

Review

David Berman. *The Essential Berkeley and Neo-Berkeley*.
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Although Berkeley's name is in the title, and there is discussion of some of Berkeley's philosophy, this book is not intended to be a contribution to scholarship on George Berkeley. Rather, as Berman makes clear, half the book is a rehearsal of Berkeley's thought as interpreted by Berman; and the other half develops Berman's own views. Let's call these Part 1 and Part 2, respectively. The thesis of Part 1 is that Berkeley is a dualist. But Berman is quick to note that the dualism at issue is not substance dualism between mind and matter, but rather what Berman calls epistemic or perceptual dualism between minds and ideas. Berman thinks that Berkeley's "dualism" presents Berkeley with a unique problem of how the self is known. The thesis of Part 2 is difficult to parse because it emerges from several psychological and anthropological theses that Berman asserts. Yet Berman's goal is to show that Berkeley's philosophy, stripped of its theological commitments and combined with Berman's psychological and anthropological theses, has the resources to explain knowledge of the self—but not for everyone. I shall try to explain.

Berkeley's core philosophical insight, according to Berman, "is not his immaterialism or idealism, as is usually thought" (ix), but instead is "the truth of dualism, that there are two kinds of basic beings (13). This is dualism because minds and ideas "are fundamental yet entirely different, and so irreducible to one another." There is a problem with what Berman clearly thinks is a radically new thesis about Berkeley. First, we don't typically think of dualism as contrasting an independent existence and a dependent existence. Rather, dualism contrasts different kinds of independent existences. Consider the analogical question for matter. Is extension a different kind of being than matter? It seems not. Rather, extension seems to be a way in which matter exists, or a quality that matter has. Similarly, ideas seem to be perceptions that minds have. That doesn't sound like there are different kinds of independent beings. It sounds more like there is one kind of independent being and one kind of dependent being. Otherwise, Descartes is also an epistemic dualist (about matter as well as about minds); so is Hobbes (but only about matter).

If what Berman means is that (1) minds and ideas are interdependent beings, and (2) since nothing else exists for Berkeley, there are no independent beings, then he may have some textual support for that reading. Berkeley thinks that minds are essentially perceptive beings—that is, they exist only as perceivers. In that case, it seems like minds exist only in virtue of having ideas. But this seems like another form of substance dualism, since it is about what exists and the manner of its existence rather than our knowledge. It also sidesteps Berkeley's commitment to the independent existence of a deity. Lastly, it overlooks the principle, suggested by Berkeley in PHK 2, that there are

several asymmetries between the existence of a mind and the existence of its ideas. My mind can exist without this or that idea, but not vice-versa. My mind perceives ideas, but not vice-versa. My mind operates on its ideas, but not vice-versa. If we take these points into account, this option begins to look like it suffers the same problems as those discussed above. Finally, those commentators who focus on Berkeley's immaterialism or idealism would surely also say that for Berkeley only minds and ideas exist, and minds need ideas to perceive or to act on. Thus, while eye-catching, Berman's description of Berkeley as a dualist doesn't do much to illuminate Berkeley's thought.

Berman considers an objection to his reading of Berkeley as an epistemic dualist (which objection is presented as an "unclarity" in Berkeley's texts). That objection is Berkeley's mention of a third category of objects that "are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind." Berman is surprised by this, saying:

Yet while Berkeley seems to be saying that these are objects, it is not clear how they can be objects without breaking down the key division he makes between passive objects and active minds. For the operations of the mind seem to be active and go with the mind not with the objects the mind perceives. (16-17)

The obvious answer to this confusion is that mental operations are ways in which minds actively exist; and ideas are ways in which minds passively exist. But that answer would disturb Berman's catchy packaging of Berkeley as an epistemic dualist. Notions also answer what Berman takes to be "THE question" (18) of Berkeley scholarship: understanding how we know minds. Berman thinks Berkeley doesn't know precisely what to say to this question. Berkeley himself is clear on this, albeit in the 1734 edition of PHK, in *Alciphron*, and gestured at in the *Third Dialogue* of 1713. Here is Berkeley in 1734:

