

Was Berkeley an Ethical Egoist?

Daniel Flage

And, generally, in the ages of Christian faith, it has been obvious and natural to hold that the realisation of virtue is essentially an enlightened and far-seeing pursuit of Happiness for the agent. Nor has this doctrine been held only by persons of a cold and calculating turn of mind: we find it urged with emphasis by so chivalrous and high-minded a preacher as Bishop Berkeley.

Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*

In this essay¹ I argue that the “Mo” sections in Berkeley’s Notebooks provide *prima facie* evidence that the young Berkeley was an ethical egoist.² The Notebook entries

¹ References to Berkeley’s Notebooks (NB) will be made parenthetically by entry number as found in *Philosophical Commentaries*, in vol. 1 of *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, (9 vols.; London: 1948-1957). References to the *Principles of Human Knowledge (PHK)*, *Passive Obedience (PO)*, and the *Theory of Vision . . . Vindicated (TVV)* will be by section number. References to *Alciphron (ALC)* will be by dialogue and section. References to Berkeley’s sermons (*SER*) will be by sermon number and page in *Works*, vol. 7.

² There are two broad approaches to the Notebooks. One approach assumes that Berkeley’s views remained constant throughout his life. On such a view, the remarks in the Notebooks—or a significant subset of them, for example, those *not* marked with a plus sign—reflect the same position as is found in all his published works. The other approach assumes that the Notebooks give us insight only into what Berkeley was thinking in 1707-1708. These views might or might not be the same views one finds in his published works. The latter is the approach I assume in this essay. Thus, my objective is *not* to show that the mature Berkeley was an ethical egoist. His remark in his sermon “Of the Will of God” that, “as it is necessary, that the civil actions of men as well as the natural motions of bodies, be governed by some one overruling principle or law, wisely directing them to their proper ends, and confining them within their due bounds, it is no less necessary to the wellbeing of the world, that the moral actions of all mankind, considered as one great society, be subjected to the law, and conformed to the will of God, who on all accounts is entitled to a dominion over them” (*SER* 10:131-132; cf. *SER* 8:110), might suggest a position closer to utilitarianism than ethical egoism.

It is widely held that Berkeley was a utilitarian. See, for example, Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 5, *Modern Philosophy: The British Philosophers*, part 2 (Garden City: Image Books, 1964), 57-61; Paul J. Olscamp, “Some Suggestions About the Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6 (1968): 147-56; Paul J. Olscamp, *The Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970); Matti Häyry, *Liberal Utilitarianism and Applied Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1994), 27-28; Matti Häyry and Heta Häyry, “Obedience to Rules and Berkeley’s Theological Utilitarianism,” *Utilitas* 6 (1994): 233-42; David Berman, *George Berkeley: Idealism and the Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 87-88; David Berman, *Berkeley and Irish Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2005), 155; Stephen Darwell, “Berkeley’s Moral and Political Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 311-38; cf. Stephen R. L. Clark, “Berkeley on Religion,” in *Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, 387-99. Opponents of utilitarian interpretation include Hugh W. Orange, “Berkeley as a Moral Philosopher,” *Mind* 15 (1890): 514-23; G. Dawes Hicks, *Berkeley* (1932; rept. New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), 185; George Pitcher, *Berkeley, The Arguments of the Philosophers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 228-54; Roomet Jakapi, “Was Berkeley a Utilitarian?” in *Human Nature As the Basis of Morality and Society*

demonstrate that Berkeley was intrigued by Locke's contention that moral truths are as subject to demonstration as mathematical truths,³ since at least twelve of the thirty-nine entries marked "Mo" concern moral demonstration (NB 669, 677, 683, 690, 697, 705, 732, 734, 739, 755, 804, 883; cf. 698, 728, 853). Given Berkeley's interest in the demonstrability of moral propositions and that the Berkeley of the Notebooks provides only a limited account of the meaning of moral terms, and given that neither Locke nor Berkeley accepted an ontology containing universals, I begin with a brief examination of Locke's account of the meaning of moral terms. Next, I provide a brief discussion of ethical egoism. Third, I argue that if Berkeley accepted Locke's account of the meaning of moral terms—*sans* abstract ideas—then the "Mo" entries in the Notebooks tend to suggest that Berkeley seriously entertained ethical egoism. I conclude with some brief remarks on *Passive Obedience*, arguing that at least some elements of that work can be interpreted egoistically.

1. Locke and the meaning of moral terms⁴

The Locke of the *Essay* provides an elaborate taxonomy of ideas. Among those ideas are mixed modes, which provide "greatest part of the words made use of in divinity, ethicks, law, and politicks, and several other sciences" (*Essay* 2.22.12). While ideas of substance represent objects external to the mind (external archetypes), mixed modes are non-representative; they are their own archetypes. As Locke wrote, "Our *complex* Ideas of *Modes*, being voluntary Collections of simple *Ideas*, which the Mind puts together without reference to any real Archetypes, or standing Patterns, existing any where, *are*, and cannot but be *adequate Ideas*" (*Essay* 2.31.3; cf. *Essay* 3.5.3-6). It is these voluntary joining together of ideas that provide the meanings of what might be called secondary moral terms, that is, kinds of actions to which moral properties are ascribed, such as "murther" and "sacrilege" (*Essay* 2.22.3), "lying" (*Essay* 2.22.9), "gratitude" and "polygamy" (*Essay* 2.28.4). Similarly, mixed modes provide the basis for the meaning of primary moral terms such as "good" and "evil" (*Essay* 2.20.3, 2.21.43), "moral obligation," "moral right," and "moral power" (*Essay* 2.28.3). Moral relations are "the Conformity or Disagreement, Men's voluntary Actions have to a Rule to which they are referred, and by which they are judged of" (*Essay* 2.28.4). While pleasure and pain and their respective causes are naturally good and evil, "*Morally good and evil* then, is only the Conformity or Disagreement of our voluntary Actions to some Law, whereby Good or Evil is drawn on us, by the Will and Power of the Law-maker; which Good and Evil, Pleasure or Pain, attending our observance, or breach of the Law, by the Decree of the Law-maker, is that we call *Reward* and *Punishment*" (*Essay* 2.28.5). Locke claims that moral rules are of three types: laws of God, laws of civil society, and laws of reputation, that is, social mores (*Essay* 2.28.6).

in *Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Juhana Lemetti, (Helsinki: Philosophy Society of Finland, 2007), 53-68.

³ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Book 4, Chapter 3, section 18; cf. 4.4.7, 4.4.9, and 4.12.8. References to the *Essay* will be made parenthetically by book, chapter, and section.

⁴ I have discussed Locke's account of moral reasoning and natural law in detail in "Locke and Natural Law," *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review* 39 (2000): 437-60.

There are several points of which we should take particular notice. Mixed modes are the voluntary joining together of ideas to which a term is applied. As such, these mixed modes are strictly subjective, although Locke suggests that disputes regarding the meanings of these terms can be resolved through careful definition (*Essay* 4.3.20). It is important to notice that moral rules—whether divine, civil, or social—are all couched in terms of their tendencies to result in pain—moral evil—if violated. As I have argued at greater length elsewhere,⁵ this tying of moral law to pleasure and pain gives reason to believe that Locke was, at bottom, an ethical egoist: not only does one naturally seek pleasure and seek to avoid pain (cf. *Essay* 1.3.3), and seek to obtain those things that cause pleasure and seek to avoid those things that cause pain, but one ought to do so.⁶

2. Some remarks on ethical egoism

Before turning to Berkeley, I shall make a few remarks on ethical egoism.

Ethical egoism generally does not receive good press among moral philosophers. It is sometimes portrayed as wanton selfishness. But unless one were living alone on a deserted island—indeed, *even if* one were living alone on a deserted island—it is unclear that identifying moral obligation with doing what is in one's interest can be understood as the unbridled venting of one's selfish whims. The thought of being able to indulge in a large bowl, or two, or seven of super-premium ice cream with unlimited toppings whenever I'd wish might appear to be the height of pleasure and therefore a moral obligation on egoistic grounds. Of course, if my doctor is right—a dubious assumption we might hope—after two or three such binges I would certainly die of a massive heart attack. Since death and sensuous pleasure appear to be incompatible, and heart attacks are reported to be quite painful, I appear to be morally obligated to refrain from excessive ice cream consumption (cf. *ALC* 2.18). So, even if I were marooned on a deserted island with an endless supply of ice cream, it would appear to be contrary to my interests, and therefore morally wrong on egoistic principles, to excessively indulge my ice cream fetish (alas!).

This example shows us that one must distinguish between sustainable pleasures and unsustainable pleasures. A sustainable pleasure is one that does not lead to pain, or, more properly, of any two pleasures, the pleasure that persists (or tends to persist) for a longer period of time before resulting in pain is more sustainable. The pleasure derived from

⁵ “Locke and Natural Law,” particularly 447-48. It might be worthy of notice that Hume also ascribed to Locke “the selfish system of morals.” See David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Appendix 2, in *Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. rev. by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), Appendix 2, paragraph 3, p. 296.

⁶ This may be seen as part of a natural law tradition that takes a natural inclination as a mark of what is morally good. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Qu. 94, Art. 2 and 3; Javier Hervada, *Critical Introduction to Natural Law*, 10th edition, trans. Mindy Emmons, Gratianus Collection Series, Section Handbooks (Montréal: Wilson & Lefleur, 2006), 132-37. Aquinas, of course, ties this inclination to reason; Locke ties it to sensation. Independent of that tradition, insofar as the notion of moral obligation is understood as a mixed mode, it allows the creator of the mixed mode to determine its ideational components.

eating ice cream is not a sustainable pleasure: the amount of pleasure-per-spoonful decreases as one eats; if one eats enough ice cream in a given period of time, one will become ill: the pleasure will be replaced by pain; and if one regularly eats enough ice cream over an extended period of time, the medical types tell us it will lead to heart disease and death. Insofar as an egoist ought to maximize her own interests (pleasures), preference ought to be given to activities resulting in sustainable pleasures rather than unsustainable pleasures.⁷

If the egoistic principle can be consistently applied, its calculations must take various facts into account. Human beings often tend to react to certain kinds of actions in predictable ways. Humans do not react well to having their property stolen, having friends or relatives murdered, being told lies, being treated with little or no respect, and so forth. If one is morally obligated to maximize one's own pleasure or happiness, these facts must be taken into account even if one is living in a Lockean state of nature. The only way one can maximize one's own *long term* happiness is to pay some attention to the interests of others. So, for example, if I knew that stealing my neighbor's goat was likely to result in various actions against my person, I would have reason to refrain from theft even if I considered barbecued goat a sumptuous treat. In a political society, where some of these actions are subject to punishment by the state, I would have even more reason to abstain from these actions since the probability of punishment (with its ensuing pain) might be greater.⁸

If ethical egoism is a viable moral stance, it must be concerned with *long term* self-interest. Typically, one should avoid actions that result in immediate pleasures if a rational calculation suggests that it is likely that the long-term results would be degrees of pain that would outbalance the immediate pleasure.⁹ If one introduces the presumption of eternal rewards and punishments for one's actions relative to a set of divinely established

