George Berkeley: Religion and Science in the Age of Enlightenment

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Chapter 1
How Berkeley’s Works Are Interpreted

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There are different kinds of studies of Berkeley. Some focus on specific areas of his thought; some provide overviews.1 Of the overviews, some are arranged according to the chronology of his individual works; others are arranged according to topics.2 Internal, analytic studies examine the cogency of his arguments and show how different interpretations of his texts handle criticisms raised by recent commentators; historical studies describe the background assumptions that inform his thinking.

More often than not, historical studies propose that we focus on issues and ways of thinking characteristic of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy in order to appreciate Berkeley’s insights. Generally that has meant that Berkeley is interpreted primarily in terms of Locke. A. A. Luce and Harry Bracken, however,


The standard deviation of a probability distribution is a measure of the spread or variability of the data. It is calculated as the square root of the variance. The variance is the average of the squared differences from the mean. A low standard deviation indicates that the values tend to be close to the mean of the distribution, while a high standard deviation indicates that the values are spread out over a wider range.

In a normal (Gaussian) distribution, the standard deviation is a key parameter that determines the shape of the curve. About 68% of the data falls within one standard deviation of the mean, 95% within two standard deviations, and 99.7% within three standard deviations. This is known as the empirical rule or the 68-95-99.7 rule.

The standard deviation is used in many fields, including finance, physics, engineering, and psychology, to analyze and compare different data sets. It is a fundamental concept in probability and statistics and plays a crucial role in understanding random processes and making predictions.
of interpretation that is unacknowledged and unchallenged—even when it ends up portraying Berkeley as confused, contradictory, or prone to fundamental changes in his positions. In the standard interpretation, the focus on Berkeley’s *Principles and Dialogues* justifies the appeal to Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke as the interpretive filters through which his other works are understood, because the *Principles and Dialogues* are the works in which he most directly addresses their issues. Interpretations that do not rely on a Cartesian or Lockean framework are usually dismissed as tendentious, far-fetched, or inconsistent with what the text “actually” says. The attempt to avoid an ahistorical reading is thus replaced by the equally pernicious strategy of thinking that Berkeley’s citations of Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke indicates that he thinks in their terms as well. When Berkeley says something that is inconsistent with a Cartesian or Lockean position such as, “the very existence of ideas constitutes the soul” (NB 577) — his comments are then usually interpreted (in the standard approach) to be positions he ultimately rejects—in some instances, just a few pages or days later.

John Roberts has recently thematized such an interpretive strategy, recommending that we elucidate Berkeley’s views “by locating them with respect to two traditions of the early modern period that inform and compete with his, those of Descartes and Locke.” When we do this, he concludes, we have a much clearer view of the basic features of Berkeleian thought. To make sure that those features are protected from any unnecessary complications in comparing remarks in Berkeley’s unpublished *Notebooks* and his published works, Roberts says that we should adopt what he calls “Constraint 1”: “When there is a conflict, one should reject early views that the author chose not to publish in favor of later views that the author chose to publish repeatedly” (Mob 7). Of course, this constraint is intended to be used especially in those instances in the *Notebooks* where Berkeley says something that sounds uncharacteristic of his more well-known views. In those cases, it is obviously easier to explain away the remarks by considering them as ill-conceived and subsequently rejected views, rather than to show how they can be interpreted in a way that is consistent with Berkeley’s other comments when they are understood apart from a non-Cartesian or non-Lockean context.

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with whom he is so closely allied.

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be perceived in consciousness,...
Informing a shift away from the traditional or received strategy of interpreting Berkeley are the following historiographic assumptions:

- First, the fact that Berkeley’s published comments appear to be inconsistent with one another does not mean that they are inconsistent. It is arbitrary and even arrogant to assume that it is more likely that he is confused or inconsistent than that we have failed to understand the nuances of his position.

