

Review

Stephen H. Daniel. *George Berkeley and Early Modern Philosophy*.
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It may come as a surprise to those familiar with Berkeley scholarship, but Steve Daniel's excellent *George Berkeley and Early Modern Philosophy* is his first monograph on a philosopher on which he has published extensively over the last two decades. Drawing from this body of work Daniel takes his reader through 18 chapters which cover a variety of issues, ranging from representation (Ch. 4) and free will (Ch. 10) to various aspects of Berkeley's theism (Ch. 9, 14–17) and authors including Hobbes (Ch. 6), Leibniz (Ch. 13), and Spinoza (Ch. 8).

At the heart of his book lies Daniel's well-known (and controversial) interpretation of Berkeley's notion of mind (cf. 1, 7–11 or Appendix 2). This includes Daniel's often (sometimes critically) noted emphasis on Berkeley's *Notebooks* (cf. 3–6 or Appendix 1). In distinction to most commentators Daniel takes Berkeley's *Notebooks* seriously and provides an interpretation that renders its entries "compatible with Berkeley's published remarks" (291). While some commentators will, for various reasons, still find issue with the prominent role Berkeley's *Notebook* plays, this does not detract from the fact that, over the course of the book, Daniel makes a strong case for his claim that the concept of mind he attributes to Berkeley (1) provides a "new way to conceive of [Berkeley's] immaterialism, (2) a new understanding of his notion of substance, and (3) a new strategy for speaking about God" (7).

As Daniel makes clear, his usage of the *Notebooks* is part of a wider strategy that aims at breaking with the "official or standard approach to study Berkeley" (2). In this interpretative tradition the emphasis rests on Berkeley's 'major works', the *Principles* (PHK) and the *Three Dialogues* (DHP). Since Berkeley explicitly deals with Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke in these works, they become the "interpretative filter through which his other works are understood" (2f). To put this point differently, in the standard interpretation Berkeley's philosophy, and in particular his notion of mind, are read as well as understood in light of the writings of Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke.

Daniel is breaking with this line of interpreting Berkeley not only by placing more emphasis on the *Notebooks* but also by 'flipping the script': for instance, instead of reading *Siris* through the lens of the immaterialism Berkeley develops in PHK and DHP, Daniel considers the latter works "in light of [Berkeley's] Christian Neoplatonic metaphysics," which is not only expressly articulated in *Siris* but, as Daniel suggests, already present in his earlier works as well (145). Furthermore, Daniel reads Berkeley alongside figures and traditions with which he is usually not associated.¹ For example, he

¹ This does not mean that Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke are not considered in Daniel's book. On the contrary: there is at least one chapter devoted to each of them (cf. Ch. 5 & 9–11). In each

starts his book by placing Berkeley and his notion of mind in Stoic (Ch. 1) and Ramist (Ch. 2) contexts before proceeding to expound the influence thinkers such as Arnauld (Ch. 7), Bayle (Ch. 12), Browne and Collins (Ch. 17), Edwards (Ch. 18), and Suárez (Ch. 3) had on Berkeley.

In short: Daniel's aim is to demonstrate the benefits of reading Berkeley in non-Lockean or non-Cartesian terms—a reading, Daniel argues, which is almost demanded by the 'principle of charity' (5, 294), because unlike versions of the "standard approach," it allows us to understand Berkeley as saying exactly what he meant to say, without inconsistencies or changes to his fundamental insights. As Daniel contends, this also provides a way to strengthen Berkeley as an author, his philosophy, and his contribution to Early Modern philosophy more generally (4–6).

While Daniel undoubtedly provides the most compelling case for his interpretation of Berkeley and the latter's notion of mind so far by putting all the pieces of the last 20+ years together, it seems proper to leave the discussion of the tenability, merits, and flaws of that interpretation to the future research discussion. Instead, I want to highlight two issues, which I believe would have deserved more attention. And which—if considered in more detail—have the potential to further strengthen Daniel's case.