⁷ Actions resulting in more sustainable pleasures are, presumably, artistic and intellectual activities (cf. NB 852; *PO* 5). This does *not* mean, of course, that one can or should entirely ignore the gustatory pleasures: consuming certain amounts of the right kinds of food are necessary for the maintenance of one's life and, therefore, the possibility of obtaining artistic or intellectual pleasures. Nor does it mean that artistic and intellectual pleasures are indefinitely sustainable. While trying to figure out what is going on in Berkeley's philosophy is—*of course!*—near the height of intellectual pleasure, it also occasionally results in the pain (frustration) of finding oneself (temporarily?) unable to make sense of certain passages and how they fit together. I suspect the egoist must seek the best balance of the various activities that are jointly necessary and sufficient for the maximization of sustainable pleasure—to the extent that can be known, it is known on the basis of experience. Berkeley, as a theist, presumably held that the only infinitely sustainable pleasure is the pleasure of heaven.

⁸ Or if not greater, at least the results are more predictable. If, in a state of nature, I eat John's goat and am discovered, John might engage in various threats unless I provide some kind of restitution (e.g., another goat). If I provide no restitution, John might simply continue to threaten. On the other hand, if I eat Fred's goat and am discovered, my life might be forfeit. At least in a political system, one can expect that one's punishment will fall within a certain range.

⁹ Similarly, if one is to obtain the skills necessary to engage in activities that will result in more sustainable pleasures, one often must endure a certain amount of pain along the way. For example, if one is going to experience the joys of producing music, one must endure the pain (tedium) of practicing scales.

laws—an assumption Locke and Berkeley shared—the stakes become infinitely great. So, to the extent one can determine what those divine laws require, it is in one's greatest interest to follow those laws. Under such circumstances, ethical egoism commits one to a conservative code of conduct.

Now we turn to the Notebooks.

3. The Berkeley of the Notebooks

If my previous remarks provide reason to believe that Locke accepted a fairly sophisticated form of ethical egoism, this, by itself, tells us nothing about Berkeley. At most it shows that there was a sophisticated form of egoism that was available to Berkeley, and, insofar as nominalism consists of the claim that all existents are individual and determinate (particulars), it shows that there was a moral theory based on a nominalistic ontology that stands as an alternative to Hobbes's moral theory. While the entries in the Notebooks unquestionably show that Berkeley reflected on some of the sections of Locke's *Essay* that concern moral reasoning, it is equally clear that he could not accept the Lockean theory without modifications. In examining the remarks in the Notebooks, I begin by looking at the entries that concern the meaning of moral terms and demonstration in moral reasoning.¹⁰ Next, I look at Berkeley's remarks on sensual pleasure as the *summum bonum* (NB 769). I show that even the remarks in some of Berkeley's early sermons tend to support my contention that Berkeley deemed individual pleasure or happiness as the good one ought to seek. I conclude with some remarks on *Passive Obedience*.

Berkeley cannot accept Locke's moral theory insofar as Locke couches everything in terms of mixed modes, which are abstract ideas. Berkeley denies not only that we have *abstract* ideas of moral properties; he denies that we have *any* ideas of moral properties. At NB 669 he wrote:

We have no Ideas of vertues & vices, no Ideas of Moral Actions wherefore it may be Question'd whether we are capable of arriving at Demonstration about them, the morality consisting in the Volition chiefly.¹¹

¹⁰ For a somewhat different account of Berkeley's views on moral demonstration in the Notebooks see Graham P. Conroy, "George Berkeley on Moral Demonstration," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 22 (1961): 205-14.

¹¹ Cf. NB 508 on free will. NB 669 is ambiguous. It *might* mean that we have no ideas of moral properties at all. Such an assumption leads one to questions regarding Berkeley's account of the meaning of moral terms. See, for example, Bertil Belfrage, "The Theological Positivism of George Berkeley (1707-1708)," in *Human Nature As the Basis of Morality and Society in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Juhana Lemetii and Eva Piirimäe (Helsinki: Philosophy Society of Finland, 2007), 37-52. On the other hand, it *might* mean that there is no *distinct and unique* idea that provides the meaning of a moral term such as "morally good"; rather, a moral term "piggybacks" on an idea that already provides the meaning for a term such as "pleasure" or "pain." This kind of piggybacking is comparable to Locke's account of mixed modes, it is consistent with Berkeley's later identification of the *summum bonum* with sensual pleasure (NB 769), and it must be assumed by anyone who would

This is one of the entries in which Berkeley is working through the nature of moral demonstration and demonstration in general. After distinguishing moral truths from natural and mathematical truths (NB 676; cf. NB 853), he remarks that “signification or Including or thinking by Including in Morality” (NB 677) provides the basis for moral knowledge. This does *not* depend on ideas: “The opinion that men had Ideas of Moral actions has render'd the Demonstrating Ethiques very difficult to them” (NB 683). Moral demonstration is all a matter of the relations among the meanings of terms. So, “To demonstrate Morality it seems one need only make a Dictionary of Words & see which included which. at least. This is the greatest part & bulk of the Work” (NB 690). Certainty can be based solely upon words and their meanings—where “meanings” are understood as only a definitional web—so long as the meanings are held constant. As Berkeley remarked, “We may have certainty & knowlege without Ideas \wedge . \wedge i.e without other Ideas than the Words & their standing for one idea i.e. their being to be used indifferently” (NB 730-730a; cf. NB 731), that is, without equivocation. The meanings of terms or signs “are perfectly arbitrary & in our power, made at pleasure” (NB 732). But the implication of the arbitrary meanings of signs together with the assumption that demonstration involves only signs—not ideas—is that demonstration is only verbal. As Berkeley wrote:

Let any Man shew me a Demonstration not verbal that does not depend either on some false principle or at best on some principle of Nature which is y^e effect of God's will and we know not how soon it may be changed. (NB 734)

Reasoning there may be about things or Ideas Actions but Demonstration can be only Verbal. I question, no matter etc (NB 804; cf. NB 739 and 771)

So, while demonstration yields certainty, it is merely verbal certainty: like pure arithmetic, there is no guarantee that it is applicable to ordinary life.

