

## Review

*Berkeley*. Daniel E. Flage.  
Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014. xii + 202 pages.  
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Daniel Flage's new book, *Berkeley*, is one of the latest books in Polity Press's Classic Thinkers series. Like the other books in that series, it is meant by and large to be an introductory text, covering a wide range of texts and topics in an accessible manner, but with nods to the scholarly literature. There is no single unifying thread in the book—as Flage notes, “our approach will focus on the arguments in the individual works in relative isolation” (18). Nonetheless there are a number of recurring themes that help to make this a cohesive text. Flage's approach will thus appeal both to the reader who wants to think systematically about Berkeley's views, but also to the reader whose interests are largely focused on a single topic or text. As an introduction to Berkeley's views, it succeeds admirably: it is well written, accessible, and engaging.

The book is divided into seven chapters, not including an introduction to Berkeley's life and works (which opens with the helpful hint that it's “pronounced **Bark**-lee”) and some brief concluding remarks. The chapters take the reader through Berkeley's theory of vision (chapter 2), his anti-abstractionism (chapter 3), his idealism and immaterialism in the *Principles* and the *Dialogues* (chapters 4 and 5), his theory of mind, including some discussion of God (chapter 6), his moral philosophy (chapter 7) and his views on economics (chapter 8). Flage does not devote chapters to Berkeley's contributions to the philosophy of science, philosophy of mathematics, or philosophy of language, although he does touch on the last, especially in chapter 3.

Many of the chapters begin with a short section on the historical context, and some of this contextual material could perhaps be supplemented (e.g., Flage says little about the early modern “way of ideas”). But on the whole, these sections do a nice job situating Berkeley's doctrines and illuminating those aspects of his views that might be puzzling to first-time readers. The section on historical context preceding the chapter on the theory of vision is particularly good in this regard. Each chapter also has, at its close, a very brief list of some of the relevant secondary literature. These are typically judiciously chosen and will be helpful to those readers who wish to pursue the particular topic of that chapter. Because this is not a book that systematically addresses or reconstructs some particular aspect of Berkeley's view, but rather, looks at a number of disparate topics and texts, I will not discuss each chapter individually in this review. Instead, I will simply highlight a few aspects of the book that may be of interest to readers.

The focal point of the book, as one might expect, is the discussion of idealism and immaterialism in chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 focuses on the *Principles* (PHK); chapter 5, meanwhile, looks at the *Dialogues* (DHP), treating it primarily as a prolonged argument for immaterialism—in opposition to those readings of the *Dialogues* that take it to be

providing supporting arguments for *Principles* 1-7.<sup>1</sup> Flage's interpretations of the text are sometimes somewhat unconventional but never unsupported.

For instance, in his discussion of the arguments for idealism at *Principles* 1-7, Flage does not make the standard move of reading Berkeley as making straightforwardly metaphysical arguments. Instead, he proposes an epistemological reconstruction in which a claim about objects considered as collections of ideas is meant to be a claim about "objects as they are known" (60) and not claims about objects point blank. Accordingly, Flage maintains that for Berkeley, "ontology follows epistemology," and so that if we have no epistemic ground for making metaphysical assertions about objects beyond "as they are known," then we are warranted in asserting otherwise. This emerges prominently in Flage's reading of the so-called immaterialist passages (PHK 8-24). Here his approach is typically to *show* simply that this is Berkeley's strategy in the *Principles* or rather, that we can make good sense of Berkeley's arguments by reading them in this way, rather than pointing to a specific argument or principle in the text that might justify this linking of epistemology and metaphysics. This is in opposition to some commentators who see Berkeley as arguing for a verificationist principle that brings us from the possibility of verifying states of affairs to the possibility of asserting that those states of affairs obtain.<sup>2</sup> For the sake of completeness, it might have been nice to see this kind of discussion here, since it fits so nicely with Flage's reading.

One thing that accounts for the absence of this discussion is Flage's thought-provoking contention that, in both the works on vision and in the *Principles*, Berkeley is employing the method of analysis, which Flage construes as one on which "the initial supposition is deemed true only if the theory proposed successfully explains it" (95, but see also 23-24, 39-41). He suggests that it should not be surprising to find a practitioner of this method holding there to be a link between epistemic grounding and metaphysical commitment. Indeed, this aspect of Flage's reading also drives an interpretive claim about the need—or rather, lack thereof—for *arguments* in the *New Theory of Vision* to establish Berkeley's initial claim that we do not immediately perceive distance by vision. Flage proposes instead that the structure of NTV offers a prolonged defense of that claim by means of showing its explanatory power. The appeal to Berkeley's methodological commitments as accounting for certain features of both the theory of vision and the arguments for idealism should be of interest to both the non-specialist and the Berkeley scholar, who may find them provocative but nonetheless significant.

