

The Importance of Idea Ontology

A Reply to My Critics

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Abstract: In my book *Idea and Ontology* I argue for a re-evaluation of how we read and engage early modern philosophy with respect to the so-called way of ideas. I contend that, despite current trends that emphasize epistemology as first philosophy, we need to retain the importance of ontology when interpreting and learning from the early moderns. In this piece, I respond to critical reviews of my book, deepening the discussion of several topics. The main topics include whether ideas are private to the finite minds that perceive them in Berkeley's philosophy, the nature of modes in typical early modern ontologies, and issues regarding the charitable reading of other scholars.

In *Idea and Ontology*¹ I argue for a re-evaluation of how we read and engage early modern philosophy with respect to the so-called “way of ideas.” One traditional story often repeated goes as follows: Descartes appropriated the word “idea” and used it in a novel way to represent the contents of finite minds. He and those who followed him then used the concept to explain and resolve a great many epistemic problems. Ideas explained how we sensed and perceived, how we attached meaning to words, how we classified, and so on. But there was a problem in idea paradise. For, along with the new way of ideas, Descartes adhered to the older substance/modification ontology. As it turned out, ideas were a bad fit with the old ontology. Despite how useful they were for engaging epistemological issues, ideas were not clearly substances in their own right (mental, material, or some third realm substance). But there were reasons for denying that they could be modes as well. As a result of this ontological tension—and larger anti-metaphysical trends in mainstream contemporary philosophy generally—some scholars have been tempted by a reading that alleges the early moderns “abandoned ontology.” That is, they either completely ignored ontological issues with respect to ideas, or they “de-ontologized” ideas. As a result, contemporary early modern scholarship has been pushed in a direction that reads what was happening in the early modern period as a sort of “epistemic turn.” All of the great early moderns from Descartes to Hume were to be read as if they were doing epistemology as first philosophy.

In my book, I argue that the last part of this interpretation or approach to the history of early modern philosophy is an error. It is a mistake to read Descartes, Locke, Berkeley, and others as if they were grappling primarily (if not only) with epistemic issues at the expense of ontological concerns. That there were epistemological engagements is, of course, obvious. But I maintain that the early moderns remained aware of the ontological facets of idea philosophy even in the face of the intractable difficulties they faced when trying to reconcile the way of ideas with traditional substance-modification ontology. The point is not that some particular interpretation of this or that early modern is better, but rather that there are significant philosophical insights to be gained by reading the early moderns as equally concerned with the ontology of ideas. Taking an anti-metaphysical approach threatens to obscure some of the insights of the period and renders early modern

¹ *Idea and Ontology* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2008).

thought uncharitably less potent. In particular, the book focuses on Berkeley, arguing that a much superior philosopher emerges, avoiding the all too common error these days of not seeking charitable readings of the claims they made in their historical context. For instance, I believe that my account provides us with a Berkeley who can field stronger positions with respect to his immaterialism, his views about divine ideas, and render other of his views more plausible, including the heterogeneity thesis and his claims about abstraction. Additional chapters concern arguments about how to read and understand other views about ideas, like those of Leibniz and Hume, but for this discussion I will focus on what has drawn the most attention: my discussion of Berkeley.

I am pleased to note at the outset that many of the reviews have been generous, and even those that are not entirely so have taken my claims and arguments seriously. For instance, Samuel Rickless, in his careful and smart review, finds my “elegant and novel interpretation” of Berkeley’s ontology of ideas “in the end unconvincing.”² It would be nice to be right; I am happy to be philosophically provocative in order to have better work in the history of philosophy. I have not the room to recast all of the arguments of the book. Here I have selected what I take to be some of the primary concerns expressed about the monograph. These are not necessarily the claims I take to be most important; if anything, what I took to be the most controversial of the arguments (namely the readings of Berkeley, Leibniz, and Hume) have occasioned relatively less response. The most prominent criticisms engage my ontological reading of Berkeley’s philosophy, my claims about the traditional ontology, and my reading of other scholars. I engage each in turn.