So, Berkeley seems to have deemed the Lockean approach to demonstration in ethics a dead end since: (1) moral ideas cannot be mixed modes insofar as mixed modes are abstract ideas; (2) if one takes seriously the contention that the meanings of moral terms are arbitrary—as Locke's account of mixed modes entails—and reformulates the Lockean system simply in terms of the definitional meanings of signs, then moral demonstration is possible; but (3) moral demonstration becomes nothing more than a verbal issue.

attribute a teleological theory of normative ethics—whether egoistic or utilitarian—to Berkeley. Hence, my working assumption follows the second line of interpretation. Nonetheless, as we shall see below, in his discussions of moral demonstration in the Notebooks, Berkeley *seems* to hold that moral demonstration depends upon nothing more than relations among words without grounding those words in ideas of sense or reflection. This, in turn, suggests that the Berkeley of the Notebooks was still in the process of working out an account of the meaning of moral terms, a possibility that no one should find terribly surprising.

But a concern with demonstration in morals is not the only theme that is found in Berkeley's jottings on morals. Among his earliest entries concerning morals are a number of entries concerning self-interest:

I allow not of the Distinction there is made twix't Profit & Pleasure. (NB 541)

I'd never blame a Man for acting upon Interest. he's a fool that acts on any other Principle. the not considering these things has been of ill consequence in Morality. (NB 542)

I am glad the People I converse with are not all richer, wiser etc than I. This is agreeable to Reason, is no sin. Tis certain that if the Happiness of my Acquaintance encreases & mine not proportionably, mine much decrease. The not understanding this & the Doctrine about relative Good discuss'd with French, Madden etc to be noted as 2 Causes of mistake in Judging of moral Matters. (NB 569)

These entries suggest that whatever moral principles obtain, they at least cannot be contrary to self-interest. Following these entries, Berkeley's focus shifts to considerations of demonstration in morals. But a concern with self-interest reemerges in NB 769. There we find this:

Sensual Pleasure is the Summum Bonum. This the Great Principle of Morality. This once rightly understood all the Doctrines even the severest of the Gospels may clearly be Demonstrated. (NB 769)

And a bit later, this:

Sensual Pleasure qua Pleasure is Good & desirable. by a Wise Man. but if it be Contemptible tis not quâ pleasure but qua pain or Cause of pain. or (w^{ch} is the same thing) of loss of greater pleasure. (NB 773)

These entries suggest that Berkeley was at least flirting with ethical egoism. But one might suggest that the identification of the *summum bonum* with sensual pleasure is ambiguous. One *might* suggest that Berkeley's remark should be understood as the factual claim that human beings are psychological hedonists, a claim that was fairly common at the time (cf. *Essay* 1.3.3). Even if one grants that Berkeley was concerned with a moral principle—as he suggests—it is ambiguous between the maximization of pleasure for an individual and the maximization of pleasure for a group. The former would suggest Berkeley's interests were egoistic; the latter would suggest his interests were utilitarian. Is there a way to decide which view Berkeley intended in the Notebooks?

There are several reasons why I believe the passages in the Notebooks are more consistent with an egoistic reading than a utilitarian reading. First, such a reading is consistent with the entries on self-interest and profit. Secondly, there is no entry in the

Notebooks that is unequivocally concerned with the interests of society.¹² Thirdly, as I show below, his early sermon “Of Immortality” prescribes the individual attainment of happiness to be the ultimate end of action. To see what is entailed in ascribing ethical egoism to Berkeley, consider again the kind of ethical egoism I ascribed to Locke.

I suggested above that if one is to be a consistent ethical egoist, one must be concerned *not* with what appears to be an immediate source of pleasure or happiness; rather, one must be concerned with what will yield the greatest amount of pleasure or happiness *in the long run*. Berkeley acknowledges that in determining one’s duty, one must take the long view. As he notes in entry 839:

One great Cause of Miscarriage in Men’s affairs is that they too much regard the Present. (NB 839)

Further, in being concerned with one’s own good, one must not only be concerned with pleasures beyond those that are immediately obtainable, one must also be concerned with the interests of others:

In Valuing Good we reckon too much on y^e present & our own. (NB 851)

Why should attending to the interests of others point to a commitment to ethical egoism rather than utilitarianism? Because anyone living in a society—even a minimalist society such as a Lockean state of nature—who would maximize his or her own long-term interests must pay attention to the interests and inclinations of other people in the society. People who engage in robbery, murder, adultery, lying, and so forth can expect various types of retaliation if discovered. So, if one is to maximize one’s long-term self-interest, one needs to attend to the interests of others and their probable reactions to one’s actions.

Further, while Berkeley might have concluded that a purely demonstrative ethic would yield nothing more than verbal truths, he suggested that “Morality may be Demonstrated as mixt Mathematics” (NB 755).¹³ If moral demonstration is construed on the model of mixed mathematics, then it might be understood as the application of a moral principle—such as “Act in such a way that it maximizes your long-term self-interest (pleasure, happiness)” —to individual cases or as the basis for formulating general rules of conduct. To do so, one would need to appeal to laws of probable behavior.¹⁴ If one were to do so concerning general conditions—the principles involved are general, so it is reasonable to conclude that one would reach general conclusions, that is, general rules of conduct—the

¹² The possible exception is NB 851, which I discuss below.

