

Review

James Hill. *The Notions of George Berkeley: Self, Substance, Unity and Power*.
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Hill's book *The Notions of George Berkeley* is an exemplary work in Berkeley scholarship. It provides an admirably lucid, rich and original interpretation of Berkeley's philosophy, addressing a variety of puzzles that have been frustrating commentators for decades. One of its main contributions lies in developing a coherent account of Berkeley's philosophy of mind (most notably, his model of self-consciousness) in light of his oft-dismissed theory of notions. But it does more than merely shed light on one of the still underappreciated areas of the positive side of Berkeley's thought. Through utilizing Berkeley's doctrine of notion, it also allows us to reconsider some of the fundamental aspects of his philosophy, from perception and conceptual thought to ethics and theology, as well as his general philosophical outlook and place in the early modern canon. Moreover, it compellingly defends the continuity of Berkeley's philosophical development, showing how the apparently idiosyncratic approach of his late *Siris* is anticipated in the theory of notions from his middle period, which, in turn, is already anticipated in his earliest works. In what follows, I give an admittedly selective, subjective and uneven summary of each chapter of the book, and raise some critical remarks and questions both along the way and in a couple of summarizing paragraphs at the end.

Chapters 1 and 2 lay the foundations. Though not a classical introduction with methodology or literature review, Chapter 1 introduces some of the main themes, claims and interpretative frameworks of the book. It foreshadows the criticism of the standard empiricist reading of Berkeley as fundamentally one-sided; and it emphasizes his metaphysical dualism between spirits and ideas, alongside the corresponding epistemological dualism between our notions of our souls and their operations, on the one hand, and our perceptual knowledge of sensory ideas, on the other. The chapter ends with delineating Berkeley's overall position (dubbed in Renaissance terms "coincidence of opposites") which he arrives at by combining innatist or rationalist insights about the realm of notions with empiricism about ideas, transcending our usual historiographical categories.

Chapter 2 provides a helpful, if inevitably schematic, summary of Berkeley's most important predecessors' views on self-knowledge. Descartes famously proposed a perceptual—or as we might call it, introspective—model. Hobbes and Malebranche both denied, though for different reasons, that we can gain immediate knowledge of our souls. Locke endorsed elements of both views: while being skeptical about our knowledge of the nature of spiritual substances, he elaborated on the introspective model by cashing it out in terms of an "inner sense" (as opposed to Descartes' intellectual perception).

Chapter 3 presents Berkeley's alternative picture. Hill first points to the reasons why Berkeley, like Hobbes or Malebranche, rejected that we have an idea of our souls. A natural place to start is PHK 27, which among many other passages emphasizes the heterogeneity between minds and ideas. Though Hill does not make this step really explicit, the fundamental metaphysical difference entails that ideas are just not the right medium to give us knowledge about the intrinsic nature of our souls. In fact, Berkeley regards self-perception as a logical impossibility, likened to seeing a sound or grasping a round square (PHK 136). Moreover, dissimilarity does not seem to be the only problem. Any putative idea of a self, construed as an object of a mental representation, creates a split between the subject and object of the act, which in the unique case of self-knowledge should coincide.

Hill focuses on two differences between minds and ideas. The first is well-known: spirits are totally active, whereas ideas are totally passive. As Hill explains, activity refers to causal power, the source of the change or motion we observe in the world. But since we do not perceive the activity itself in our ideas, we can conclude that ideas are completely passive. Hill does not clarify how this follows. Isn't Berkeley simply mistaking an absence of evidence for evidence of an absence? Or is it his commitment to the transparency of our ideas that justifies making this step? On the other side of the same coin, it is also glossed over whether Berkeley is more justified to derive our notion of causal power from our experiences of volitional activity. The interpretation of self-knowledge Hill later advances seems to help Berkeley out at this point: our own notions of causal power are not gained from perceiving that our volitions are constantly followed by some effects, but the causal power itself is somehow self-revealing in the very operations of our will.

