

## Review

Talia Mae Bettcher. *Berkeley's Philosophy of Spirit: Consciousness, Ontology and the Elusive Subject*  
London: Continuum, 2007, 173 pp.

Talia Mae Bettcher's *Berkeley's Philosophy of Spirit* has the ambitious goal to render Berkeley's philosophy of mind coherent in the face of centuries of criticisms to the contrary. This is a noble endeavor and constitutes both a needed and valuable effort in Berkeley scholarship. Bettcher's interpretation offers solutions to a number of problems associated with the alleged inconsistency of Berkeley's position, such as the relation of ideas to the mind, the mind's simplicity and passivity, knowledge of the mind, time, and identity. She views Berkeley's substance as a transition from the traditional subject of inherence to the more contemporary view of the subject distinct from objects. Such a perspective is both an illuminating and gracious way to view Berkeley and place him in the history of philosophy. Her arguments are rich with the historical and philosophical context in which Berkeley formed his unconventional spiritual ontology.

Bettcher begins by leading her reader through Berkeley's early influences to demonstrate the motivations behind Berkeley's philosophical views and ends with a nod forward to Berkeley's effect on later philosophy. Such a survey exhibits a vast knowledge of both Berkeley's works as well as the philosophical and theological setting in which he developed his theory of immaterial substance. Along the way, she deftly handles numerous complications with Berkeley's position pointing out ways to render Berkeley both intelligible and consistent. In particular, Bettcher offers a striking interpretation of ideas not as modes of mind but as the variable elements of consciousness. Consciousness involves both the self and the other. She maintains the distinction between the mind and its ideas as the unchanging subject in opposition to its variable objects. This interpretation allows for consistency in Berkeley's views on the mind's simple nature along with its immortality. It also serves to produce an interesting take on the mind's existence through time as an unchanging entity that does not exist in or through time; instead, a finite mind is an agent that perceives various moments of time. The ideas change, but the mind itself does not. Though we are clear about the relation of ideas to the mind as ideas are perceptually dependent on minds, more is needed on the status of the mind's existence. Bettcher denies that Berkeley holds the traditional view of substance as an independent existent, but is then fairly silent on its ontological status and its relation to ideas.

Bettcher holds true to Berkeley's principled belief that finite spirits are agents. But, there is an interesting twist in her perspective on Berkeley's agency. According to her, Berkeley allows no knowledge of mental activities. Though the very nature of the mind is its activity, there is no access to such. Bettcher provides a nice, subtle argument for knowledge of the "I" of the mind but stops short of anything else. On her viewpoint, Berkeley can provide knowledge of the existence of the thinking agent and its thoughts. Yet, the mental activity of thinking itself, which connects the agent to its thoughts, is not something of which the agent is aware. Support for this position is prompted by

Berkeley's omissions rather than any explicit denial. Yet, one wonders why evidence to the contrary is ignored. Berkeley may not have included volitions in his items of knowledge in a few passages, but he does include them elsewhere. In fact, the very first principle of PHK I lists the passions and operations of the mind as objects of knowledge. At PHK I 142, he explicitly asserts that we have a notion of both the mind and its actions. Because Bettcher presents an eloquent and richly historical defense of Berkeley's use of "notion" to secure knowledge of the mind itself, it seems odd at best that she chooses to argue that the use of "notion" here doesn't indicate knowledge.

This particular aspect of her interpretation is especially odd given that her exclusion of volitions and mental activities from both knowledge and real existence leads to a number of questions about her own account. After all, her main theme is that the mind is consciousness of the self as agent and its ideas. Without the thinking to connect the two, it is unclear how one is conscious of oneself as an agent that produces or operates about its ideas. Bettcher argues that the immediate awareness of oneself is an immediate awareness of oneself *qua* agent. Yet what is knowledge of self as agent if there is no knowledge of agency? Her position begs the very question that she is attempting to answer: does Berkeley have secure knowledge of the mind itself? We gain knowledge of the mind by a reflex act, but according to Bettcher, we are not aware of the reflex act that gives us access to the mind. There is no awareness of being aware.

This elimination of mental activities, then, raises more questions than it seems to solve. First, it is difficult to see how the existence of God can be derived from the realization that ideas of sense are passively perceived against our will. The difference in vivacity and coherency in imagined and sensed ideas doesn't indicate the divergent sources of ideas. A second but related problem is that the distinction between the will and the understanding become utterly obsolete in her interpretation. The will acts by causing ideas that under Bettcher's analysis amounts to perceiving ideas. The awareness of the self and its ideas is the production of ideas. An imagined idea is created by the perception of it. Bettcher notes that mental operations may be mysterious for Berkeley, and given her interpretation, they are indeed mysterious. In order to avoid the conclusion that in sensory perception finite wills cause the ideas they perceive, she tries to supplement this position by claiming that there is a difference in perception: when finite minds produce imaginary ideas, they are actively perceiving, but when finite minds perceive sensory ideas, they are passively perceiving. However, without knowledge of the act of perception itself, there would be no knowledge of the different types of perceiving.

I applaud Bettcher for her consistency, but I find that the cost is too much on such a controversial reading. True, Berkeley rejects the traditional substance ontology, as Bettcher rightly points out; but there is no reason to throw out the baby with the bath water. Mental activities do not have to be taken as modes or properties of immaterial substance in order to offer a coherent account of mind.

Overall, *Berkeley's Philosophy of Spirit* offers a unique, insightful perspective into the inner workings of Berkeley's philosophy of mind. Bettcher's historical analysis of the philosophical and theological background behind Berkeley's ideas and terms is

insightfully subtle and complex. All in all, Bettcher's interpretation has a lot to offer and does indeed serve to vindicate Berkeley. Quilting together Berkeley's philosophy of mind is a daunting task, and Bettcher's philosophy of spirit certainly moves us forward.

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