¹³ Cf. NB 770, where Berkeley asked whether geometry also should be understood as mixed mathematics.

¹⁴ That Berkeley contended that one can (and, perhaps, should) appeal to descriptive natural laws in determining one’s behavior is clear from *PHK* 31. At NB 817 he wrote, “Mem. to take notice of Lockes Woman afraid of a wetting,” which alludes to an example of a woman predicting the weather based on visible signs. See *Essay* 4.17.4.

ethical egoist is likely to conclude that he or she should accept general rules such as, “Do not kill,” “Do not steal,” “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not bear false witness,” etc.¹⁵

Considerations of self-interest also point toward the kinds of pleasure that are best pursued. At NB 787 Berkeley notes, “Mem. to excite men to the pleasures of the Eye & the Ear w^{ch} surfeit not, nor bring those evils after them as others.” Later he remarked:

There be two sorts of Pleasure the one is ordain’d as a spur or incitement to somewhat else & has a visible relation & subordination thereto, the other is not. Thus the pleasure of eating is of the former sort, of Musick is y^e later sort. These may be used for recreation, those not but in order to their End. (NB 852)

If the consistent ethical egoist focuses on sustainable pleasures, this focus on the pleasures of the eye and ear—art and music—is what one would expect. Gustatory pleasures are unsustainable; pleasures provided by the fine arts are indefinitely sustainable. Indeed, Berkeley here suggests gustatory pleasures are little more than instrumental: the pleasures of the palate are merely a means to the attainment of health, which is a sustainable pleasure (even if it is a pleasure that is most noticed in its absence).¹⁶ It is unclear how this passage would support a utilitarian reading of Berkeley, for on such a reading it seems to suggest that the good of society is more fully obtained by a focus on the fine arts than by a system that provides all members of society with at least the basic necessities of life.¹⁷ To the ethical egoist, however, it is little more than sage advice: the pleasures from the contemplation of art or music cannot be overdone nor do they result in subsequent pain; they are sustainable pleasures.

You might have noticed that I have had little to say about the future bishop’s concern with the religious side of ethics. The reason is that the Berkeley of the Notebooks raises few ethical concerns that tie to religion. There are only two entries marked “Mo” that explicitly allude to God vis-à-vis moral obligation:¹⁸

The 2 great Principles of Morality. the Being of a God & the Freedom of Man: these to be handled in the beginning of the Second Book. (NB 508)

¹⁵ It might also be worth noticing that in *Guardian* #127—one of the *Guardian* essays universally attributed to Berkeley—after discussing the natural emotional tendency one has to look to the common good of humans, Berkeley comments, “because the good of the whole is inseparable from that of the parts; in promoting therefore the common good, every one doth at the same time promote his own private interest” (*Works* 7: 227-28).

¹⁶ Sustaining health would seem to depend on “excellent rules [descriptive natural laws] about exercise, air, and diet” (*ALC* 6:28).

¹⁷ A sophisticated egoist might well recognize that a social system that provides basic necessities to all members of society is in her best interest, since it provides a modicum of social stability.

¹⁸ NB 734 might be considered a third passage, but the issue there is moral demonstration, alluding to “some principle of Nature which is the effect of God’s will and we know not how soon it may be changed.” A fourth is NB 769, where Berkeley claims that sensual pleasure is the *summum bonum*, claiming “This once rightly understood all the Doctrines even the severest of the Gospels may clearly be Demonstrated.” I discuss NB 769 below.

God Ought to be worship'd. This Easily demonstrated when once we ascertain the signification of the word God, worship, ought. (NB 705)

The allusion to free will in the first entry requires at least that one be capable of choices that can affect one's actions (cf. NB 145, 145a, 149, 166, 539, 626, 631, 816). How the Being of God, as such, plays a role in the moral considerations of a presumptive ethical egoist is less clear, but the second passage might shed some light on that issue. Assume, as the future bishop certainly did,¹⁹ that there is a God who has all the attributes theistic philosophers traditionally assign to God, that is, God is in some sense a person, all powerful, unique, a universal ruler, etc. If there were such a one, then it would be in one's long-term best interest to recognize God's existence and to treat God with respect. Thus, just as a consideration of one's long-term self-interests might justify those claims regarding one's duties to other human beings that are summarized in the Decalogue, considerations regarding God vis-à-vis one's long-term interests are summarized in those commandments concerning God. Notice, this treats the commandments as nothing but implications of the egoistic principle: the best means to obtaining happiness is to act in accordance with those laws. If the will of God can be discerned either by reason or revelation,²⁰ then considerations based on the egoistic principle allow one to discern God's will by reason. Revelation reveals the same laws together with the disturbing claim that if you break the rules, "God'll get ya (forever and ever, amen)." So, an ethical egoist should conclude that long-term self-interest by itself—applying the egoistic principle to considerations of persons alone—would justify each of the commandments of the Decalogue, and once those same commandments are recognized as divinely instituted—together with promises of eternal happiness if followed and eternal pain if broken—one is morally obligated on egoistic grounds to follow God's laws.

Someone might object that there is another way to understand the position in the Notebooks. The objection might be posed this way: "One should take more seriously the divine command theory as an alternative account of Berkeley's views about morality. Berkeley might be an ethical egoist because he subscribes to the divine command account of morality (which presupposes fear/hope of sanctions, personal identity, freedom of the agent, etc.). The argument you have given seems to suggest just the opposite. Nonetheless, there is nothing in your argument that rules out the divine command account."²¹

There are several points to notice in reply. First, in most schematic representations of moral theories, divine command theories are set in opposition to egoistic theories of obligation. On a divine command theory, engaging in or refraining from an action of a certain kind is deemed a positive or negative duty *because* it is commanded by the Deity. On such a view, the consequences of one's actions play no role in determining the moral

¹⁹ This will become clear when we look at the sermon "Of Immortality."