Chapter 6, on minds, is also noteworthy. Here Flage returns to his earlier work on notions<sup>3</sup> but reconsiders his former contention that we have relative notions of minds in light of passages from the *Dialogues* that suggest that we have an intuitive or reflexive (but in either case direct) access to our own minds. Flage offers the somewhat surprising

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<sup>1</sup> See Samuel Rickless, *Berkeley's Case for Idealism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See especially Kenneth P. Winkler, *Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> See Daniel E. Flage, *Berkeley's Doctrine of Notions: a Reconstruction Based on his Theory of Meaning* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

suggestion that Berkeley's notions might in some cases be ideas of reflection, noting that there is no constraint on ideas of reflection, that they resemble their objects. But rather than construing our direct access to our own minds as a kind of *introspective* access, as is fairly standard, Flage suggests that we read Berkeley as appealing to a *Cartesian* notion of intuition as grounding our knowledge of our own minds. The discussion here is somewhat brief, as is perhaps to be expected from a book aimed primarily at non-specialists; nonetheless, one might hope that Flage will be elaborating on this proposal in further work, as it is a refreshing take on a topic that could use a new look. This chapter also does not contain a section on historical context (although Flage does briefly discuss some different historical conceptions of substance). Some further discussion of Descartes' epistemology might have been well-placed.

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, Flage also discusses Berkeley's views on God—both his arguments for the existence of God (or at least, the existence of some God-like mind: more on this shortly) and his vision of what role God plays in his idealism/immaterialism. Flage pays most careful attention to the so-called 'passivity' argument for the existence of God, that is, the argument that our sensory ideas must be caused by some mind other than our own, because we are passive with respect to them, and that that mind must be benevolent and wise, because our sensory ideas are orderly. In chapter 4, this discussion focuses largely on providing a lovely explanation of Berkeley's view that our ideas are transparent to us, and showing how this fits in with arguments for the existence of spirit. In chapter 6, Flage returns to the passivity argument, offering the original suggestion that, in the early sections of the *Principles* (29-33), Berkeley does not mean to be providing an argument for the existence of a Christian God. Flage instead proposes that the argument in these sections is merely meant to establish the existence of the "Author of Nature," and that Berkeley only thinks he is entitled to argue that the "Author of Nature" *is* the Christian God at *Principles* 146 after having established the immense complexity of the physical world in the intervening passages. My own initial sense is that, if (with Doug Jesseph)<sup>4</sup> we read the passivity argument as an inference to the best explanation, then even if we concede to Flage that there is some added complexity between PHK 33 and 146, this merely renders the argument for the same conclusion stronger, rather than establishing a different conclusion in the later passage. That said, these sections of Flage's book are intriguing and engaging for the first-time reader and the specialist alike.

The discussion of the passivity argument is by far longer than Flage's discussion of the so-called "continuity" argument, that the continued existence of physical objects requires an infinite perceiver. He briefly recaps this argument in his discussion of Berkeley's *Dialogues* view that immaterialism "is superior to . . . Christian materialis[m] insofar as it provides a stronger proof of the existence of God" (106). It might have been nice to see a longer discussion, if not of the continuity argument itself (which commentators have sometimes focused on as one of Berkeley's weaker efforts), then at least of the view that ordinary objects persist over time, especially given that many first-time readers of

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<sup>4</sup> Douglas Jesseph, "Berkeley, God, and Explanation," in *Early Modern Philosophy: Mind, Matter, and Metaphysics*, eds. Christia Mercer and Eileen O'Neill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 186-205.

Berkeley, at whom this book is largely aimed, zero in on object-persistence as one of the main concerns confronting immaterialism.

Some of the inclusions in this book are surprising (though not unwelcome). The final chapters, on Berkeley's moral philosophy and his economic views, treat subjects that are not often covered in introductory texts on Berkeley. Of these chapters, chapter 7, on moral philosophy, is particularly interesting. Flage begins by making the standard distinctions between different kinds of moral theories, paying careful attention to the distinction between utilitarianism and natural law theory. This is because, in opposition to a once-standard reading of Berkeley on which he is a kind of rule-utilitarian,<sup>5</sup> and building on his own earlier treatment of the young Berkeley as an ethical egoist<sup>6</sup>, Flage here argues that Berkeley's views evolve from ethical egoism in the *Notebooks* to a natural law theory in *Passive Obedience* and in *Alciphron*. The arguments here are nicely supported by some well-chosen texts, and will surely be a useful contribution to the history of early modern moral philosophy.

Flage's book presents a clear, concise, and comprehensible introduction to a wide range of Berkeley's views, something that has been wanting for many years now. Specialists may not agree with some of the novel interpretations that Flage offers, but they are consistently interesting and well-supported. Moreover, he is careful not to treat them as the final word on any topic. For in his concluding remarks, he provides his readers with the delightful suggestion that they should treat this book in the same way that they would treat any other piece of interpretive literature, that is, as being "wrong, at least in detail" (180). Flage's book includes what amounts to a sustained invitation to readers to take up the texts on their own, something that can only be embraced. Upon the whole, this is a lovely book and a welcome addition to the existing literature.

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<sup>5</sup> See Paul J. Olscamp, *The Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970).

<sup>6</sup> See Daniel E. Flage, "Was Berkeley an Ethical Egoist?" *Berkeley Studies* 19 (2008): 3-18.