But rather than discussing these issues, Hill mentions a less familiar distinction between spirits and ideas: spirits are simple or indivisible, whereas ideas are complex. On Hill's reading, in PHK I 7, Berkeley dismissed all simple ideas as abstractions. As the next step, Hill distances himself from the "relative interpretations" which get Berkeley's project wrong on a fundamental level by associating him with the skeptical position of his predecessors that we cannot know the soul immediately, only via the effects it produces. Instead, Berkeley had room for direct awareness which applies to the self and its operations in a non-perceptual, indeed non-representational, way. Agreeing with Winkler (and a couple of other interpreters), Hill argues that for Berkeley, knowing our mental acts lies in performing them, as opposed to, as the introspective model holds, turning towards them. It is not only that self-knowledge requires or stems from our mental operations, but it is constituted by them. Self-knowledge is thus knowing through doing.

While it may sound a little bit sketchy, this view avoids the problems besetting the introspective model, such as the infinite regress it seems to lead to, or, in Ryle's famous words, the absurdity of trying to catch one's own shadow. In fact, one might wonder if it is too good to be true. As Hill himself raises the question, does this view count as an account of self-reflection at all? Doesn't it do away with the cognitive part completely, reducing self-knowledge to the very actions we perform? The allusion to Ryle also pushes the reader into this direction. But Hill appeals to Berkeley's master argument to

show that we can forget about ourselves as the agents of our mental operations, and, accordingly, there is room for self-reflective attention even in terms of this model. I wonder if it is indeed compatible with the view that self-knowledge consists in nothing else but “the enjoyment of our mental activities.” On the other hand, if we need some attention to realize that we are performing these acts, and this extra attention is essential to self-knowledge, Berkeley’s view is perhaps not so different from those accounts in the period according to which self-consciousness is (to use Arnauld’s term, “virtually” or implicitly) inherent in every, first-order, mental act.

Chapter 4 discusses the relationship between Berkeley’s theory of notions, underlying his account of self-knowledge, and innatism or rationalism (which Hill, apparently, uses interchangeably). Hill proposes that Berkeley’s doctrine of notions have an expanding scope, incorporating more and more non-empirical aspects of his philosophy, from the self and its operations through relations and Platonic concepts such as unity or beauty.

A brief but helpful discussion of the history of the term “notion” paves the way for exploring Berkeley’s innatism implied by his endorsement of notions. On the traditional, empiricist, reading, it appears rather surprising that Berkeley never rejects innatism. Indeed, as Hill is keen to emphasize, in passages such as NB 649, Berkeley explicitly endorses some form of innatism. As expected, Hill distinguishes between a crude and refined version of innatism: between what we might call an “actualist” and a “dispositionalist” version. Because of the well-known ambiguities in Descartes’ views, Hill calls upon Leibniz’s “refined” innatism to illuminate Berkeley’s position. Accordingly, Berkeley does not hold that we have all our notions actually and consciously present in us *ab initio*. Rather, it takes time and reflection on our mental activities to grasp them. As an interesting, though not really elaborated, implication, it shows (again) that the Berkeleyan mind is not fully transparent: we might completely know what is and what is not included in a particular idea we actually perceive, and even be fully aware of all our ideas at a given time, but our notions and our mental operations can escape our attention.

But doesn’t the appeal to some sort of experience make Berkeley an empiricist, after all? As Hill replies, by the same reasoning, we should reclassify Leibniz as an empiricist, and we can basically throw our hands up. I wonder if that’s the appropriate reaction to the empiricist/rationalist distinction. Hill’s way to lower our hands is to restrict empiricism to gaining our concepts from sensory or quasi-sensory mechanisms, such as Locke’s inner sense model of reflection. In such a case, Leibniz and Descartes are not empiricists but innatists or rationalists, because they think we acquire our concepts in purely intellectual ways, even if these intellectual acts depend on self-reflective experiences, indeed ones of (intellectual) introspection.

A different way to approach the issue of experience would have been to appeal to a helpful analogy Hill mentions in the last chapter: both digging up a coin and forging it require some activity but they are of fundamentally different sorts. So, analogously, if the content itself is not derived but only discovered through the experience of the mental activity, a dispositional innatist is perhaps more clearly distinguished from a concept

empiricist where the content itself is derived solely from the experience. But Berkeley is less clear in this respect—at least when it comes to notions such as that of God and causal power, with their contents apparently deriving from experiencing our own mental activities.