²⁰ *SER* 10:130; cf. Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. John C. Higgins-Biddle, The Clarendon Edition of the Works of John Locke (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 149, where Locke claims even pagan philosophers, upon hearing Christian laws of morality, "found them agreeable to reason; and such as can be by no means contradicted."

²¹ I wish to thank a referee for *Berkeley Studies* for raising this objection.

character of an action. In contrast, ethical egoism is a consequentialist (teleological) theory of moral obligation, and, as such, it is *solely* the consequences of an action (furthering one's interests) that determine the action's moral character. So, while a theory of *motivation*, such as *psychological* egoism, might be fit well with a typical divine command theory—the presumptive *fact* that all human beings seek pleasure and avoid pain might motivate one to follow divine laws due to threats of eternal punishment—it is *prima facie* implausible to contend that Berkeley is an *ethical* egoist *and* subscribes to a divine command theory. Second, one might attempt to subsume the principle of ethical egoism under a divine command theory, that is, one might contend that the principal divine commandment is that in all actions one ought to seek what is in one's best interest. Historically this might be taken as some variation on a Christian natural law theory. On such a scheme, the commandments of the Decalogue—the typical divine commands in the Western tradition—would be understood as derivative rules specifying the best means to the end of individual human happiness. Further, it would allow, as most natural law theorists do, that the requirements of natural law can be known by reason alone (as well, in the Christian tradition, as by revelation). If the critic is concerned with such a divine command theory, I grant that the Berkeley of the Notebooks *might* have entertained it, although there is no textual evidence supporting it in the Notebooks, and the contention that the egoistic principle is the fundamental divine commandment is *prima facie* inconsistent with most understandings of biblical revelation.²² Finally, and most importantly, there is no evidence in the Notebooks that Berkeley identified moral rules with divine laws in virtue of their divine source. The two passages that might be cited as providing *some* evidence for such an interpretation (NB 508 and 705) are obscure. On the other hand, his identification of the *summum bonum* with sensual pleasure at NB 769 and his concern with pleasures derived from the arts at NB 852—which, presumably, are more sustainable than most sensual pleasures—tend to suggest that pleasure or happiness is the end sought in morally correct actions. If is so, then it would seem that keeping divine commandments is morally correct insofar as it yields greater pleasure and less pain.

But is there textual evidence that Berkeley held that one ought to obey God's laws simply out of self interest? It seems so. His sermon "Of Immortality" suggests exactly that.

²² There are other variants on natural law theory that could be consistent with the position in the Notebooks, although the evidence there is insufficient to show that it was the position Berkeley entertained. One such is Locke's, who claims not only that "*Morally good and evil* then, is only the Conformity or Disagreement of our voluntary Actions to some Law, whereby Good or Evil is drawn on us, by the Will and Power of the Law-maker; which Good and Evil, Pleasure or Pain, attending our observance, or breach of the Law, by the Decree of the Law-maker, is that we call *Reward and Punishment*" (*Essay* 2.28.5), but also that the laws involved range from social mores to civil laws to divine laws (*Essay* 2.28.6). In both, the end is personal pleasure that arises from conforming to or pain that arises from disobeying a law. On Locke's view, the precise content of divine laws might never be known (see *Essay* 4.18.10). So regarding divine laws pertaining to other humans, the best way to determine their content might be from the resulting pleasure or pain that arises from applying what one takes to be the content of the law.

The sermon “Of Immortality” comes from approximately the same period as the Notebooks: it was preached in Trinity College Chapel on Sunday evening, 11 January 1707-8. Focusing first on the question of the effect Christianity had on the world (*SER* 1:9), Berkeley suggests that promises of eternal bliss for living a virtuous life and eternal misery for living a vicious life gave reason to follow the path of virtue. He wrote:

if some among the Heathen practis'd good actions on no other view than y^e temporal advantages they brought to civil society, if others were found who thought vertue a reward sufficient for itself. if reason & experience had long before convinc'd the world how unpleasant & destructive vice had been, as well to its votaries as y^e rest of mankind. w^t man would not embrace a thing in it self so lovely & profitable as vertue, wⁿ recommended by the glorious reward of life & immortality? w^t wretch so obdurate & foolish as not to shun vice a thing so hatefull & pernicious wⁿ discouraged therefrom by the additional terrors of eternal death & damnation? Thus might a man think a thorough reformation of manners y^e necessary effect of such a doctrine as our Saviour's. (*SER* 1:10).

Given the context, one might reasonably assume that Berkeley used “virtue” to refer to actions consistent with divine laws, and “vice” to refer to its opposite.²³ He seems to suggest that one ought to seek what is in one's own interest, and the only ultimate means to do so is to follow God's laws.

Of course, Berkeley remarks, there is little evidence that Christians are more inclined to follow a path that is rationally in one's own interest than were the “old Heathen Romans” (*SER* 1:10), even though Christians claim to know that the stakes are much higher—eternal bliss or eternal damnation—than the heathens recognized. Indeed, even given a wager no less extreme than Pascal's, Berkeley contends that it is only rational to place the desires for eternal happiness above all others (*SER* 1:12-13). And he explains why humans do not focus on the eternal: one has no determinate idea of eternal pleasures and pains, and one assumes that such eternal rewards and punishments are in the distant future (*SER* 1:13).

