient) because though the purposive result of their causal acts is limited, it is not impossible. Limited *power* entails for finite spirits a complete absence of the condition essential for causal agency, but limited *benevolence* and *knowledge* entails only that purposive ends are imperfectly realized, not that they are not realized at all. Thus, both finite spirits and God are causal agents for Berkeley.

### III. Existential Necessity

It is tempting to think that one reason Berkeley may have had for rejecting the link between causation and logical necessity is that he thought such necessity ought to be instantiated in God's *nature*, not his *will*. In that case, we might think that Berkeley would endorse the ontological proof for God's existence, which purports to show the necessity of God's *being*. But not only did Berkeley not advance the ontological argument, he was quite hostile toward it. I suggest that his resistance to the argument may be understood as a further rejection of the conflation of a metaphysical issue (being) with a logical one (necessity).

In a passage from the *Notebooks*, Berkeley claims that it is “[a]bsurd to Argue the Existence of God from his Idea. we have no idea of God. tis impossible!” (NB 782) This suggests that he may have been driven to reject the ontological proof by his insistence that ideas are passive, spirits active. In other words, because God is “a being purely active. . . . No idea can be like unto, or represent the nature of God” (DHP 231).

But Berkeley has another reason, distinct from his idiosyncratic conception of “ideas” (and “notions”) for rejecting the ontological argument. He advances it in the Fourth Dialogue of *Alciphron* by having the title character give a speech against the methodology of that proof:

let me tell you I am not to be persuaded by metaphysical arguments; such, for instance, as are drawn from the idea of an all-perfect being. . . . This sort of argument . . . I have always found dry and jejune; and, as [it is] not suited to my way of thinking, [it] may perhaps puzzle, but never will convince me. (Alc 142)

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<sup>23</sup> Winkler's aim in “Berkeley on Volition” is to show the respective contributions made by an infinite spirit and a finite spirit to the latter's acts. My aim is to show how an infinite spirit and a finite spirit can both meet the same condition for causal agency. For more on this issue as Winkler construes it, see Jeffrey K. McDonough, “Berkeley, Human Agency, and Divine Concurrentism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 49 (2008): 567-90.

Alciphron claims instead that the only acceptable method of proving the existence of God is the method used to prove the existence of anything else, namely, an appeal to facts: “A matter of fact is not to be proved by notions, but by facts” (Alc 144).

Of course, the character Alciphron represents free-thinkers, whose views Berkeley is at pains to discredit in the dialogue; but his spokespersons, Euphranor and Crito, do not object to Alciphron’s insistence that the issue of whether God exists is “a matter of fact” and that it is to be determined by procedures that would prove (or not) the existence of any particular thing. Berkeley never advances the three most important claims from Descartes’ version of the ontological argument: he does not insist that the proposition “God exists” is self-evident; he does not argue that God’s non-existence is a contradiction; and he does not suggest that God’s being is qualitatively different from the being of anything else.<sup>24</sup> On the contrary, in accepting that the question of God’s existence is “a matter of fact,” Berkeley anticipated, and perhaps influenced Hume’s argument in the first *Enquiry* that denying the existence of any being does not result in a contradiction.<sup>25</sup> With the ontological argument in mind, Hume writes:

The non-existence of any being, without exception, is as clear and distinct an idea as its existence. The proposition, which affirms it not to be, however false, is no less conceivable and intelligible, than that which affirms it to be. . . . [T]hat Caesar, or the angel Gabriel, or any being never existed, may be a false proposition, but still is perfectly conceivable, and implies no contradiction.<sup>26</sup>