In any event, Hill mentions further peculiarities of Berkeley's innatism: in contrast to "standard" rationalists, for Berkeley, notions do not concern physical concepts, such as space or extension. More importantly, for him, the experience required in realizing the "spiritual" notions is, nonetheless, sensory, as it necessarily involves grasping ideas and, hence, cannot happen in some isolated intellectual sphere. It is only when we operate on our sensory ideas that we can acquire notions of ourselves and concepts, such as God and causal power, that we derive from performing these acts. All in all, the picture that emerges from Hill's analysis is that Berkeley stands in some categorically different camp on its own—so much so, one wonders how much we actually gain by calling (rather cautiously or tentatively as Hill does) Berkeley's theory of notions an innatist or rationalist doctrine.

Among the diverse areas of Berkeley's thought where his doctrine of notion has interesting implications, Hill first turns to the nature of perception in Chapter 5. On his interpretation, perception cannot be a fully passive process as it is one of the mental operations we have notions of and part of the essentially and indivisibly active self. This, of course, is a well-known puzzle with many more or less convincing attempts to defend the consistency of Berkeley's different claims about the passivity or activity of perception. Hill's attempt is among the best.

He first presents Berkeley's argument for the passivity of perception from the first dialogue of DHP (195–97). Berkeley rejects head-on what Hill helpfully labels as the two-component view of perception, according to which the mental act of perceiving is distinct from its object. If the two were separate, we might think that the object is not necessarily related to the mind and might exist mind-independently after all. Passivity is also crucial for Berkeley's proof of a divine cause of our perceptions, and I would add more generally, for his fundamental attempt to maintain our anti-skeptical trust in our senses and the "reality" of the world around us. Hill nonetheless tries to establish a development in Berkeley's thought, leaning towards a more active characterization of the mind (including apparently its perceptual activities) in the later stages of his career. Hill also hints at the first dialogue passage being *ad hominem* and, more importantly, registers the fact that, even in his early works, Berkeley contradicts his own much richer understanding of mental activity and volition which includes such sustained cognitive phenomena as acquiescence or attention required by every act of perception. But Hill focuses most on the problem of unification of sensory input in perception, arguing that (as it will be a recurrent theme in the book) even early on Berkeley thought that unity lies in our minds' constructive activity. Hence, when we combine and unify the multitude of ideas into stable objects of experience, we are doing something in perception. And this realization made Berkeley change his mind in his middle period, ditching the view that perception is essentially passive.

Whether, in Hill's reading, Berkeley thought through all the ramifications this move has for his overall philosophy or not is unclear to me. While Hill helpfully shows that mental activity should be seen as a broader category for both early and late Berkeley than the conscious volition he rejects as a component of sense perception, his concept of perception is equally ambiguous between a stricter and much richer conception. And only the latter seems to include such mental activity as the unification of our ideas into objects. To put it bluntly, Hill's reading ignores the distinction between immediate and mediate perception. In defending his Kantian interpretation, Hill points to the implicit mental activity involved in spatial perception, such as the way we see the distance of objects through an intermodal mechanism. But it is natural to think that none of this happens on the immediate level, the level of the mere sensory input of color and light. Hill, by contrast, argues that these bare inputs are never the objects of our experiences in an isolated manner since, for instance, we always perceive color and light at some distance. While this seems to be true on a psychological level, Berkeley never questions that color and light are primary at least in the logical sense, as they are what allow us to associate other sensations and hence the (tangible) distance with the objects we see. The same can be said about the synthesis of object perception. We first have to be able to receive (in a regular manner) the disparate ideas of some smell and taste and so on *immediately* in order to be able to unite them, and perceive the cherry as a unified bundle of ideas *mediately*.

Of course, if Hill is right and Berkeley is more Kantian on this point, he manages to distance Berkeley from the standard empiricist reading pretty radically as a thinker who already questioned the "myth of the given" in perception. Moreover, he seems to distance Berkeley from the empiricist camp further in terms of emphasizing the importance of unconscious mental activities in Berkeley's philosophy of perception. But I wonder if playing down the passivity of perception somewhat weakens one of the main claims of Hill's book. One of the biggest problems with the introspective theory of self-knowledge is that it is modeled on the passivity of how we perceive sensory ideas. But if outward perception is also active in some deep sense, then it appears to be less clear why Berkeley was against this view so radically. Also, his clear-cut epistemological dualism (between passively received ideas, on the one hand, and actively cognized notions, on the other) gets a bit blurry. All in all, Berkeley's commitment to the passivity of perception still presents a difficult puzzle to solve.