So Berkeley concludes that considerations of self-interest rationally oblige us to attend to our eternal interests, which are couched in terms of pleasure and pain. This suggests that one is morally obligated to follow God's laws *because* doing so yields an infinite increase in pleasure, while ignoring them yields an infinite increase in pain. This is precisely what one might expect from an ethical egoist. Further, this is wholly consistent with the remark at NB 769 that “Sensual Pleasure is the Summum Bonum. This the Great Principle of Morality. This once rightly understood all the Doctrines even the severest of the Gospels may clearly be Demonstrated.” Weighing one's actions on a scale that includes eternal

²³ It is fairly clear that the later Berkeley understood virtue in this way, in contrast with some of the moral sense theorists. See *TVV* 3.

rewards and punishments, following “even the severest [doctrines] of the Gospels” is strictly a matter of self-interest.²⁴

But someone might object that sermons are a curious source for determining philosophical beliefs. “Preachers have a vested interest in keeping ‘the faithful’ in line,” such a one would say. “Hell-fire and brimstone sermons are one of the tools of the trade. So, the fact that Berkeley preached such a sermon—even if it was not extremely sulfuric—can provide one with little insight into his moral *philosophy*.”

I confess some sympathy with such an objection.²⁵ But the fact that his public pronouncements are consistent with and in some cases help explain the meaning of his private remarks in the Notebooks seems to be a reason for taking *this* sermon to provide *some* evidence for contending that the young Berkeley seriously entertained ethical egoism.

4. *Passive Obedience*

But someone will certainly object that if even if the Berkeley of the Notebooks entertained ethical egoism, it was, at most, a brief flirtation. By the time he wrote *Passive Obedience* he was a committed utilitarian; indeed, he was a rule utilitarian. He is concerned throughout *Passive Obedience* with the public good (*PO* 8, 10, 11, 15, 29, 30, 36, *et al.*). After dismissing act utilitarianism on the grounds of insufficient knowledge of the relevant circumstances in any given case and no standard for comparison (*PO* 9), he embraces rule utilitarianism. As Berkeley wrote:

It follows therefore, that the great end to which God requires the concurrence of human actions must of necessity be carried on by the second method proposed, namely, the observation of certain, universal, determinate rules or moral precepts,

²⁴ Nor is “Of Immortality” the only sermon in which Berkeley alludes to self-interest or self-love as the reason why one is obligated to follow the Gospel. In one of the manuscripts for the sermon “On the Mission of Christ” (1714), Berkeley wrote, “Everyone knows the prevailing principle in human nature is self-love. This under the direction of Reason shou’d lead us into the true methods of obtaining happiness” (*SER* 4:48n; cf. *SER* 6:90). This remark is followed by considerations of how the passions can veil one’s considerations of self-interest. Similarly, in the “Anniversary Sermon before the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel,” Berkeley claimed that obtaining eternal life is the “true interest” of every person (*SER* 9:115).

²⁵ While one might like to *assume* that there was no hard and fast distinction between Berkeley the minister and Berkeley the philosopher, to show that such an assumption is true requires a careful examination of the sermons vis-à-vis the philosophical writings of the same periods. The rhetoric of the pulpit, insofar as it is intended to fulfill certain religious objectives, need not match the rhetoric of one’s philosophical closet; good philosophy is not always good theology, and vice versa. Further, if, as David Berman suggests, Berkeley occasionally engaged in dissimulation (“Berkeley’s Life and Works,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Philosophy*, pp. 21-31), there might be additional reasons to be wary. Nonetheless, insofar as sermonic claims are consistent with the philosophical claims from the same period, they would seem to provide *some* evidence to support a philosophical interpretation. On the other hand, if there is an apparent inconsistency between philosophical claims and claims in a sermon, the latter should not provide conclusive evidence against an interpretation of a *philosophical* work.

which, in their own nature, have a necessary tendency to promote the well-being of the sum of mankind, taking in all nations and ages, from the beginning to the end of the world. (*PO* 10; cf. *PO* 11, *PO* 31)

This is, of course, *theological* utilitarianism, the objector would continue, since the moral duty of the action rests upon divine decrees, but it's no less utilitarian, since the rightness of the action depends solely upon the tendency to promote the well-being of humankind. Such is the objection.

To give a complete answer to this objection would require a thorough analysis of *Passive Obedience*, but several observations might be sufficient to raise doubts regarding the utilitarian thrust of that work.

The first puzzle comes in Berkeley's "To the Reader," where he stresses that his objective is show that subjects of a government have an absolute duty to obey the government passively. We find this:

THAT an absolute passive obedience ought not to be paid any civil power, but that submission to Government should be measured and limited by the public good of the society; and that therefore subjects may lawfully resist the supreme authority, in those cases where the public good shall plainly seem to require it; nay, that it is their duty to do so, inasmuch as they are all under an indispensable obligation to promote the common interest: *these and the like notions, which I cannot help thinking pernicious to mankind, and repugnant to right reason* [my emphasis], having of late years been industriously cultivated, and set in the most advantageous lights by men of parts and learning, it seemed necessary to arm the youth of our University against them, and take care they go into the world well-principled; I do not mean obstinately prejudiced in favour of a party, but, from an early acquaintance with their duty, and the clear rational grounds of it, determined to such practices as may speak them good *Christians and loyal subjects.* (*Works* 6:15)

This tends to speak against anything like a utilitarianism that is limited to the good of the society in which one lives.