The Privacy Thesis

One of the more controversial upshots of the ontological emphasis of my reading of Berkeley is my claim that he is best read as denying the privacy of ideas of sense. As I note throughout the latter part of my book, Berkeley is far from clear about the ontological status of ideas relative to minds (mental substances). No doubt, he believes that the regularity and orderliness of our ideas of sense constitutes reality. As he notes, things are more real when they are “more affecting, orderly, and distinct.”³ He continues:

the sun that I see by day is the real sun, and that which I imagine by night is the idea of the former. In the sense here given of *reality*, it is evident that every vegetable, star, mineral, and in general each part of the mundane system, is as much a *real being* by our principles as by any other.⁴

As long as we perceive our own orderly sensory ideas, we are perceiving reality. At this point I argue in the book that the best way to explain *why* our orderly ideas constitute a volitionally independent reality is because they are numerically identical to the ideas God

² Samuel Rickless, “Review of *Idea and Ontology*,” *Berkeley Studies* 20 (2009), 33. Hereafter, references to this review will be embedded in the text as R with the page number.

³ PHK 36, *Works* II: 56. All citations from Berkeley’s published works are from A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop, eds. *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*. 9 vols. (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1948-57).

⁴ PHK 36, *Works* II: 56.

perceives.⁵ Furthermore, if our ideas are not numerically identical to those of God's, then the possibility of a veil-of-perception form of skepticism arises, since we could reasonably doubt whether our ideas are proper copies of the archetypes of God. In the book I highlight this anti-skeptical argument as a motivation for attributing the thesis to Berkeley.

Rickless objects on two grounds. First, he contends that veil-of-perception skepticism is not an issue given Berkeley's theory of reality and hence cannot be a motivation for denying the privacy of ideas. If the sensory ideas we perceive *just are* reality, then skeptical worries about our ideas being intermediaries do not arise. If God has archetypal ideas that are perfect originals of our own ideas, that is all well and good; but reality is *not* constituted by those archetypes, for it is our own ideas that are real in virtue of their orderliness. That is the criterion Berkeley advances in the texts. Hence the real world might be numerically plural across individual minds. All that matters is that the ideas are qualitatively identical. The charge of skepticism can only arise if one supposes that God's archetypes constitute reality and *not* what we directly perceive.

On this point I believe Rickless is correct and am thankful for his insight. The real world for Berkeley is composed of the ideas of sense we perceive and so veil-of-perception of skepticism cannot be a motivation for Berkeley denying the privacy of ideas. I implicitly (and improperly) assumed that reality must be single and grounded in God's archetypes, which was in effect to beg the question. This realization helps explain the second objection, which is that my reading of Berkeley cannot account for a few passages, most notably his exchange with Samuel Johnson, where Berkeley appears to be willing to accept that our ideas are not numerically identical to those of God.⁶ Furthermore, in those same passages Berkeley has the opportunity to note that reality is constituted by divine archetypes, but refuses to do so. Having diagnosed the earlier error, I am happy to concede the point.

Granting Rickless' point, however, only forces us to concede that veil-of-perception skepticism is not a reason for Berkeley denying the privacy of ideas. Informed by the correction, it also makes it less likely that *Berkeley* explicitly or reflectively advocated the numerical identity of our ideas of sense and God's divine ideas. It remains an open question, however, whether one should believe that Berkeley ought to have made such a move in order to produce a stronger system. Such suggestions are fraught with difficulty, since it becomes less clear how charitable one is really being the farther one moves from the actual claims of the author.

I submit there are still some reasons for thinking that one ought to deny the privacy of ideas in a Berkeleian system. Guided by Rickless' comments, I have perhaps sharpened my concerns. I start by noting that the recognition that reality is constituted by the

⁵ There are complications here I engage in the book. God does not *sense* ideas as finite minds do, but he does perceive them, which is sufficient for my thesis.