Chapter 6 discusses Berkeley's "conceptual dynamism," partly motivated by the Kantian reading of Berkeley's theory of perception, partly by the aim of drawing out the implications of his theory of notions. As is well known, Berkeley attacks abstraction as a way to account for conceptual thought. With regard to the first type of abstracting, Hill claims, again, that Berkeley rejected simple ideas as unconceivable abstractions. From this Hill concludes that Berkeley discarded a foundational element of Locke's concept-empiricism which allows us to analyze complex perceptions in terms of simple ideas and recombine them later in imagination. While this interpretation has a textual basis and is defended by other scholars such as Winkler, I am still not sure if Berkeley really wanted to push this line to this extent. For instance, Berkeley's understanding of (creative) imagination seems to rest on our ability to re-combine the simplest constituents of our

sense perception. Maybe his simple ideas are not the Lockean qualities of color and shape—which, as *both* realized, are inseparable in thought as well as in reality—but colored patches of light, as well as sounds, smells, etc. Berkeley’s attack on the second type of abstraction concerns how ideas become general by removing their determinate properties. Hill is not concerned with the details of this debate. Rather, he helpfully distinguishes between concept formation and possession. It is important because other views—from Descartes’ innatism to Locke’s empiricist theory of abstraction—agree that the former requires a mental operation. But for Descartes and Locke, possessing a concept no longer consists in a mental activity, with our intrinsically general or indeterminate ideas just standing passively in front of the mind’s eyes.

For Berkeley, by contrast, conceptual thought is a continuous mental activity: that is, to possess a concept is doing something to an idea. Again, as his related theory of self-knowledge, it might sound a bit Rylean. As Hill will explicitly say later, for Berkeley as well as Ryle, having concepts lies in a know-how as opposed to a know-what. He also adds that Berkeley can be regarded as a pragmatist, who thinks that in possessing a concept, there is no need for any knowledge apart from engaging in a rule-governed activity. But, as Hill adds, this activity is an irreducible *mental* operation, which is hardly the conclusion Ryle or his followers wanted to draw. Also, it seems to me, in Berkeley’s view, possessing a concept still requires some cognitive relation even if it is more than that. In fact, as Hill notes, the concepts we are talking about here, such as the concept of a triangle, have a perceptual or sensory content.

Relatedly, it is a bit unclear to me if, on Hill’s reading of Berkeley, concept possession lies merely in a disposition or competence, or the actual exercise of a skill. The terminology of “ability,” “skill,” “mastering a technique,” or even “competent use,” as well as the analogy with Ryle, suggests the former. But it is mostly spelled out in terms of actually performing mental operations. And what does competence mean here? Do I only have a concept of a triangle if I (am able to) use my corresponding idea in the way others do? If so, then concept possession is somehow even a social enterprise, and dependent on our common use of language. But, as Hill clarifies, for Berkeley, language only plays a secondary role in fixing and facilitating the application of concepts, with their generality being constituted solely by what happens in the individual mind. This seems to further distance Berkeley from some potential implications of a Rylean or Wittgensteinian reading.

In any event, it soon turns out that these sensory concepts are dependent on notions, most specifically, our cognitions of our own mental activities establishing relations between ideas. As such, Berkeley’s later expansion of notions to concepts such as unity or power seems not to come as a great surprise. But in my view, to build on the quibbles I mentioned with regard to Chapter 5, this discussion just underscores the huge gulf between how Berkeley approaches conceptual thought and sense perception, construing the former as a representational state (i.e., a state where the content of the act is partially determined by our minds), while regarding our immediate perceptions where we do nothing like that. Indeed, Hill later explicitly claims (arguably going further than before) that perceptual content is penetrated by a network of relations established by mental

activities and shot through with the judgments of the mind in a Kantian manner. Nonetheless, it seems convincing that for Berkeley, conceptual thought—being grounded on our ability to selectively attend to features of an idea that are deemed relevant to the given mental act of representation—is more active or dynamic than for his contemporaries.