Hume rejects the ontological argument for the purpose of advancing atheistic arguments. Berkeley’s aims in *Alciphron* are different. He wants to meet Alciphron’s challenge that God’s existence must be known through ordinary means, and he argues that “God Himself speaks every day and in every place to the eyes of all men” (Alc 157). The important point, though, is that in treating the question of God’s existence as a matter of fact, and in anticipating the Humean assertion that “[n]o negation of a fact can involve a contradiction” (*Enquiry* 12.28), Berkeley rejects the Cartesian attempt to import logical necessity into God’s *nature*. His point is not the one made by Gassendi (and more famously by Kant) that existence is not a property. It is that logical necessity could not coherently be instantiated in any being, not even God. Berkeley thus rejects (1) Descartes’ attempt to import logical necessity into God’s *being* and (2) Malebranche’s attempt to import logical necessity into God’s *will*, both on grounds of incoherence.

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<sup>24</sup> These are the relevant aspects of Descartes’ version of the proof. See Meditation 5 (CSM, II, 46) for the first point; the *Principles* (CSM I, 198) and Replies II (CSM II, 117) for the second point; and Replies I (CSM II, 83) for the third point. For discussion of the arguments Berkeley does advance for God’s existence, see Douglas M. Jesseph, “Berkeley, God, and Explanation,” in *Early Modern Philosophy: Mind, Matter, Metaphysics*, eds. Christia Mercer and Eileen O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 183-205.

<sup>25</sup> Hume takes note of Berkeley’s *Alciphron* in his essay “Of National Characters,” in David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1986), 209.

<sup>26</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12.28.

## Conclusion

I have argued that Berkeley is entitled to hold that both finite spirits and an infinite spirit are causal agents. Though both Berkeley and Malebranche subscribe to the exceptionality of volitional causation, Malebranche ties causation to omnipotence and logical necessity and thereby makes it impossible for finite spirits to be causal agents. Berkeley rejects these criteria for causation and makes causal agency a matter of benevolence and wisdom. Because finite spirits are imperfect, their goodness and intelligence are limited, and so too is their ability to bring about purposeful effects. But this is just to say that finite spirits are *imperfect* causal agents; it is not to say that they are not causal agents at all.<sup>27</sup>

Wheaton College, Norton, MA  
[nkendric@wheatonma.edu](mailto:nkendric@wheatonma.edu)

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<sup>27</sup> Versions of this essay were presented at the International Berkeley Society meetings in Newport (2008) and Neuchâtel (2010), and at the Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association (2010). I am grateful to Melissa Frankel, Larry Nolan, Keota Fields, Steve Daniel, Sam Rickless, Marc Hight, Georges Dicker, Tom Stoneham, Margaret Atherton, Seth Bordner, Alison Simmons, Geneviève Brykman, and Dick Brook for probing questions and helpful criticisms. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Lisa Lebduska, Dana Polanichka, Hyun Kim, John Partridge, Stephen Mathis, and Teresa Celada for their comments on a penultimate draft of the essay.

## Review

*Berkeley*. Daniel E. Flage.  
Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014. xii + 202 pages.  
ISBN: 978-0-7456-5634-2

Daniel Flage's new book, *Berkeley*, is one of the latest books in Polity Press's Classic Thinkers series. Like the other books in that series, it is meant by and large to be an introductory text, covering a wide range of texts and topics in an accessible manner, but with nods to the scholarly literature. There is no single uniting thread in the book—as Flage notes, “our approach will focus on the arguments in the individual works in relative isolation” (18). Nonetheless there are a number of recurring themes that help to make this a cohesive text. Flage's approach will thus appeal both to the reader who wants to think systematically about Berkeley's views, but also to the reader whose interests are largely focused on a single topic or text. As an introduction to Berkeley's views, it succeeds admirably: it is well written, accessible, and engaging.

The book is divided into seven chapters, not including an introduction to Berkeley's life and works (which opens with the helpful hint that it's “pronounced **Bark**-lee”) and some brief concluding remarks. The chapters take the reader through Berkeley's theory of vision (chapter 2), his anti-abstractionism (chapter 3), his idealism and immaterialism in the *Principles* and the *Dialogues* (chapters 4 and 5), his theory of mind, including some discussion of God (chapter 6), his moral philosophy (chapter 7) and his views on economics (chapter 8). Flage does not devote chapters to Berkeley's contributions to the philosophy of science, philosophy of mathematics, or philosophy of language, although he does touch on the last, especially in chapter 3.