In section 1, Berkeley indicates that his concern is with the Law of Nature, "or those virtues and duties which are equally binding in every kingdom or society of men under heaven; and of this kind I take to be that Christian Duty of not resisting the supreme Power implied in my text. *Whosoever resisteth the Power, resisteth the ordinance of God.*" Allusions to the law of nature place Berkeley's discussion within a long tradition,²⁶

²⁶ It is worthy of notice that Berkeley more carefully distinguishes between a purely descriptive sense of "law of nature" and a prescriptive sense of that term than did some of his predecessors. He wrote: "we ought to distinguish between a twofold signification of the terms law of nature; which words do either denote a rule or precept for the direction of the voluntary actions of reasonable agents, and in that sense they imply a duty; or else they are used to signify any general rule which we observe to obtain in the works of nature, independent of the wills of men; in which sense no duty is implied"

a tradition that tends to explain the apparently utilitarian orientation of some of his comments. In his discussion of the law of nature, Aquinas claimed that the very notion of law has an orientation to the common good. He wrote, “Thus, from the four preceding articles, the definition of law may be gathered; and it is nothing else than an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated.”²⁷ Nor is this surprising. As I argued above, if a secular ethical egoist is concerned with her long-term self-interest, she must take the interests of other humans into account. Indeed, I am inclined to believe that a sophisticated rule ethical egoist would develop a set of rules that are indistinguishable from those of a rule utilitarian.²⁸ If one introduces *eternal* rewards and punishments and a divine lawmaker, self-interest must be viewed in the very long-term.

In *PO 4*, Berkeley raises the question of how natural laws are known. Like a good natural law theorist, he holds that they are to be discovered by the deductions of reason, although that approach, “has not, that I know, been anywhere distinctly explained, or treated of so fully as the importance of the subject doth deserve.” So, Berkeley introduces a digression on the obligation of moral duties in general. He presents a discourse on self-love:

Self-love being a principle of all others the most universal, and the most deeply engraven in our hearts, it is natural for us to regard things as they are fitted to augment or impair our own happiness; and accordingly we denominate them good or evil. Our judgment is ever employ'd in distinguishing between these two, and it is the whole business of our lives to endeavour, by a proper application of our faculties, to procure the one and avoid the other. (*PO 5*)²⁹

Initially, one takes the pleasure to be sought to be purely sensual pleasure. But as one matures, one comes to realize that an immediate good is often followed by a greater evil, and that a present evil is often followed by a future good, that is, one becomes concerned with sustainable goods.

(NB 33). His point there is to argue that Hobbes’s contention that the law of self-preservation is a descriptive law of nature, rather than a prescriptive law of nature.

²⁷ *Summa Theologica* Q 90, A 4, in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Treatise on Law*, ed. Stanley Parry, trans. the Benziger Brothers, Inc. (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, n.d.), 11-12. See also Q 93, A 5, p. 49, Q 93, A 6, p. 52. As Sterling Lamprecht has shown, the contention that natural laws direct humans to act for the benefit of the group was one of five tenets postulated by virtually all natural law theorists in seventeenth century Europe. See Sterling Power Lamprecht, *The Moral and Political Philosophy of John Locke* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 10-14.

²⁸ To say that the resulting rules are the same that as would be proposed by a rule utilitarian, of course, does *not* imply a commitment to utilitarianism, since the egoist and the utilitarian are committed to distinct foundational principles.

²⁹ Remember, natural law theory holds that we naturally do and ought seek the good: the natural end of a thing is *both* descriptive and prescriptive. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q 94, A 2, especially pp. 59-60 in *Treatise on Law*, and Q 94, A 3; cf. Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1936; rept. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1991), 337.

Hence an alteration is wrought in our judgments; we no longer comply with the first solicitations of sense, but stay to consider the remote consequences of an action, what good may be hoped, or what evil feared from it, according to the wonted course of things. This obliges us frequently to overlook present momentary enjoyments, when they come in competition with greater and more lasting goods, though too far off, or of too refined a nature, to affect our senses. (*PO 5*)

This is followed in *PO 6* by considerations of one's *eternal* interests, which is wholly consistent with an egoistic reading of *Passive Obedience*.³⁰

Berkeley's focus throughout *Passive Obedience* is on natural law. As I have argued above, this general focus follows from a long-term consideration of self-interest: humans are social animals (cf. *PO 25*), and, as such, one must take the interests of others into account in calculating one's own long-term interests. So, one's own interests are intrinsically wedded to the general interests of humankind. Hence, considerations of self-interest yield a system of natural law which might appear to be utilitarian. But it is fundamentally a system of law, and concerns with private calculations of what is in the public interest (*PO 29*) or other considerations of the public weal (*PO 30*) are never sufficient to call for a suspension of natural law (*PO 31*). In effect, such interests are too narrow; they are not based on *long-term* interests. Anarchy is untenable (*PO 16*). So, both considerations of self-interest *per se* and self-interest vis-à-vis public interest indicate that obeying the civil authorities is a natural law (*PO 25*).

5. Conclusions

If my arguments are plausible, I have shown that some of the remarks in the Notebooks provide reasons to believe that the young Berkeley seriously entertained ethical egoism. Egoistic principles are plausible only insofar as one is concerned with long-term self interests, interests that are tied to both interests of other persons (including God) and considerations of eternal rewards and punishments. I have argued that this is consistent with the position in his early sermons and *Passive Obedience*.³¹

James Madison University
flagede@jmu.edu

³⁰ Appealing to the light of nature (*PO 6*), Berkeley argues that "there is a sovereign omniscient Spirit" who rules the world. "He is, therefore, with the most undoubted right, the great legislator of the world; and mankind are, by all the ties of duty, no less than interest, bound to obey his laws."

³¹ A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Berkeley conference in Newport, Rhode Island on June 28, 2008. This work was supported by the James Madison University Program of Grants for Faculty Educational Leaves.