Chapters 7 and 8 show how Berkeley's theory of notions gains even further significance in the later works. Despite his unwillingness to define goodness in absolute or abstract terms, for Berkeley, ethics is still important though largely implicit. Chapter 8 gives a helpful summary of the development of Berkeley's ethical thinking, culminating in the *Siris*'s account of ethics in terms of notions. It is commendable, again, that Hill looks beyond the usual texts, such as the *Passive Obedience* and *Alciphron*, and attempts to produce a coherent, unified interpretation of Berkeley's scattered ethical remarks.

One important, if unexpected, line is that ethics is not a purely theoretical enterprise for Berkeley, as we cannot have passive representations of ethical concepts, but it lies in an active comprehension of moral categories. This also explains the *Alciphron* criticism of moral sense theory, which is presented as analogous to his rejection of Locke's inner sense model of self-knowledge. Perhaps it is fair to say that Berkeley's view shows some similarities with virtue ethics insofar as moral goodness is tied to the right "operative persuasion of mind." As Hill helpfully points out, it is important that we have appropriate feelings such as tenderness towards others, but sentiments play only a secondary role in ethics. It is, rather, the virtues these emotions stem from that make an act good. Hill spends some time criticizing a "notable line of interpretation," the utilitarian reading of Berkeley's ethics. One issue he raises is that a rule-utilitarian interpretation fails to account for Berkeley's strict attachment to the moral law in *Passive Obedience*. He also interprets Berkeley's appeal to "well-being" in terms different from how standard utilitarians (e.g., Bentham) would do. For Berkeley, well-being is not worldly pleasure (contrasted with pain) but refers to and includes our eternal, other-worldly, interests.

Perhaps, in order to gain an even more rounded interpretation, Hill could have addressed the psychological egoism, and (some sort of) hedonism of Berkeley's early comments more directly. The discussion of Berkeley's analogy between Newton's universal attractionism and benevolence as a uniting instinct of human behavior is interesting. It points out that goodness or benevolence (just like gravitation) is not simply a matter of perception but actually pulls us together, creating communities and societal bonds. In *Siris*, Berkeley develops this analogy further by putting special emphasis on the intrinsic unity of our minds. On Hill's interesting reading, goodness in the social sphere consists in our mind's activity to extend or confer its own unity to other things, uniting with other minds and forming communities and societies.

Chapter 8 explains Berkeley's related concepts of unity and God, through the lens of his theory of notions. As for the former, Berkeley is opposed to the Lockean view that we perceive unity as a primary quality of external objects, a simple idea accompanying all our experiences. Berkeley rejects this view as an illegitimate abstraction. Unity is always relative to the things considered and depends on the concepts under which they are

considered. In Hill's terms, the Berkeleyan world of perceptions is not parceled into units intrinsically, but unity is the product, or rather the process, of our minds' unifying activity. Hill only talks about sensation as the putative source of our idea of unity, but as PHK 13 shows, Berkeley was aware that, in Locke's view, reflection should also convey the idea of unity to us. But we can second guess Hill's reply: it would be only another misguided appeal to introspection, since even when it comes to our own ideas, we do not perceive any intrinsic unity in them. Not only do we not have a simple (abstract) idea of unity, but no idea is intrinsically single or unified.

Again, I am not sure this was Berkeley's intention in the early works, and he might not have wanted to deny that we can reflect on a single idea, the feeling of warmth, say, without experiencing any complexity or division within it. Of course, and this is Berkeley's point, unity is not out there on its own, and the unity of the objects we (mediately) perceive, such as of an apple, depends on our abilities to consider different bundles of ideas as unified objects. In any event, it is again instructive to realize the continuity in Berkeley's philosophy, tied together by his active, non-representational approach to unity from the *Notebooks* through the *Siris*. In the later stage, unity is not even considered as the product of the mind but, being subsumed under the scope of notions, is reduced to the mental activity of unification itself. Hill then rejects Frege's objection that such a view makes numbers a purely subjective matter, leading to an untenable psychologism about mathematics. In his response, Hill points out that for Berkeley, unity does exist objectively in our spirit's intrinsic simplicity which, while not perceived as such in introspection, allows us to apply unity and numbers to sensible things and hence count apples and so on.