Many of the chapters begin with a short section on the historical context, and some of this contextual material could perhaps be supplemented (e.g., Flage says little about the early modern “way of ideas”). But on the whole, these sections do a nice job situating Berkeley's doctrines and illuminating those aspects of his views that might be puzzling to first-time readers. The section on historical context preceding the chapter on the theory of vision is particularly good in this regard. Each chapter also has, at its close, a very brief list of some of the relevant secondary literature. These are typically judiciously chosen and will be helpful to those readers who wish to pursue the particular topic of that chapter. Because this is not a book that systematically addresses or reconstructs some particular aspect of Berkeley's view, but rather, looks at a number of disparate topics and texts, I will not discuss each chapter individually in this review. Instead, I will simply highlight a few aspects of the book that may be of interest to readers.

The focal point of the book, as one might expect, is the discussion of idealism and immaterialism in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 focuses on the *Principles* (PHK); chapter 5, meanwhile, looks at the *Dialogues* (DHP), treating it primarily as a prolonged argument for immaterialism—in opposition to those readings of the *Dialogues* that take it to be



providing supporting arguments for *Principles* 1-7.<sup>1</sup> Flage's interpretations of the text are sometimes somewhat unconventional but never unsupported.

For instance, in his discussion of the arguments for idealism at *Principles* 1-7, Flage does not make the standard move of reading Berkeley as making straightforwardly metaphysical arguments. Instead, he proposes an epistemological reconstruction in which a claim about objects considered as collections of ideas is meant to be a claim about "objects as they are known" (60) and not claims about objects point blank. Accordingly, Flage maintains that for Berkeley, "ontology follows epistemology," and so that if we have no epistemic ground for making metaphysical assertions about objects beyond "as they are known," then we are warranted in asserting otherwise. This emerges prominently in Flage's reading of the so-called immaterialist passages (PHK 8-24). Here his approach is typically to *show* simply that this is Berkeley's strategy in the *Principles* or rather, that we can make good sense of Berkeley's arguments by reading them in this way, rather than pointing to a specific argument or principle in the text that might justify this linking of epistemology and metaphysics. This is in opposition to some commentators who see Berkeley as arguing for a verificationist principle that brings us from the possibility of verifying states of affairs to the possibility of asserting that those states of affairs obtain.<sup>2</sup> For the sake of completeness, it might have been nice to see this kind of discussion here, since it fits so nicely with Flage's reading.

One thing that accounts for the absence of this discussion is Flage's thought-provoking contention that, in both the works on vision and in the *Principles*, Berkeley is employing the method of analysis, which Flage construes as one on which "the initial supposition is deemed true only if the theory proposed successfully explains it" (95, but see also 23-24, 39-41). He suggests that it should not be surprising to find a practitioner of this method holding there to be a link between epistemic grounding and metaphysical commitment. Indeed, this aspect of Flage's reading also drives an interpretive claim about the need—or rather, lack thereof—for *arguments* in the *New Theory of Vision* to establish Berkeley's initial claim that we do not immediately perceive distance by vision. Flage proposes instead that the structure of NTV offers a prolonged defense of that claim by means of showing its explanatory power. The appeal to Berkeley's methodological commitments as accounting for certain features of both the theory of vision and the arguments for idealism should be of interest to both the non-specialist and the Berkeley scholar, who may find them provocative but nonetheless significant.

