

Review

Talia Mae Bettcher. *Berkeley: A Guide for the Perplexed*.
London: Continuum, 2008. xv + 207 pp.

In her new book, *Berkeley: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Talia Bettcher presents an insightful and cogent interpretation of Berkeley's metaphysics and epistemology. Bettcher focuses on Berkeley's two main works, *Principles of Human Knowledge* and *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, and bases her interpretations primarily on these works. The result is a coherent and original interpretation of Berkeley that concentrates on well known Berkeleyan themes and topics, but it has the unavoidable outcome of leaving other major works of Berkeley (e.g., *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, and *Alciphron; or, the Minute Philosopher*) with a much shorter treatment and only scant remarks about *De Motu* and *Siris*. The author acknowledges this and further claims that "any responsible introduction really does need to take this kind of focus" (xi). Maybe so, but I cannot help thinking that even an introductory book on Berkeley, with just over 200 pages (including index and bibliography), could have included at least some discussion of Berkeley's other works to give the reader some understanding of the development of Berkeley's views and the relationship between the systematic interpretation offered by Bettcher and Berkeley's earlier and later views. Berkeley's *Philosophical Notebooks* in particular, although ridden with interpretative difficulties, would have deserved at least some attention, especially since the footnotes in Bettcher's book are not excessive by any means. On the other hand, the secondary literature is taken into an account admirably: the references to it are few but well chosen, which fits the purpose of the book nicely. Instead of mentioning all there is written about some particular interpretative question, Bettcher generally just mentions the ones that she is against or which resemble her own interpretation.

That being said, the first chapter, although short, succeeds in giving an accurate description of Berkeley's life and the philosophical and political climate of his day. The second chapter describes Berkeley's overall philosophical project including its origins and targets. Bettcher points out that Berkeley is motivated not only by anti-skepticism and deep religious feelings but also by practical, moral considerations, an important point which is all too often left unmentioned when interpreting Berkeley. By siding with common sense against philosophical perplexities, Berkeley aims to encourage men into virtuous action by proving the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. The main forms of skepticism that undermine both religion and morality are identified as the denial of the real existence of sensible qualities, fueled by the new science of the day and the Lockean ignorance of the real essences of everyday items.

The third chapter discusses Berkeley's fundamental philosophical assumptions and offers an interpretation of the so-called Master argument. That Argument aims to show that it is impossible to conceive an everyday item existing unperceived. The problem is that, even if we grant that when we conceive of a thing that that thing is thereby conceived or thought in the mind, it does not follow that one has failed to conceive of that thing *as* conceived without the mind: one seems to be able to "isolate" the content from thinking itself. Bettcher argues that Berkeley operates with both a new understanding of consciousness and with a new understanding of ideas, and that these should be taken into an account when trying to understand

the Master Argument. On Bettcher's reading, thinking for Berkeley always involves consciousness that one is thinking ("reflexivity of thought"), and the consciousness in question ought not to be confused with the reflection whereby one attends to one's own mental states. The latter involves attending; the former (referred to by Bettcher as "essential consciousness") happens every time one thinks. The objects of essential consciousness in turn are for Berkeley "thing-like" items that Bettcher calls "subjective-objects." Bettcher considers there to be an important difference between the view defended by Berkeley and the previous view, defended by Locke and Descartes, according to which one is conscious of one's own *mental states*. Subjective-objects are not states, acts or episodes of mind, in the sense that, although their existence consists in being perceived, they nevertheless possess certain thing-like features: for instance, an imaginary unicorn is pink and has a horn. Besides subjective-objects, all essential consciousness involves the awareness of the fact that these objects of consciousness belong to me: it is I myself who is thinking. Whenever one thinks, one is conscious of both the (subjective-) object of one's thinking and oneself. Bettcher thus reformulates the worry about the Master Argument in these new terms: in order to conceive an everyday item to exist unperceived, "one must eliminate the self altogether (something which seems truly impossible to do)". Since all conceiving involves both subjective-object and awareness of oneself, this is impossible. The question now is whether in conceiving an ordinary object to exist unconceived we are able to eliminate the conceiving self (54). If not, the object conceived as existing unconceived has been represented as conceived.

It is better to quote Bettcher herself on the matter:

The complaint that the self has not intruded into the content has no merit, since things are never represented *as* perceived in the content. Rather, the content is *only* ever represented as perceived insofar as there is a self-evident self perceiving it. Berkeley's Master Argument would now hinge on the following assumption: An object is represented *as* perceived by the mind just in case there is an accompanying self. And if accepted for true, the argument then stands or falls on whether one is always conscious of oneself when one conceives of something else. (54)

I admit that I fail to see the solution of the Master Argument that follows from bringing the consciousness of self into every act of conceiving. Admittedly, it seems to follow by definition that one is always conscious of oneself in every conceiving. But how does it follow that one fails to conceive the object *as* unconceived? Just as it is possible to conceive an object *as* unconceived, it would seem to be possible to conceive an object as without the mind, although one always has to be conscious of oneself when doing this conceiving. Admittedly one would be conscious of oneself while conceiving it, but it has not been shown yet how this fact about conceiving the object "bleeds into the content" so that one cannot think of the thing *as* existing unconceived. Bettcher seems to be offering some additional reasons for this when she continues:

[N]o object can be perceived except *as* a subjective-object. Nor can one abstract certain aspects (such as color or sound) from their being perceived. For in abstractly thinking about color, one will nonetheless be aware of oneself as well. Since this is precisely what is involved in a thing being represented to the mind *as* perceived, it would appear that any

attempted abstraction is of no use in escaping cognitive-closure [i.e. that all thought contents are subjective-objects, see p. 51] . (54)

It seems that the impossibility of conceiving an object as unconceived hinges on our inability to abstract the object from our own existence. But why is our own existence of any importance when wondering whether trees and houses can exist unperceived unless one already presupposes that their existence is dependent on oneself? It seems that one could similarly deny that aspects of perceived objects can be abstracted from their being perceived by stipulating that conceived objects exist only as they are conceived; but one doesn't seem to need any essential consciousness for that. No doubt, one can equate subject-objects, whose existence is to be perceived, and ordinary things such as trees and houses. But that would seem to be begging the question instead of showing that objects cannot be conceived as unconceived.

The second part of the book, which comprises chapters 4–6, discusses the questions of immediate versus mediate perception (chapter 4), the thesis that everyday items are collections of sensible things immediately perceived (chapter 5), and the claim that spirits are the only substances (chapter 6). Especially illuminating is the discussion of different versions of representational realism in chapter 4. Bettcher distinguishes between Strong Immediate Perception (perceiving something immediately without the use of a vehicle of perception at all, as in perceiving a performer on stage via screen) and Weak Immediate Perception (which allows for immediately perceiving something by means of some vehicle when the vehicle itself is not perceived immediately, as in perceiving something with the help of binoculars).

Here and elsewhere, Bettcher's point would have been clearer were it not for occasional misprints in the text that could easily have been corrected. For instance, when discussing the Pain/Pleasure Argument, reference is repeatedly made to premise (3) of the argument (apparently that heat and pain are not distinct). However, the argument is not explicitly presented with numbered premises. Also in the discussion of the thesis that everyday items are nothing but collections of sensible things that we immediately perceive, the pictures that are designed to clarify the discussion are found on the wrong page.

The third part of the book treats Berkeley's arguments for the existence of God and other spirits (chapter 7), divine perception (chapter 8), and the status of sciences in Berkeley's philosophy and their relation to common sense (chapter 9). Bettcher offers an interesting solution to the problem of how God (who is perfect) can perceive pain (which is an imperfection; Third Dialogue, 240)—from which it seems to follow that the ideas that we and God perceive are not the same. Bettcher argues that we can understand how God's perceptions resemble ours by analogy to our ideas of imagination: just as ideas of imagination may resemble the ideas received by sensation without involving any pain or pleasure, so God too may be understood to perceive the pains that human beings perceive, but not by passively suffering them but only by actively causing them. They would thus be similar to our ideas of pain in the same way as imagined pains are similar to experienced pains, the difference being that imagined pains don't hurt. But it seems that we can think or imagine pains and pleasures without experiencing them (even if we must have experienced them at least once). This is not the case, however, with God, who is unable initially to perceive pains or pleasures in order to form imaginary pains and pleasures (which do not hurt or please) later on; so the analogy seems inadequate.

Bettcher ends her book with a short comparison between Berkeley and Hume. The discussion is interesting, since Bettcher only touches on the topic of activity and passivity that many commentators consider to be central to Berkeley's conception of the mind. Because of her emphasis on consciousness, though, the topic does not get much attention. She also attempts to explain Berkeley's view on mental causation by identifying the creation of an idea with merely perceiving it, thereby avoiding the need to suppose the existence of any individual volitions. But even though self-created ideas differ from those acquired through the senses in being less vivid and orderly and in lacking pleasure and pain, not all of our ideas of imagination seemingly are caused by us. For example, how in such an account would one distinguish ideas one intentionally creates from those that just pop into one's mind or which are due to memory? Moreover, Berkeley would seem to be committed to the view that the ideas we cause through imagination are created *ex nihilo* altogether mysteriously: we don't seem to have any account of how they come about. If this is the case, it seems inexplicable why we would want to call ourselves active when imagining instead of speaking of undergoing ideas of imagination. Some account of the *modus operandi* by which we create ideas of imagination would seem preferable to merely speaking of creating ideas by perceiving them.

Although Bettcher's book is meant as an introduction to Berkeley, I would be hesitant to use it as the only secondary literature on Berkeley when teaching an undergraduate course, or even recommending it as the very first commentary on Berkeley to start with. This is not due to the shortcomings of the book but because the book is somewhat difficult to approach without a fair amount of knowledge of Berkeley. However, for anyone familiar with both Berkeley's work and some of the secondary literature on it, this book will be rewarding in providing a novel and well argued interpretation of his thought. Indeed, I think the interpretations presented in it will have to be taken into an account in the prospective literature on Berkeley. Any serious student of Berkeley will find this book extremely interesting.

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