We comprehend our own existence by inward feeling or reflexion, and that of other spirits by reason. We may be said to have some knowledge or notion of our own minds, of spirits and active beings, whereof in a strict sense we have not ideas. (PHK 89)

Berman's question for Berkeley is: "Do I know I am a mind directly or immediately in experience, or indirectly by inferring it from the objects I perceive or experience and/or produce?" (18). Again, Berkeley seems to have already answered this question in 1713:

Phil. I own I have properly no idea, either of God or any other spirit; for these being active, cannot be represented by things perfectly inert, as our ideas are. I do nevertheless know that I, who am a spirit or thinking substance, exist as certainly as I know my ideas exist. Farther, I know what I mean by the terms *I* and *myself*; and I know this immediately or intuitively, though I do not perceive it as I perceive a triangle, a colour, or a sound.... Ideas are things inactive, and perceived. And Spirits a sort of beings altogether different from them.... I have, therefore, though not an inactive idea, yet in myself some sort of an active thinking image of the Deity. And, though I perceive Him not by sense, yet I have a notion of Him, or know Him by reflexion and reasoning. *My own mind and my own ideas I have an immediate knowledge of* [emphasis added]; and, by the help of these, do

mediately apprehend the possibility of the existence of other spirits and ideas. (DHP 231–32)

If this passage is to be believed, Berkeley thinks he knows his own mind and his own ideas immediately; and that he knows his own mind not by means of ideas “properly” or strictly speaking, but “in a large sense,” which Berkeley terms a “notion.” (A note to scholars: Berman provides no citations for passages that he quotes from Berkeley’s *Three Dialogues*, but only the passages themselves.)

Berman recognizes the relevance of Berkeley’s notions in getting at the question with which Berman is occupied. It is a fact of Berkeley scholarship, rarely discussed outside of conference dinners, that far too little work has been done on Berkeley’s notions despite their importance to understanding Berkeley’s philosophical system. The reason for the comparatively small amount of commentary on notions is the range and complexity of textual and philosophical difficulties they present. Few attempt to untangle them. That’s why James Hill’s recent book-length treatment of the subject is of considerable interest to commentators. Yet Berman’s discussion of Hill’s book is a scant three paragraphs. Readers looking for an informative summary of the contours of Hill’s reading will be disappointed. Nevertheless, Berman manages to make two more extraordinary claims. First that notions are not experienced for Berkeley. That is, they are not perceived either by sense, imagination, memory or reflection—despite Berkeley’s claim in the passages quoted above that notions are perceived through reflection—though not “as I perceive a triangle, a colour, or a sound.” Berman’s second claim is that notions are timeless or “always there” without “a beginning and end” (63). This is so despite being notions being perceptions in finite minds. How can my notion of my own mind exist timelessly if my own mind does not? Sadly, Berman does not provide textual evidence in support of this reading.

Part 2 addresses how Neo-Berkeley—that is, Berman—thinks we know our own minds. The thought, as I understand Berman, is that we typically assume that perception is irreflexive. The perceiver does not perceive itself in the act of perception. Nor does the perceiver perceive the act of perceiving. In perception, the perceiver only perceives the object of perception. Berman defends his view that, similar to Leibniz’s doctrine of apperception, perception is reflexive. The mind perceives itself perceiving at the same time that it perceives the object of that perception. Berman situates this against Hume’s phenomenalist skepticism about the self, which claims that we lack any impressions of the self. Berman concludes that there are two kinds of humans: those who have reflexive perceptions and those who don’t. One wonders whether there is a threat of an infinite regress here. Am I aware, aware that I’m aware, aware that I’m aware that I’m aware, and so on *ad infinitum*? It is also unclear whether Berman’s thesis is an empirical claim about human psychology, or human anthropology. What is clear is that it is not a philosophical claim; and that the distinction between two types of humans is poorly supported.