⁶ See *The Correspondence of Berkeley*, ed. Marc A. Hight (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Letter 197, Johnson to Berkeley (5 Feb 1729/30) and Letter 199, Berkeley to Johnson (24 March 1730).

orderliness and regularity of our sensory ideas does not preclude there being a *reason* for that order. Consider the possibility of a set of sensory ideas that are coherent, orderly, and regular but qualitatively different from the ideas I actually perceive. We can imagine such a case and I think Berkeley could have as well. Berkeley, I should think, would have two options when confronted with that possibility. He might believe that reality could be plural. That is, the alternate experience would be fully real and just as real as what I actually perceive. And if two persons were having qualitatively distinct but coherent and orderly experiences, they would be experiencing equally real (but distinct) worlds. Alternatively, Berkeley might have the intuition that reality is single and ultimately grounded by God. God could have created alternate sets of coherent experiences, but chose to give us (presumably *all* of us) *this* one. At times Berkeley seems to write as if this were his intention:

PHILONOUS: To me it is evident, for the reasons you allow of, that sensible things cannot exist otherwise than in a mind or spirit. Whence I conclude, not that they have no real existence, but that seeing they depend not on my thought, and have an existence distinct from being perceived by me, there must be some other mind wherein they exist. As sure therefore as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite omnipresent spirit who contains and supports it.⁷

Berkeley appears to write as if the sensible world is singular. One way of securing the singleness of reality is to have God create an archetypal order that we directly perceive. It has the added advantage of being economical; God need only create one idea of sense for each possible experience, rather than many qualitatively identical ideas for each finite mind that perceives that content. I raised this point with Rickless (who nonetheless believes that Berkeley might well be committed to a plural reality), and he replies as follows:

I'm not sure what Berkeley would say about a situation in which, as you imagine, I have an orderly and coherent experience that is qualitatively different from the orderly and coherent experience I have now. I am guessing that Berkeley would be committed to the view that *that* world would be real too. I say this in part because God perceives all the ideas we do, *but not by sense* (as Berkeley tells us). So, presumably, God's ideas do not have the same qualitative feel (the same what-it-is-like-to-perceive) to him that ours do to us. And yet, of course, God's ideas are no less real for all that. Indeed, it seems that God might have chosen to give us ideas that are qualitatively different from those we now possess, but, being the perfect being that he is, those ideas would be just as orderly and coherent, and would, as I read Berkeley, constitute the real world in that case. Perhaps these commitments are problematic, perhaps not. But I think that Berkeley is probably committed to them.⁸

⁷ DHP, *Works* II: 211-12.

⁸ Private conversation, October 2013. My thanks to Sam Rickless for allowing me to reproduce this portion of our correspondence. I also owe him a debt of gratitude more generally for generously elaborating upon his criticisms.

I still have no argument against this alternative. The issue, however, is illustrative of the deeper and larger point that I want to draw from the book: how one reads Berkeley's ontology of ideas can *matter*.

There are also a few brief points worth emphasizing with respect to the denial of the privacy of ideas. There is, I believe, still some substance in the question of whether Berkeley really believes that our *private* ideas constitute reality, or whether he believes that our sensory ideas *that are numerically identical to God's divine ideas* constitute reality. That is, even granting that Berkeley does not commit himself to the claim that God's archetypes ground the orderliness of our ideas as real, should he do so? There are at least two reasons for thinking perhaps he should. First, since God is omnipotent, in a trivial sense he already perceives (but does not sense) the ideas we do. Perceiving those ideas is a part of God's knowledge of the world. Since God's omnipotence arguably already has him perceiving my ideas, it would be otiose to require God to duplicate effort by creating additional copies. Second, Berkeley allows that we communicate meaningfully with other minds. Yet if *all* ideas were private, no individual could *ever* know that they were successfully communicating with another finite mind. What they perceived would be real, but it would not be clear that anyone could ever infer genuine communication with another mind. Wittgenstein's private language argument springs to mind.

I freely confess that Rickless has persuaded me that my stronger claim—that Berkeley has anti-skeptical motivations for denying the privacy of ideas—is most likely mistaken. I continue to believe that there are philosophical pressures that militate towards denying the privacy of sensory ideas, but that is a separate issue.