Chapter 6, on minds, is also noteworthy. Here Flage returns to his earlier work on notions<sup>3</sup> but reconsiders his former contention that we have relative notions of minds in light of passages from the *Dialogues* that suggest that we have an intuitive or reflexive (but in either case direct) access to our own minds. Flage offers the somewhat surprising

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<sup>1</sup> See Samuel Rickless, *Berkeley's Case for Idealism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See especially Kenneth P. Winkler, *Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> See Daniel E. Flage, *Berkeley's Doctrine of Notions: a Reconstruction Based on his Theory of Meaning* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

suggestion that Berkeley's notions might in some cases be ideas of reflection, noting that there is no constraint on ideas of reflection, that they resemble their objects. But rather than construing our direct access to our own minds as a kind of *introspective* access, as is fairly standard, Flage suggests that we read Berkeley as appealing to a *Cartesian* notion of intuition as grounding our knowledge of our own minds. The discussion here is somewhat brief, as is perhaps to be expected from a book aimed primarily at non-specialists; nonetheless, one might hope that Flage will be elaborating on this proposal in further work, as it is a refreshing take on a topic that could use a new look. This chapter also does not contain a section on historical context (although Flage does briefly discuss some different historical conceptions of substance). Some further discussion of Descartes' epistemology might have been well-placed.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, Flage also discusses Berkeley's views on God—both his arguments for the existence of God (or at least, the existence of some God-like mind: more on this shortly) and his vision of what role God plays in his idealism/immaterialism. Flage pays most careful attention to the so-called 'passivity' argument for the existence of God, that is, the argument that our sensory ideas must be caused by some mind other than our own, because we are passive with respect to them, and that that mind must be benevolent and wise, because our sensory ideas are orderly. In chapter 4, this discussion focuses largely on providing a lovely explanation of Berkeley's view that our ideas are transparent to us, and showing how this fits in with arguments for the existence of spirit. In chapter 6, Flage returns to the passivity argument, offering the original suggestion that, in the early sections of the *Principles* (29-33), Berkeley does not mean to be providing an argument for the existence of a Christian God. Flage instead proposes that the argument in these sections is merely meant to establish the existence of the "Author of Nature," and that Berkeley only thinks he is entitled to argue that the "Author of Nature" *is* the Christian God at *Principles* 146 after having established the immense complexity of the physical world in the intervening passages. My own initial sense is that, if (with Doug Jesseph)<sup>4</sup> we read the passivity argument as an inference to the best explanation, then even if we concede to Flage that there is some added complexity between PHK 33 and 146, this merely renders the argument for the same conclusion stronger, rather than establishing a different conclusion in the later passage. That said, these sections of Flage's book are intriguing and engaging for the first-time reader and the specialist alike.

The discussion of the passivity argument is by far longer than Flage's discussion of the so-called "continuity" argument, that the continued existence of physical objects requires an infinite perceiver. He briefly recaps this argument in his discussion of Berkeley's *Dialogues* view that immaterialism "is superior to . . . Christian materialis[m] insofar as it provides a stronger proof of the existence of God" (106). It might have been nice to see a longer discussion, if not of the continuity argument itself (which commentators have sometimes focused on as one of Berkeley's weaker efforts), then at least of the view that ordinary objects persist over time, especially given that many first-time readers of

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Jesseph, "Berkeley, God, and Explanation," in *Early Modern Philosophy: Mind, Matter, and Metaphysics*, eds. Christia Mercer and Eileen O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 186-205.

Berkeley, at whom this book is largely aimed, zero in on object-persistence as one of the main concerns confronting immaterialism.

Some of the inclusions in this book are surprising (though not unwelcome). The final chapters, on Berkeley's moral philosophy and his economic views, treat subjects that are not often covered in introductory texts on Berkeley. Of these chapters, chapter 7, on moral philosophy, is particularly interesting. Flage begins by making the standard distinctions between different kinds of moral theories, paying careful attention to the distinction between utilitarianism and natural law theory. This is because, in opposition to a once-standard reading of Berkeley on which he is a kind of rule-utilitarian,<sup>5</sup> and building on his own earlier treatment of the young Berkeley as an ethical egoist<sup>6</sup>, Flage here argues that Berkeley's views evolve from ethical egoism in the *Notebooks* to a natural law theory in *Passive Obedience* and in *Alciphron*. The arguments here are nicely supported by some well-chosen texts, and will surely be a useful contribution to the history of early modern moral philosophy.