- Second, the fact that Berkeley’s published comments appear to be inconsistent with some of his unpublished comments does not permit us to conclude that the unpublished comments represent views that he rejects or doubts. It is obviously easier to dismiss his unpublished remarks rather than to do the hard work of discerning how seeming inconsistencies can be overcome. Besides, authors are not required to publish all of their ideas, especially when they suspect (as Berkeley quickly discovered) that readers locked into a Cartesian or Lockean mindset will misinterpret them. When commentators refuse to treat Berkeley’s private 1708 notes on a par with his “considered” opinions published a year or two later, or cite an unpublished remark only when it supports a favored interpretation, or ignore De Motu (1721), Alciphron (1732), and Siris (1744) in favor of the “mature” works of 1709–1713 - they reinforce the bias in favor of thinking that Berkeley’s importance relies on reading him in a Cartesian or Lockean context.

- Third – and this one should be apparent to anyone familiar with the fallacy of the appeal to authority – the fact that an interpretation has become the official or received view does not guarantee its correctness – especially if it is based on violations of the two prior principles.

My purpose in raising these points is to emphasize how Berkeley’s published works in philosophy, religion, mathematics, science, economics, and politics are often understood apart from one another. Considering how his unpublished writings are relegated to a secondary status, and how his “early” (pre-1709) and “late” (post-1737) writings are treated as unimportant for grasping his central insights, and how he is supposed to have changed his mind even in his most well-known works, it is no wonder that commentators complain about not being able to determine Berkeley’s real position on certain issues.

All of this can be avoided, however, if we treat Berkeley’s writings as consistent with one another, and instead of thinking that he rejects his own ideas, we think that he merely refocuses his attention and adapts his ways of speaking to accommodate certain contexts or to clarify earlier remarks. His Notebooks provide the best opportunity for testing such a strategy. However, because Berkeley’s writings are so
The second example concerns Becket's murder described in "The Mirror of Pelagius." According to the Mirror, Becket was killed by a group of men near the church of St. John the Baptist. The Mirror describes Becket's murder as a result of his refusal to grant the bishop of Rochester a dispensation for his marriage. Becket was said to have been killed by a group of men who had been sent by the bishop of Rochester to obtain the dispensation. The Mirror describes Becket's murder as a just punishment for his refusal to grant the dispensation.

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According to the first approach, Berkeley is said to have always endorsed a Cartesian notion of the self as a spiritual substance, and his mention of the bundle theory is simply an indication of passing musings about a theory he ultimately rejects. Proponents of the second approach argue that the bundle theory was Berkeley’s real position, but for prudential reasons he gave lip service to the view that the mind is a Cartesian or Lockean substance. Those who adopt the third approach say that Berkeley accepted the bundle theory for a short time and then rejected it in favor of his published view. Despite their differences, all three strategies grant that the Cartesian and Humean concepts of mind are incompatible, and that is what drives the effort to show how Berkeley could not have proposed both.

Of course, the major flaw in these strategies is that they impose a Cartesian or Humean way of thinking about spiritual substance or mind onto Berkeley, and they refuse to acknowledge how he could develop a distinctive doctrine that does not draw on either view and does not attempt to reconcile them. These strategies of interpretation thus fail to appreciate how Berkeley objects fundamentally to describing the mind or spiritual substance as a thing that thinks or wills — not only because such a description is unnecessary but also because it easily misleads us into thinking that mind can be an object of thought (i.e., an idea) or can even be said to be a thing that thinks or wills:

Say you the mind is not the perceptions but that thing which perceives. I answer, you are abused by the words that and thing; these are vague, empty words without a meaning.... Say you there must be a thinking substance, something unknown which perceives and supports and is the cause of the ideas. Say I, make it appear there is any need of it, and you shall have it for me.... If you ask what thing it is that wills, I answer if you mean idea by the word thing or anything like an idea, then I say tis no thing at all that wills. This how extravagant soever it may seem yet is a certain truth. We are cheated by these general terms, thing, is, etc. Again, if by is you mean is perceived or does perceive, I say no thing which is perceived or does perceive wills.... Substance of a spirit is that it acts, causes, wills, operates, or if you please (to avoid the quibble that may be made on the word it), to act, cause, will, operate; its substance is not knowable, not being an idea. (NB 581, 637, 658–59, 829)

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10 See Lucie, Dialectic of Immaterialism, 24–33, 173; and Marc Hight and Walter Ott, “The New Berkeley,” Canadian Journal of Philosophy 34 (2004): 8–11. This strategy relies on the now discredited assumption that Berkeley’s marginal “+” mark indicates a position he comes to reject.


