

Review

Tom Jones. *George Berkeley: A Philosophical Life*.
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. xxiv + 624 pages.
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Is Tom Jones' book *George Berkeley: a Philosophical Life* not the first comprehensive philosophical biography of George Berkeley? Arthur Luce's mid-twentieth century biography is not philosophical: this fact is stressed both by Luce¹ and Jones (3). Another book that comes to mind for comparison is David Berman's *George Berkeley: Idealism and the Man*,² and this one does not seem to be comprehensive enough. I don't take into account Alexander Fraser's nineteenth century biography,³ although it might be considered good for its time. During the last few decades, the quality of philosophical biographies has increased dramatically: the high standards set by Ray Monk's *Ludwig Wittgenstein*,⁴ Manfred Kuehn's *Kant*,⁵ and other such books must be met by anyone who dares write a story of a philosopher's life. Tom Jones' work, based on an incredibly broad range of contemporary and modern sources, meets these standards and sets the bar even higher, finding new connections in Berkeley's life and suggesting new interpretations of the facts well known.

This voluminous book includes seventeen chapters. It begins with an introduction (Chapter One) that defines the scope of the book and gives an overview of Berkeley's philosophy, which is very useful to have in the beginning: for those who are new to Berkeley's philosophy the introductory chapter gives a general impression of it, and for professionals it reveals the author's approach to the object of his research. Besides the question that must be answered by any biography, "What do we know about George Berkeley?" (1), Jones suggest a more holistic approach to Berkeley's life and work and asks the question, "Can we attribute character to Berkeley, given that all we have of him is a set of documents, even if some such documents explicitly discuss his character?" (3) What Jones means is not only personal but also philosophical character, and it turns out that the later can be applied to explain the former. Jones calls this methodology a "biographical approach": "A consideration of the central topics in Berkeley's immaterialism offers a justification of a biographical approach to his philosophical career—but one that might first require us to rethink our ideas of what people are and how they know one another" (4). To understand Berkeley's philosophical character, we can ask a question (which Jones doesn't ask explicitly)—what is it like to live in a Berkeleyan world? The key to answering it is "participation of the Divinity" (14). This approach in Jones' hands makes Berkeley's philosophy deeply personalist: all the metaphysical questions are always about you and God. It is characteristic of Jones'

¹ Arthur A. Luce, *The Life of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1949), v–vi.

² David Berman, *George Berkeley: Idealism and the Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

³ Alexander C. Fraser, *Life and Letters of George Berkeley* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871).

⁴ Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1990).

⁵ Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

approach to start discussing Berkeley's philosophy from the problem of knowledge of other minds. "Participation of the Divinity" is the main feature of Jones' explanatory strategy: it organizes Berkeley's personal life and goals, his immaterialist metaphysics, his social philosophy, his views on family, education, economy, politics, slavery, etc. And Jones' Berkeley believes that all these spheres must be organized in a particular order that will maximize our participation in God. Jones finds a universal point of view on all the phenomena of Berkeley's life, he applies it consistently and gives us a comprehensive, persuasive, unified portrait of Berkeley. But the flip side of this picture is that it can be taken as one of several possible points of view. After all, Jones admits that there is a rationale "for never being satisfied with the interpretation at which one has arrived" (541).

Chapters Two to Fifteen describe Berkeley's life and work (Chapter Sixteen is called "Afterlife," the Seventeenth is "Conclusion"). The organization of the main part of the book is not strictly chronological. Biographical parts are interwoven with the analysis of Berkeley's views. The work leaves an impression of a monumental mosaic harmoniously uniting diverse parts, each of which is also a masterpiece. From the beginning of the second chapter, Jones surrounds the reader with the atmosphere of Berkeley's time. Jones analyzes the scarce data on the years of Berkeley's infancy, explores the details of his education in Kilkenny College and Trinity College, including their curricula and day schedules, describes Berkeley's early career steps. Jones gives probably the most detailed contextual analysis of Berkeley's first published works: *Miscellanea mathematica* and *Of Infinities*. What is particularly important is that he stresses the practical and moral context of these works. The second chapter ends with a discussion of *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*.