Flage's book presents a clear, concise, and comprehensible introduction to a wide range of Berkeley's views, something that has been wanting for many years now. Specialists may not agree with some of the novel interpretations that Flage offers, but they are consistently interesting and well-supported. Moreover, he is careful not to treat them as the final word on any topic. For in his concluding remarks, he provides his readers with the delightful suggestion that they should treat this book in the same way that they would treat any other piece of interpretive literature, that is, as being "wrong, at least in detail" (180). Flage's book includes what amounts to a sustained invitation to readers to take up the texts on their own, something that can only be embraced. Upon the whole, this is a lovely book and a welcome addition to the existing literature.

Melissa Frankel  
Carleton University  
[Melissa.Frankel@carleton.ca](mailto:Melissa.Frankel@carleton.ca)

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<sup>5</sup> See Paul J. Olscamp, *The Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> See Daniel E. Flage, "Was Berkeley an Ethical Egoist?" *Berkeley Studies* 19 (2008): 3-18.

## News and Announcements

### **2016 American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meeting: International Berkeley Society Session**

Washington Marriott Wardman Park Hotel  
Washington, D.C.  
7 January 2016

Melissa Frankel (Carlton University): “Descartes and Berkeley on Sensory Perception”  
Commentator: Genevieve Migely (Cornell College, Iowa)

Nathan Sheff (University of Connecticut): “Berkeley’s Dilemma for Temporal Absolutists”  
Commentator: TBA

Chair: Stephen H. Daniel (Texas A&M University)

### **International Berkeley Conference**

Hebrew University  
Jerusalem, Israel  
11-14 January 2016

Organizers: [Meir Buzaglo](#) and [Bertil Belfrage](#)

Bertil Belfrage: “George Berkeley’s New Philosophy (after 1721)”

Artem Besedin: “Scholastic and Cartesian Models of Intuition in Berkeley’s Philosophy”

Richard Brook: “Berkeley’s *De Motu*”

Matteo Bonifacio: “George Berkeley and the Way of Ideas”

Meir Buzaglo: “An Idealistic View on ‘Disappearing’ ”

Georges Dicker: “Berkeley’s Critique of Locke’s Theory of Perception”

Keota Fields: “Berkeley on Skepticism and Empirical Psychology”

Adam Grzelinski: “*Siris* and Berkeley’s Late Social Philosophy”

Marc Hight: “Berkeley’s Strange Semi-Occasionalist Mystery”

Nancy Kendrick: “Berkeley and Locke on Passive Obedience and the Social Contract”

A. David Kline: “Berkeley, Empirical Equivalence and Anti-Realism”

Tali Leven: “Ghost of Departed Quantity”

Ville Paukkonen: “Berkeley’s Conception of Substance”

Luc Peterschmitt: “How did Berkeley Read Newton?”

Marc Pickering: “The Ideas in God’s Mind”

Timothy Quandt: “Berkeley’s Vulgar Defense of Defect and Suffering”

Michael Roubach: “Berkeley and Husserl’s Notion of Abstraction”

Ofra Shefi: “A Question of Reason: On Berkeley’s Attitude to Teleology”

Mark Steiner: “Borrowings from Berkeley in Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*”

Piotr Szalek: “Berkeley’s Non-cognitivism”

Bartosz Żukowski: “Berkeley and Collier: A Case of Fortunate Coincidence”

Marta Szymańska-Lewoszewska: “Unity, Diversity and Order: On Natural Religion in Berkeley’s Works from 1730s to 1750s”

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