This unity of the self is just a reflection of the divine unity. Our concept of God is the last topic Hill discusses in the book. In a compelling analysis, he compares Berkeley's three-step process from DHP with Locke's (empiricist) constructivism. An important similarity to Locke is that it requires the mental activity of heightening our powers and reducing our imperfections, with no innate idea of God sitting in our souls as some pre-given content. It is not even just like digging up a roman coin in one's garden; rather, it needs to be forged from our inner resources. But there is a similarly huge difference to Locke's account, which can be traced back to the *Notebooks*: God as an essentially simple being cannot be represented in a complex idea. Locke was, of course, aware of this difficulty as an instance of our limited access to the real essences of finite things or souls, let alone God's nature. As Hill rightly emphasizes, Berkeley opposed this sort of skepticism both generally with regard to real essences and God in particular. Berkeley believed we have a more intimate (if "extremely inadequate") knowledge of God than Locke's admittedly highly relative and complex idea.

Hill then compares Berkeley's account to Descartes' refined innatism about God. Despite similarities, Berkeley's view of God is importantly different not only because, unlike the Cartesian view, it does not rest on a perceptual model of experiencing our own thinking abilities as the basis of our (amplified) notion of God. Moreover, as Hill points out, Descartes starts from an innate idea of infinity, while for Berkeley, our notion of God starts from an awareness of our finite selves. But this point could have been generalized

more: Berkeley seems to reject (in a rather empiricist move) Descartes' *a priori* approach to God (as for instance is attested in his dismissal of all-perfection theology in NB 845). Hill ends with a crucial question about the role of the pure intellect in Berkeley's philosophy and, unlike the Cartesians, restricts its scope to the spiritual, theological and moral spheres. Even so, it can only be a modified form of pure intellect, as the Cartesian pure intellect does not seem to sit easily with his non-perceptual account of self-knowledge. Accordingly, Hill ends on a rather cautious note to the effect that the "pure intellect" of other thinkers is the closest to what Berkeley's theory of notions is getting at.

Since it is a wonderfully rich and original account touching on many puzzling theoretical and interpretive issues in Berkeley's philosophy, there are a variety of interesting, if controversial, claims to pick out. I already mentioned a couple of my concerns with Hill's reading of Berkeley's innatism or his allegedly Kantian theory of perception. I only want to emphasize my comments on the overall classificatory scheme that emerges from the discussion. As he himself acknowledges, Hill is restricting "empiricism" to a sensory-based view, which is already a questionable move. But once the experience of one's own mental operations is accepted as an empirical source, and innatism is construed in dispositional terms (as Hill prefers to do), the distinction becomes so much harder to draw between opposing camps of early modern epistemology. Simply put, given such qualifications, I am inclined to think that it is not only Berkeley who should be more open to "rationalism" but "traditional empiricists" like Locke or Hume, too. In other words, while rightly emphasizing Berkeley's originality and the impossibility of forcing him in either the empiricist or rationalist camp, Hill inadvertently reinforces a dichotomy that was never clear-cut in the first place.

This approach, I suspect, partially comes from taking the *Siris*, and its own historiography, seriously, which is the last feature of the book I want to comment on. Focusing on this later work is refreshing but is not without its own methodological pitfalls. For one, not unlike the *Notebooks*, rather than explicitly endorsing views as his own, Berkeley often merely reports the views of Neoplatonic authors in the *Siris*. Moreover, doesn't regarding it as the culmination of Berkeley's thought just make the reverse mistake of those who completely dismiss it as a late aberration, incompatible with the early works? Overall, Hill does a great job in avoiding both these extremes, giving a balanced and careful reading which establishes some fundamental continuity, but not complete identity, in Berkeley's whole *oeuvre*. Accordingly, despite the quibbles or rather just questions I mentioned earlier, it is hard not to be sympathetic to the project with its bold attempt to give a highly systematic and original account of Berkeley's philosophy of mind, perception, conceptual thought and many related issues. Hill's book is an important work that challenges many deep-seated interpretations of Berkeley.

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