The third chapter contains an interpretation of Berkeley's immaterialist metaphysics. Jones' aim is not to give a lengthy account of all the details and problems of Berkeley's *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*. Rather, he puts these works in the frame of his "participation of the Divinity" approach. Jones' diagnosis is this: "[T]he idiosyncratic solution Berkeley proposes to the problems he is confronting is a good reconciliation of the competing conceptions of philosophy and its purpose at his time, but that was not necessarily a solution well suited to achieving his social and religious ends. It was more of an esoteric than exoteric solution" (80). In the seventeenth chapter Jones writes: "There was something revolutionary about his immaterialism, but it was one of those conservative revolutions that seeks to leave things as they are" (535). It is a reasonable interpretation given from the biographical point of view that has been accepted by Jones. But from a more common standpoint, Berkeley's immaterialism can be seen as a progressive step in the history of philosophy: a step towards, let's say, Kantian transcendental idealism. The innovative element in Jones' interpretation of Berkeley's immaterialist works is an attempt to find various philosophical personae of the author there: "Berkeley is shifting from the persona of the philosopher as guide and instructor to the persona of the philosopher as iconoclast and introvert who disregards custom" (100).

Chapter Four explores Berkeley's early social and political views. Jones offers extensive evidence for Berkeley's engagement in Tory's politics. This fact concords with the

rhetoric of Berkeley's *Passive Obedience* and his activity as a Trinity College official. In further chapters Jones emphasizes the depth of Berkeley's connection with Tories, especially with the Talbot family, which resulted in the notorious York–Talbot slavery opinion. Chapter Five concentrates on Berkeley's views on education. Jones' characteristic of Berkeley is categorical: "Berkeley's educational thinking was ... privatized and elite.... Berkeley thought of education in politico–theological terms, as a means of training people in the ways of the true church so that they could proselytize, by more or less stable means, throughout their lives" (155). This is also the leitmotif of Berkeley's approach to female education, which is overt in *The Lady's Library*—a chrestomathy collected and supplemented by Berkeley. *The Ladies Library* and *The Guardian* are the two projects of Richard Still that were realized with Berkeley's active participation. They are discussed in the sixth chapter.

In the middle chapters Jones' methodology gives the most vivid results. In Chapters Six and Eight, Jones describes Berkeley's stay in Italy and analyzes his travel journals. Berkeley's notes reveal his deep interest in the phenomenon of tarantism (involuntary dancing that was thought to be caused by the bite of a tarantula). Berkeley's attention to tarantism is an exotic topic in the literature, but Jones suggests an interpretation that establishes a strong connection between this interest and his philosophy: "Berkeley may be thinking of the tarantula as the means of communication of a peculiar form of spiritual influence. The spider is, or is the medium of, another spirit—say an ambivalent or a demonic spirit.... Being bitten is (being forced) to participate in another spirit, in the same way that seeing God's will in the world and following it is to participate in God (in a fuller or better way than merely being in the world)" (279). I don't see why we should have recourse to the demonic spirits to explain tarantism and cannot simply take it as a form of participation in God. But, anyway, Jones' "Participation of the Divinity" methodology provides Berkeley's interest in tarantism with a natural place in his world outlook.

A more important application of Jones' method is presented in Chapters Seven and Nine. These parts can be united under the title "Berkeley and ...". In the seventh chapter, Jones explores the topic of "Berkeley and others," namely, the native Irish, the Italians, the Americans, and enslaved people. Chapter Nine discusses Berkeley's relations with women. Again, Berkeley's attitude to all those groups of "others" can be explained by one sentence: "His conduct when encountering ethnically different people certainly demonstrates a concern to preserve social order in more or less its current form in this world" (226). The purpose of preservation is the fullest and most effective participation in God. Something similar can be said about Berkeley's attitude to marriage: "sexual contact and reproduction, like horse breeding ... require close management in order to produce social goods" (306). Berkeley's relations with women are also a rare topic for research on this philosopher. An important result of Jones' work is his explication of the relations between Berkeley and Anne Donnellan, to whom he made an unsuccessful proposal. And the attention that Jones draws to Anne Forster, who became Berkeley's wife, is also remarkable. For when we return to the beginning of the book—not the Introduction, but to the very beginning, its cover—we see a fragment of John Smibert's *Bermuda Group*, and many books on Berkeley have the portrait copied from this picture