To think that Berkeley appeals to a description of mind or spiritual substance is generally assumed. However, in Berkeley's work, mind is understood as an active principle in perception, which he refers to as the "soul," or "spiriit." Berkeley often uses the term "mind" interchangeably with "soul". He distinguishes between mind and body, arguing that mind is not a physical substance.

In opposition to Descartes and Locke, Berkeley argues that the mind is not a separate entity from the body. Instead, Berkeley believes that all knowledge is derived from the present moment, and that objects exist only as long as they are perceived. This is known as the "presentism" theory of knowledge.

Berkeley's philosophy is often characterized as "immaterialist" or "immaterialist." He believed that the mind is the source of all knowledge, and that everything we perceive is merely an impression of the mind. Berkeley's ideas have had a significant influence on modern philosophy, particularly in the areas of epistemology and metaphysics.
To say that Berkeley endorses a doctrine of innate ideas -- especially when he is generally assumed to follow Locke in rejecting them -- is hardly a commonplace in Berkeley scholarship. Indeed, when confronted with Berkeley’s claim that we are created with innate ideas, commentators typically dismiss NB 649 as an aberration. But as with powers and the bundle theory, Berkeley does not change his mind on innate ideas. Rather, he adapts its salient features to his idealism, redefining innatism in a way that permits him to argue that different minds perceive the “same” ideas and experience the same moral sentiments -- not because the objects of their perceptions (i.e., the standard Cartesian or Lockeian innate ideas) are identical, but because God wills that their acts of perceiving are in concert with one another (PO 25; Alc I.14). In this way, the issue of innate ideas serves as a third example of how an otherwise puzzling doctrine in Berkeley’s philosophy can be explained without portraying him as confused or dismissing his texts as unrepresentative of his “considered” views.

Admittedly, Berkeley’s way of thinking about the mind’s relation to its ideas is different from that found in Descartes, Malebranche, or Locke, so it is hardly surprising to see how few commentators have appreciated its significance for understanding the overall cohesiveness of his thought. Geneviève Brykman, however, points out that Berkeley’s description of nature as a language links our ideas essentially to mind by embedding them in an always already discursive context. This linguistic characterization of mind challenges the standard Cartesian or Lockeian strategies for interpreting Berkeley by refusing to assume that minds and ideas are ontological givens. Instead, she sees Berkeley as developing a philosophy in which things in the world are identified by being differentiated in the “veil” of the divine language that minds enact.

No doubt, this strategy for interpreting Berkeley is unfamiliar to some historians of modern philosophy because it requires thinking in the Stoic terms of difference and propositional expression rather than the Platonic/Aristotelian terms of identity and predication on which Cartesian and Lockeian strategies draw. That might

explain why many readers fail to appreciate how Berkeley's shift in focus to the language of nature requires that we think of things first and foremost as signs that depend on being perceived specifically as this or that thing that is, as related to other things.

This shift in perspective—from simply assuming that things have their identity apart from their role in a communicative network to thinking of things in terms of how they relate to the sensory experience of others—marks a turning point in Berkeley's philosophy. Berkeley's theory of perception involves a radical rethinking of the nature of reality. For Berkeley, if there is no one to perceive something, then it cannot exist. This means that everything we perceive is a product of our own minds. Berkeley argues that the world is composed of nothing but ideas, which exist only in the minds of perceivers. This idea of the mind as the source of all reality is known as idealism.

In this passage, S. H. Daniel discusses the implications of Berkeley's shift in focus. Daniel notes that Berkeley's shift away from a focus on external reality to a focus on the mind as the source of all reality has important implications for our understanding of perception and experience. Berkeley's philosophy suggests that our perceptions are not simply reflections of an external world, but are instead constructed by our minds. This means that our experiences of the world are shaped by our individual perceptions and beliefs, rather than by an objective reality.