My first point pertains to the issue of Berkeley's Irishness and the importance of the Irish context. Daniel repeatedly draws attention to Berkeley's "self-acknowledged Irish identity" (8–9, 52, 213). While this turn of phrase is neutral with respect to the tenability of Berkeley's self-identification, it would have been worth explicitly noting the complicated nature of Berkeley's relation to his Irish heritage. As Tom Jones has recently argued in detail,² Berkeley's entries are an instance of him "playing the Irishman for rhetorical purposes" (215), rather than a genuine embracing of his Irishness. In fact, despite his "ecumenism" (214), Berkeley's views of and remarks on the "native Irish" (i.e., Catholic) population oscillate between a lack of respect (cf. *Querist*, Qu. 96–99) and the downright horrendous (cf. *Querist*, Qu. 19, 20, 138, 196).³

Despite the complicated nature of Berkeley's self-identification, I think Daniel is right to stress this aspect. Indeed, his immediate intellectual context in Ireland arguably would have deserved more attention. Daniel repeatedly mentions two of the most prominent 'Irish' thinkers at the time, William King and Peter Browne (215, 240f., 265–72), and he discusses their views in some detail (262–66). The focus of this discussion, unfortunately, remains confined to the issue of 'Divine Analogy', that is, the problem of how we can and ought to speak about God (261). Due to this limited focus, Daniel arguably misses out on an opportunity to further his aim of broadening the background of Berkeley's

case, Daniel's discussion focuses on highlighting the ways in which the views of these thinkers fundamentally differ from Berkeley's account of the mind (cf. 82–86, 158–60, 171f., and 183–88).

² See Tom Jones, *George Berkeley: A Philosophical Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 214–220.

³ See *Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (9 vols.; London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948–57), 6: 242–44.

philosophy, since there are *prima facie* good reasons to assume that King and Browne had *some* influence on Berkeley.

There is not only the potential meeting of the three authors when Berkeley presented “On Infinities” to the Dublin Philosophical Society (215), but there is also the fact that we know that King read (and disliked) Berkeley’s *New Theory of Vision* and that Berkeley read (and disliked) King’s *Sermon*.⁴ Despite the rather strained relationship of the two thinkers,⁵ King could have had a sustainable influence on Berkeley’s thinking even if only as someone who (from Berkeley’s point of view) advanced wrongheaded opinions. As Daniel acknowledges (265), Berkeley is unhappy with the position King develops in his *Sermon*, but it still could have profoundly shaped the way in which Berkeley thought about the issue of divine analogy. The same may go for the dualism between mind and body that King seems to endorse in the *Sermon*.⁶ It must be noted that it is unclear whether King also endorses a *substance* dualism and what notion of substance he is working with (cf. *Sermon* §§ 10, 16, 33). But it is precisely this kind of unclarity that renders his case *prima facie* so interesting.

The same, albeit for different reasons, holds for Peter Browne. After all, Browne was the provost at *Trinity College* when Berkeley was studying there, so one would be hard pressed to deny that Browne had *any* influence on Berkeley. And while Browne arguably endorses substance dualism, he was, as Kenneth Pearce points out,⁷ also highly critical of Locke’s *Essay*.⁸ More particularly, Pearce (221f.) argues that Browne’s notion of spiritual substance is developed in reaction to Locke, as is his notion that we can only have a “conscious Experience of [the mind’s] several Ways of Acting upon the Ideas of Sensation.”⁹ Thus, according to Daniel’s reading of Berkeley there seem to be promising points of agreements between the latter and Browne’s notions of the mind—despite the fundamentally different positions they advance when it comes to the issue of divine analogy (266–68).

To put it differently, there are good contextual and philosophical reasons to render plausible the assumption that King or Browne influenced Berkeley. It thus seems worth investigating whether their influences stretch to the latter’s notion of the mind—which is the focus of Daniel’s writing.