The Substance–Modification Ontology

Another concern, also advanced by Rickless, is about my claim early in the book that the moderns operated within a substance–modification ontology. I argue that by the time of Descartes, there is a traditional implicit conception of the categories of being. Everything is either an enduring substance, or a modification of a substance. I characterize the distinction between substances and modes as one principally of *dependence*. Substances are (to some degree) independent things that can exist without other kinds of things. Modes are *dependent* things, but things nonetheless. I invoke Quine's conception of a thing as "that over which one can quantify" to arrive at a serviceable understanding of the distinction. The distinction matters because of discussions that invoke the reification of ideas. I argue that the "problem" with reification is not one of treating treats modes as things, but rather treating modes as *independent* things. So, assuming that irritability is some sort of mode, to reify irritability is to make a mistake. But the mistake is not in treating the mode like a thing. *It is* a thing. The mistake is to treat irritability as if it were an independent thing. I then argue that this clarification helps us resolve certain issues that arise when discussing early modern conceptions of ideas.

There wind up being two important points worthy of attention here. First, Rickless contends that my analysis overlooks a careful analysis of another ontological category,

that of substratum as a separate criterion for substancehood (R 26). As a result of this oversight, Rickless presents a second, more important criticism: that I endorse an inappropriate conception of mode. He suggests that to resolve the infelicity of my initial discussion of substance I should give up my understanding of the traditional conception of mode as a dependent thing. Instead, he wants to give up the notion that modes for the moderns are things at all. Instead, they are simply “ways of being” (R 27).

My response to the first complaint is short: Rickless is correct. My argument as intended was that the early moderns operated initially within the confines of an ontology that treated substance and mode as mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories. It was not my intention to exclude the existence of other conceptions of substancehood or to deny the complications he raises. The text was not sufficiently clear about my precise intentions and I am indebted to him for the illumination about possible complications with the substance ontology.

Yet I reject the solution Rickless provides. He attacks my conception of the early modern mode on the grounds that modes are not things. But I argue instead for a specific conception of thinghood using Quine’s criterion that a thing is that over which one can quantify. So imagine that one considers red a mode of the mind. I mostly certainly *can* count the instances of red, and there is some “thing” about which I am speaking when I discuss red or the instances of red in the room. I discuss this in the context of engaging the common concern that we not reify certain items. I ask in the book what it *means* to say that an early modern reifies (in particular) ideas. I disagree with Jonathan Bennett’s analysis on this point, arguing that it is perfectly meaningful to treat modes like things.⁹ The key is that modes are not *independent* things. So what violates our intuitions about reifying moods (like irritability) is not that the mood is not a thing, but rather that the mood is not an *independent* thing.

Rickless rejects my conception of a mode as a thing and that leads him to attribute an error to my thinking. The point at issue is whether it is appropriate to invoke Quine’s conception when discussing modes. He writes “What I am suggesting is not that modes are not things *in Quine’s sense*, but rather that modes are not things in the sense of persisting entities that underlie change” (R 28). He concludes at one point, “Importantly, what becomes evident is that modes are ways of being, not things themselves” (R 27). Yet I see no argument as to why ways of being cannot themselves be persisting things that underlie change. That is, we can quantify over ways of being in many circumstances.

Independently, I confess that I am not sure what it *means* to say that something is a “way of being” without itself being anything. In working on the book one of my most difficult struggles was with the concept of reification, how philosophers used the term, and how to apply those discussions to substances and modes. Rickless recognizes the point, and explicitly admits that using the Quinean sense modes are indeed things. He disagrees, however, that one should use the Quinean sense at all. His replacement is that modes are “not things in the sense of persisting entities that underlie change” (R 28). So for

⁹ Jonathan Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:8-12, secs. 158-59.

Rickless, modes are ways that substances are such that these “ways” are not persisting nor do they underlie change. I actually considered such an account and was disabused of the notion by early commentators, being persuaded it was an error. It was pointed out to me that a color might itself underlie change and endure. Thus some instance of red might undergo a change in brilliance. An instance of irritability might be more or less irrationally expressed. Yet if these are meaningful cases, then modes *can* underlie change and they *can* persist. Indeed, why should we suppose that modes *cannot* persist? If Rickless is right that modes never persist, then I must grant him the point. But I see no reason to think he actually is right on this issue.