on their cover. But the cover of Jones' book is the first I know where Berkeley's portrait is not cropped. Here Berkeley is depicted together with his wife and their son Henry. Jones notes the importance of Anne's role as a supporter of George's Bermuda project and his co-thinker in his later years. Jones' work makes it impossible to think of Berkeley in his middle and later years without Anne as his co-worker.

Chapter Ten depicts the details of Berkeley's Bermuda project in a broad historical and cultural context. The background reconstructed by Jones is impressive, for he draws attention to the moral inconsistency of Berkeley's approach. Berkeley considered financing his college on Bermuda by the income from the plantations on Saint Christopher's Island. His educational project had slave labor as its part. During his stay in Newport, "Berkeley practiced slavery in a slaving plantation" (233). Again, here we find a feature of Berkeley's character: his eagerness to propagate the desired social and religious order makes him blind to the circumstances of others. Berkeley, who tried to establish a college for the native Americans, doesn't consider the experience of his predecessors. Given that his actions were supported by his philosophy, Berkeley appears as a self-benighted person (in an intellectual sense). Jones' conclusion about Berkeley's role in the development of contemporary culture is pessimistic: "Berkeley's grant, then, despite it never being paid, was part of the history of transformation of the Caribbean into slave societies" (347).

Chapters Eleven and Twelve discuss *Alciphron*. Jones ties these works to Berkeley's earlier writings by claiming that "*Alciphron* is, then, a further exploration of philosophical persona" (363). It seems that here Berkeley finds the philosophical mask that fits him best: "For the remainder of his career, his character or persona as a philosopher would also take the form of practice" (378). The first example of practice that is necessarily organized for some purpose is language.

Chapters Thirteen to Fifteen cover Berkeley's years as the Bishop of Cloyne. Berkeley's philosophical practice is discussed under two topics: discipline and therapy. At this point, terminology gets some Wittgensteinian flavor: philosophy has become a practice for Berkeley, part of which at least is therapy. Berkeley's disciplinary project is based on the claim that the "spiritual and temporal authority are connected, and that civil governments should maintain an interest in the religious practice of their subjects" (391). Berkeley's non-philosophical disciplinary activities include his "guidance to his clergy on how to engage in the project of bringing Catholic inhabitants of Cloyne into the established church" (391), and his "involvement in planning the civil and military defense of Ireland from Jacobite forces in 1745 and the maxims on patriotism" (391). Again, Jones draws our attention to "[t]he limitations of Berkeley's capacity for role reversal—to think himself into the position of other people" (428).

The Fifteenth Chapter suggests a perfect interpretative instrument for Berkeley's later writings—the concept of therapy. This notion is very useful and informative because it helps Jones to unify Berkeley's later philosophy. Namely, Jones finds a remarkable connection between *The Querist* and *Siris*: "He also acts as a philosophical therapist who helps others better to direct their desires and appetites. That is the ambition of his to

major texts of his time Cloyne, *The Querist* and *Siris*. . . . *Siris* seeks to heal the body and mind. . . . *The Querist*, on the other hand, analyses human behaviour as a system of supplying demands” (455). Discipline and therapy are effective instruments to give unity to Berkeley’s character: discipline explains the synchronic unity between his philosophical and non-philosophical activities, while therapy explains the diachronic unity between Berkeley’s different writings. These two concepts are Jones’ valuable discoveries.