My second point concerns the issue of relations. Daniel repeatedly highlights that his focus rests on the “relation of mind and ideas” (12, 16, 32, 80, etc.). And while his

⁴ See Letter 12 in *The Correspondence of George Berkeley*, ed. Marc A. Hight (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 35.

⁵ See Letter 13 (*Correspondence*, 39) and Letter 108 (*Correspondence*, 175).

⁶ See William King, David Berman, and Andrew Carpenter, *Archbishop King’s Sermon on Predestination* (Dublin: Cadenus Press, 1976), §§ 19–23.

⁷ Kenneth L. Pearce, “Peter Browne on the Metaphysics of Knowledge,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 88 (2020), 216.

⁸ Cf. Peter Browne, *Things Divine and Supernatural Conceived by Analogy with Things Natural and Human* (London: Innys & Manby, 1733), 127f.

⁹ Peter Browne, *The Procedure, Extent, and Limits of Human Understanding*, 2nd ed. (London: Innys & Manby, 1729), 109.

primary aim is to clarify Berkeley's notion of mind, this formulation draws attention to the fact that relations also play an important role in this endeavor. However, even though Berkeley's notion of relations has not attracted much scholarly attention, it is notoriously difficult to interpret. For one, Berkeley does not say much more than that all relations "include" an act of the mind (PHK § 142). Considering how little Berkeley says about relations, it is unsurprising that almost contrary interpretations have been defended in the secondary literature. On the one hand, there is a reading according to which relations are nothing above and beyond mental acts of comparing.¹⁰ On the other hand, Berkeley has been interpreted as someone who thinks that relations (e.g., likeness), exist independently of mental acts of comparing and are instead simply observed or 'discovered'.¹¹

In light of this vast array of interpretations, it would have been helpful if Daniel could have further expanded on his understanding of Berkeley's notion of relation and explicitly connected this notion to the secondary literature. For instance, he writes that "differentiations and relations *are* the activities that constitute" minds (33), and that actions, relations, and minds "*subsist* rather than exist" (62). At first sight, this may sound as if Daniel is endorsing a rather anti-realist interpretation of relations in the vein of Muehlmann. Yet, this seems to be at odds with Daniel's overall interpretation of Berkeley as endorsing a "semantic realism" (274), which he shows to have interesting parallels to the kind of realism one finds in Leibniz (206f.). A more explicit discussion of the ontological status of relations as well as the secondary literature would have helped to dissolve these apparent tensions and further supported Daniel's argument, since it would have shed additional light on his interpretation and the way it differs from others. This in turn would have helped to further clarify his interpretation of Berkeley's notion of mind precisely because relations and minds are closely aligned according to Daniel.

However, the issues I have raised do not detract from the overall quality of Daniel's *George Berkeley and Early Modern Philosophy*. It relates Berkeley to many thinkers and traditions he is not often considered alongside and thereby provides a comprehensive and unique overview of Daniel's interpretation of Berkeley's notion of mind—an interpretation which is sure to spark further scholarly discussion in the future.

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¹⁰ See Robert G. Muehlmann, *Berkeley's Ontology* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), Ch. 2; and Todd Ryan, "A New Account of Berkeley's Likeness Principle," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14 (2006), 568.

¹¹ Peter West, "Why Can An Idea Be Like Nothing But Another Idea? A Conceptual Interpretation of Berkeley's Likeness Principle," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* (§ 1). Luce and Jessop seem to offer yet another interpretation, when they remark that Berkeley does not elaborate on the notion of relation he introduces in PHK §142. Rather, it seems that for Berkeley "the activity of relating somehow enters into the content of the relation" (*Works* 2: 106). A suggestion what an interpretation along these lines could look like can be found in Tom Stoneham, *Berkeley's World: An Examination of the Three Dialogues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 238-44; and Katia Saporiti, *Die Wirklichkeit der Dinge: eine Untersuchung des Begriffs der Idee in der Philosophie George Berkeleys* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006), 240-42.