Berman calls these two types dualist humans and monist humans. If you’re worried that dualism and monism are contradictory theories, Berman says not to worry. They are contrary, not contradictory. Thus, while one human cannot be of both types, both types of

humans can coexist. Furthermore, Berman argues that some human minds (those that immediately perceive themselves) can immediately perceive other human minds. He describes this as “dualistic intimacy.” How do we immediately perceive another mind? By loving another person, telepathy, emotions, friendship, rapport, etc. But it is not clear that I immediately perceive the mind that I love, or the mind of my friend, rather than mediate perceive that mind through our longstanding linguistic interactions. I shall not comment on telepathy.

In addition to dualist and monist humans, there are two other categories of humans for Berman. First, there are those who think sight gives us immediate acquaintance with the external world and touch gives us immediate acquaintance with internal states such as pleasure and pain. Let’s call these type-1 humans. Second, there are those who think touch gives us immediate acquaintance with the external world and sight gives us immediate acquaintance with internal states like pleasure and pain. Let’s call these type-2 humans. The idea is that for type-2 humans, if we only had sight and lacked touch, we would not be acquainted with the external world; and vice-versa for type-1 humans. Berman finds evidence of these two categories of humans in the writings of Locke, Berkeley, Russell, and others. Russell and Abbott are type-1 humans. They think that although none of the senses brings us into direct contact with the world, sight is responsible for the belief that we are in direct contact with the external world. Locke and Berkeley are type-2 humans. They think that touch brings us into direct contact with the external world, but sight does not. Yet it is unclear whether Berman is making psychological or epistemic claims, since he slips between saying that touch or sight brings us into contact with the external world; and saying that touch or sight provides basic non-inferential justification for our belief that there is an external world. The psychological claim would warrant the claim that there are two kinds of humans (but only if supported by a large cache of empirical research). The epistemic claim does not. It only shows that philosophers disagree over the source of epistemic justification for perceptual beliefs.

These categories prompt Berman to produce a Hobbiton-like spectrum of “valley-folk,” “hill-folk,” and “summit-folk.” The idea is that there need not be clear distinctions between type-1 and type-2 humans (which categories Berman genders as ‘he’ and ‘she’ respectively). According to Berman, the type-2 human subconsciously projects her (Berman’s gendering) visual images on to her tactile sensations, “making her believe that she is touching something solid and experiencing a material object” (166). Berman tells us that this claim is supported by empirical research, but that research itself is neither cited nor discussed in any detail. In contrast to the female who projects her visual imagery onto tactile sensations, the male is unable to cast such projections; and thus understands his tactile sensations for what they truly are: sensations rather than direct contacts with external objects. These gendered extremes suffer from a form of synesthesia, according to Berman. Between those extremes are a spectrum of valley-folk. And of course, one could be a dualist male, a dualist female, a monist male, a monist female, or a dualist or monist valley-folk.

It is truly unclear to me where all of this is going, and what it has to do with Berkeley. I suspect that Berman's motivations are revealed in his discussion of *Siris*. He thinks Berkeley scholars have unduly ignored that work or failed to appreciate it properly. But Berman's understanding seems to be more literary than philosophical as it is focused on thematic similarities between *Siris* and Plato's Allegory of The Cave. One does not find philosophical theories, or arguments, or analysis here. Instead, one finds a description of a religious experience of ascending into "the intelligible realm" and touching "THE truth" (98) through a form of meditation. Presumably, this is the treatment for the synesthesia discussed above. Elsewhere, Berman suggests that we humans are eternal "gods" or "demi-gods" (137). I suppose that the lesson is that we can achieve divinity and eternal life through meditative treatment of our synesthesia, use of telepathy, friendship and rapport, etc. If that is the lesson, it is sadly lost on me.

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