Chapter Fourteen describes Berkeley’s life in Cloyne. Jones shows how Berkeley’s habits were in harmony with his views—except for maybe one: “Eating presented a philosophical challenge to Berkeley, one in which appetites were pitted against reason. It was a challenge he was, at least in the judgement of his wife, unable to meet” (446). Jones describes Berkeley’s way of life in Cloyne where he tried to combine temperance with artistic taste. Berkeley’s life in Jones’ presentation was harmonious: the virtues and vices in his acts corresponded to the virtues and vices in his thought. Chapter Sixteen describes the public reaction to Berkeley’s death and his family’s life some time thereafter.

Jones’ book is a product of titanic labor and meets the highest standards of intellectual biography. Jones suggests new interpretations of some of Berkeley’s thoughts and notes, finds new biographical materials, and offers a comprehensive approach to the whole body of Berkeley’s thought. This last point is most important. One of the problems of Berkeley’s philosophy is its unity: making sense of the fact that *Principles* and *Siris* had been written by one and the same person was a hard task for many commentators. Jones completes this task in his own way. Berkeley’s later philosophy is unified by the concepts of discipline and therapy. His earlier and later periods are unified by his search for philosophical persona. This later instrument is probably not as effective as the first two. One can say that Berkeley’s change of philosophical personae is exactly the phenomenon to be explained. Anyway, in Jones’ work this change looks smooth and logical.

Jones’ book leaves the reader with a question: is Berkeley an antihero of our time? Jones’ answer can be this: Berkeley is a human with his vices and virtues, and today his vices are seen more sharply than in his own time. The apology of a philosopher is a bad strategy for a historian of philosophy, and Jones’ book is not apologetic. He tries to be objective, and his attempt is quite successful. Jones’ Berkeley fits the characteristic given to him by Jonathan Swift as “an absolute Philosopher with Respect to Money Titles or Power” (339).

But for a Russian reader like myself, Berkeley—the—Antihero is quite a trivial persona of this philosopher. In his work *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*,⁶ Lenin develops a detailed critique of Berkeley. Lenin’s attention to Berkeley had a positive consequence: it was the reason for printing the works by Berkeley—the idealist *per excellence*—in the Soviet Union. But it also shaped the attitude to his philosophy for more than seventy years: Berkeley was viewed quite negatively, and not only in theoretical matters. He was

⁶ Originally published in 1909 under the pseudonym Vl. Ilyin. English translation: Vladimir I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* (Moscow: Progress publishers, 1947).

regarded as a part of the “bourgeois philosophy,” representing all the vices of capitalism. This negative image of Berkeley in some respects accords with Jones’ picture, and, given my opposition to the first, I want to make some critical remarks on the second.

One of the conclusions in the seventeenth chapter is this: “In various ways, Berkeley was an antagonist of the philosophical and social–scientific attitudes that characterize some versions of Enlightenment. It is clear the he was an opponent of radical Enlightenment, as Jonathan Edwards defines it. . . . It is even somewhat doubtful that Berkeley could be characterised as a participant in Israel’s moderate or mainstream Enlightenment” (534). It is true that Berkeley doesn’t meet Israel’s requirements for being a philosopher of those types of Enlightenment, but it doesn’t mean that Berkeley wasn’t a part of some kind of Enlightenment. By that I mean the specific phenomenon of Irish Enlightenment. And local intellectual Enlightenments, such as Irish or Russian, although being progressive, do not satisfy Israel’s criteria for being radical or even moderate. In addition to this, Berkeley’s influence on the Enlightenment thinkers is undeniable. The reception of Berkeley’s theory of vision by Voltaire, Condillac and Diderot, and Kant’s transcendental idealism are other examples.

My second critical remark concerns another outcome of Jones’ methodology. Its holism is an advantage for its interpretation, but it has a side effect: it turns out that Berkeley’s immaterialism and theory of vision are organically connected to his views on social hierarchy. But is Berkeley’s metaphysics that harsh? Cannot we have immaterialism without passive obedience? After all, human character is not always as harmonious as the character of Jones’ Berkeley: our thought is sometimes compartmentalized, and our actions may be different from our expressed attitudes. Cannot it be the case of Berkeley as well, at least in some respects?

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