Charity and the Early Modern Tale

The last sort of criticism leveled against the book is that I have violated my own charge to be charitable. I argue in the book that—in part owing to the influence of a general anti-metaphysical attitude in contemporary work in general—some scholars have asserted that the progression from Descartes via Locke and Berkeley to Hume is one where ideas are slowly stripped of their ontological status. That is, by the time we reach Berkeley and Hume, the early moderns no longer thought of ideas as having an ontological status at all. They are “purely epistemic” beings. Attributing such a radical view to others might well raise suspicion. In the words of reviewer Monte Cook, “Lacking a clear sense of why Yolton and Watson subscribe to the early modern tale and being struck by how strong Hight’s arguments are, one might naturally wonder whether they actually do subscribe to it.”¹⁰ The charge is particularly painful, since I went to considerable lengths both in my research and in writing the book to be as charitable as possible.

There are two straightforward issues: (1) have I saddled some philosophers with an uncharitable reading? and (2) independently of whether I have, what are the upshots of making the claims that I do? Cook, like the few others who have leveled this charge, does not emphasize the second issue, but I will return to it, since I believe it is telling.

The basic issue at hand is *what* philosophers like John Yolton, Thomas Lennon, Richard Watson, and others actually believe with respect to the ontological status of ideas in the early modern period. This issue is difficult primarily because, despite reading what these scholars have written, I still don’t know what they had in mind. No one has risen to defend the Yolton thesis beyond a few short reviews of my book. That might be because I have produced a straw man, but it might also be because the position is vague and unclear from the start.

Have I been uncharitable? Consider some sample claims about ideas in the early modern period:

¹⁰ Monte Cook, “Review of *Idea and Ontology*,” *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* 1.16.2009. <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/23884-idea-and-ontology-an-essay-in-early-modern-metaphysics-of-ideas/>

Berkeley tells us that he has not turned things into ideas, but just the reverse. Thus ideas *are* things. Does this mean they are entities?¹¹

Neither Malebranche nor Foucher saw that the modern way out was to be an utter denial of the meaningfulness of the question ‘What is an idea?’ taken as a demand to provide an ontological model that explains how representation can and does take place, and that the modern answer to how causal interaction takes place was to be the rejection or at the very least the ignoring of the demand for an ontological explanatory model.¹²

Asking whether an idea could be an entity at all seems suggestive, but I grant the case is more complicated. Cook complains that the more reasonable reading of the Yolton position is that he is not denying that ideas have an ontological status; rather Yolton intends that ideas for Locke “have no ontological status *distinct from our perceptions*.” That is, Yolton is just trying to separate Locke from Malebranche. Ideas are not some *tertium quid*. Fair enough, but that might leave it open as to what they are. Cook’s reading is certainly plausible. If that were obviously Yolton’s position, then I would happily concede the point and return to the analysis of the moderns that occupies the larger part of my book. If we can read the early moderns as keeping a heavy finger on ontological issues and not forgetting them when plying their epistemological practices, then I feel vindicated. Yet if others read him differently, or if he wants a stronger view, I have an obligation to fend off the challenge. So is that all Yolton and others wish to say, that ideas are not some intermediary in the perceptual process?

Unfortunately, I find evidence that the view extends further. First, the modest view Cook wishes to attribute to Yolton is eminently plausible and easy to express. If that is all Yolton wished to say, he had ample opportunity to do so in his many books and articles. But Yolton consciously pushes his reading of Locke and the early moderns further.