Berkeley's ideas have had a significant impact on the development of philosophy, particularly in the areas of epistemology and metaphysics. His emphasis on the role of the mind in shaping our experiences of the world has led to a renewed interest in the study of consciousness and perception. Berkeley's philosophy continues to be studied and debated by philosophers today, and his ideas have influenced a wide range of other philosophical traditions.
Berkeley’s shift in focus to the first and foremost as signs that is, as related to things that have their identity in thinking of things in terms of Berkeley’s philosophy but also his 32 years old, he says, he distrusted contemporaries (NB 266), seemingly a communal sense. That Irish Father, he refers to his belief that the relations that are literally sense experience.

As if experience runs throughout and from the pronouncements of a priori, or communicative legacy of being aware of anything — whether a point, means invoking a discursiveness to make sense of it. Perhaps the shall presume that their linguistic and sense of reality, but the Irish cannot say that we should speak in that even if we adopt the but subject it by drawing attention to the systematics, metaphysics, as sense of meaning. In that theory, within a system of signs. the activity of differentiating and relating is made. Minds are not very much can be described derivatively in such a way the world are intelligible. Mind specifically, the linguisticality of Berkeley’s works — including those philosophy, such as Passive and Sin, take on greater import for what the senses are explicable by systematics and metaphysics. In short, no idea without will, being either have them than annihilation, or annihiation than them there being no ideas perfectly void of all pain and uneasiness” (NB 833). All perception is thus unavoidably affective, because everything we experience — whether or not we recognize it as such — is significant in virtue of its place in a system of signs. By embedding the discussion of mind in the context of a system of signs, Berkeley (unlike his contemporaries) portrays mind as the will or intention that things be identified by being differentiated and related rather than as something distinct from already differentiated things.

In short, the way to interpret Berkeley’s works is (as he recommends to Samuel Johnson) to read them in order. In his Notebooks he sketches out the issues that will occupy his subsequent works, including examinations of: (1) how things are intelligible within networks of sign relations (New Theory of Vision, 1709); (2) what it means for things to exist (Principles I, 1710); (3) what minds are and how they relate to one another (Principles II, lost; Passive Obedience, 1712); and (4) how God’s act of creation is related to ideas and finite minds (Dialogues, 1713). Later works describe God’s ordering of events in terms of how objects are regulated by the laws of nature (De Motu, 1721) and how the minds that experience those objects are morally responsible and still free (Alciphron, 1732). The Theory of Vision Vindicated (1733) highlights the different ways in which finite minds confront the challenge of ordering experience (i.e., suggestion, inference); and the second edition additions to Principles and Dialogues (1734) reveal how the inherently semiotic or intentional character of mind is captured in the vocabulary of notions. In his works on mathematics and money — The Analyst (1734), A Defence of Free-thinking in Mathematics (1735), and The Querist (1735–1737) — Berkeley indicates how “notions” provide an intermediate concept between the signifying relations of ideas as determined by the divinely-instituted language of nature and those established through merely human convention. Indeed, nothical signification is Berkeley’s accommodation to our fallen human situation, in that the notions on which we rely in mathematics (e.g., proportion, infinity) and economics (e.g., money) are neither purely natural nor simply conventional, neither divine nor grounded merely in extra-systemic reference. In Siris (1744) this appeal to an intermediate way of speaking is extended to the minute corpuscles responsible for the efficacy of tar water. As the ultimate cause of all things, however, mind is the principle by which things are differentiated from and related to one another. Because our fallen nature precludes our thinking simply in those terms, Berkeley appeals to “pure elementary fire” (or “acidity”) as the instrumental cause of such differentiation.

In Siris, Berkeley’s philosophy comes full circle back to its original inquiry into how existence has meaning, in that it characterizes the central activity of mind not as an impulse toward homogenous unity but as the effort to achieve harmony in an

24 Berkeley to Johnson, 30 March 1730, in Philosophical Works, 355.
Chapter 2
Berkeley's Metaphysics
Marc A. Hight

2.1 Enter Instrumentalism

First we require a clear sense of the discussion from devolving on a characterization provided by.称为

one need not claim that Berkeley's tools are consistent in the sense that Berkeley's

there is a consistent position. 

Berkeley's wide-held tool is an instrument that requires some principles.

Douglas Joseph contends the

Berkeley is not simply by its definition a

being a stronger instrumentalism.

In Berkeley's way of thinking, the mind is on the

truth in the matter of Berkeley's thought and rest the assumption to imagine

cases where there are none."