Had Locke seen sufficiently clearly these implications of his position, he could have written a reply to clarify the difference between his own epistemological analysis and that which used the older metaphysical categories of substance and accident. He so quietly dispensed with the traditional categories on this question that many of his critics did not appreciate the novelty which he was introducing.¹³

Now this passage does not say that Locke abandoned ontology; it says that Locke abandoned the *traditional* ontology, consonant with my own reading of Locke. But Yolton also says things like “The point of this remark [about Norris] is that Locke did not consider ideas to have an ontological status.”¹⁴ Frankly, the problem is that I just do not

¹¹ John Yolton, “Reply to Mr. Tipton,” *History of European Ideas* 7 (1986), 584.

¹² Richard Watson, “Foucher’s Mistake and Malebranche’s Break: Ideas, Intelligible Extension, and the End of Ontology,” in *Nicolas Malebranche: His Philosophical Critics and Successors*, Stuart Brown, ed. (Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1991), 31-32.

¹³ John Yolton, *Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1996), 97.

¹⁴ John Yolton, *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 94.

know what to do with such claims. As a result, I was forced to engage the more radical position and take it seriously. I am not the first to wonder about the position being expressed. Vere Chappell, for example, tries to interpret Yolton as well, considering several readings because he is not clear about the position either.¹⁵ Chappell also notes the equivocal use Yolton puts to the term “perception” when interpreting Locke, making his pronouncements yet more difficult to untangle. Given that the view is hard to untangle and that there are several striking passages that seem to directly deny that ideas have an ontological status, I was obligated to consider the position seriously.

Thomas Lennon adds a third interpretation of Yolton (one which he happens to endorse). According to Lennon, Locke does not think of ideas as distinct entities; rather, the word “idea” refers to a material object *as it appears*.¹⁶ Thus he advocates attributing a form of a theory of appearing to Locke. Lennon’s reading has the virtue of actually being clear about *what* ideas are: they are appearances. As such, my complaint about “epistemology as first philosophy” is at least minimally met (although one might reasonably press for an account of the ontological status of appearances). But I am pursuing a stronger thesis, namely that Locke and the other early moderns are struggling *within* the traditional confines of the substance–modification ontology. I argue in my book against portions of Lennon’s reading of Locke. I am able to engage Lennon without worry of charitability concerns because he has a clear position about the ontology of ideas.¹⁷

One might also worry about whether my larger claim that this reading is a “traditional” one is true. After all, perhaps as Rickless suggests, Yolton and others are notable precisely because their interpretations run against the grain (R 23). In fact, I partly agree with this claim. Amongst serious early modern scholars these views have been influential but are by no means ubiquitous. My target was—and remains—larger. My claim is that, concerning contemporary work and attitudes, there is a decided tilt towards “epistemology as first philosophy.” That gets applied generally, but in particular to our readings of the early moderns. I once attended a colloquium where an invited speaker claimed privately afterwards that what we learned from the early moderns was the utter failure of an ontological approach to the world. Thus I introduced my book by citing some leading philosophers, such as Hilary Putnam, who claimed that ontology is an exhausted enterprise.¹⁸ I am not the only person to note this attitude,¹⁹ but having noted the trend, it was not to my purpose to ferret out every instance of it. Instead, my purpose was to *show* the value of ontological readings of the early moderns. The upshot of my claims about the early modern tale was that there is value in taking the ontology of ideas seriously.

¹⁵ Vere Chappell, “Locke’s Theory of Ideas,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Locke*, ed. Vere Chappell (New York: Cambridge, 1994), 32-35.

¹⁶ Thomas Lennon, “Through a Glass Darkly: More on Locke’s Logic of Ideas,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 85 (2004): 322-37.

¹⁷ See Hight, *Idea and Ontology*, section 4.2.

¹⁸ Hilary Putnam, “Ontology: An Obituary,” in *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 71-88.

¹⁹ See John Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

I suggest therefore that I have not been uncharitable, but cautious. To the extent that I have been uncharitable, I would choose to revise and sharpen my analysis rather than mischaracterize views, no matter how difficult they are to interpret. What I wish to emphasize is my attempt to refocus attention on taking early modern ontology seriously by demonstrating that there are philosophical insights still to be gleaned from so doing. If I should be so fortunate as to provoke serious discussion about the ontology of ideas in the early modern period, then I shall count my efforts a success.

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