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Editor

George Berkeley

Religion and Science in the Age of Enlightenment
GEORGE BERKELEY: RELIGION AND SCIENCE IN THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT
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This book is dedicated to the memory of my father.
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Introduction

Berkeley’s Philosophy Between the Analytics and the Historians: Beyond the “Standard Interpretation”

Up to now, the critical approaches of the scholars towards Berkeley’s philosophy may be summarized as follows: on the one hand, the analytical attitude, dominant in the 1970s–1980s of the last century in English-speaking countries, focused on the early published works (above all Treatise on the Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous), considered as originally meaningful and eminently significant.¹ Interpreters found some problems of “consistency” in Berkeley’s texts, but the constant endeavour to give them sense was usually successful: they were able to resolve problems, absorbing – so to say – Berkeley’s “inconsistencies”. Moreover, analytic scholars often judged Berkeley’s philosophy from the point of view of the (then) current philosophical theories, considered as the worthiest to be taken into consideration.

On the other hand, historians of philosophy – more often “continental” or Irish – dedicated themselves to the whole of Berkeley’s life and works, including the less palatable ones, either because unpublished (as Philosophical Commentaries), or

because someway “deviating” from the mainstream of Berkeley’s thought (as the essays published in the *Guardian, Alciphron* and, above all, *Siris*). Moreover, historians tried to comprehend Berkeley’s life and works, tracing them back to their historical context; they even accepted the possible “inconsistencies”, and considered them not as unpleasant and embarrassing contradictions to eliminate, but as...
possible changes in opinion, or elements of tenseness to account for from an historical point of view.

From this perspective, it was not always possible to solve interpretive problems; perhaps simply because Berkeley himself left them unsolved, or because they were the symptoms of some yet unexplored historical "knots". To sum up, historians are used to cohabiting with contradictions, while analytics are determined to accurately sort out and denounce them. Or, to put it in other terms, historians do not need to be "charitable", while analytics often recur to this word, in order to express their attitude towards leading philosophical figures of the past, and their texts.

Last of all, historians of science generally overlooked Berkeley’s “scientific” works (as New Theory of Vision, De motu, Analyst, Querist, and – once again – Siris), maybe because they (and their author) were too philosophically compromised with the embarrassing metaphysical tenets of immaterialism.3

Sometimes, representative scholars of the main analytic philosophy reached conclusions that risk appearing quite obvious from an historical point of view, as if they amounted to saying that the philosophy of the twentieth century is different from the philosophy of the eighteenth. Other times, historical reconstructions did not fail to appear quite useless, from a theoretical point of view, either because they limited themselves to a general survey of Berkeley’s life and works, or because they

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insisted on his well-known relationships with Locke, and – after A. A. Luce’s book \(^4\) – with Malebranche, or his “influence” on Hume.\(^5\)

The “standard approach” – as Stephen Daniel calls it in the opening essay of this collection – is therefore, in my opinion, a double one: the analytical approach consists of a quite exclusive consideration of *Treatise on the Principles of Human Knowledge* and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, taken out of their authentic historical context, and judged from the point of view of their actual truth. The historical approach includes Berkeley’s thought in the empirical tradition (something like the old Hegelian triad: Locke – Berkeley – Hume), or, less obviously, in a Cartesian and Malebranchian context – are they to be considered as opposite to each other, or not.\(^6\)

There is another limit – evident, but still unstressed – that is to be imputed to the “standard approach”, either analytical or historical: scholars definitely privileged English-written critical literature, overlooking contributions written in other languages. That is to say, they tended to consider unimportant whatever was unintelligible to an English-speaking public.

In the last times, however, things have partially changed, in that Berkeley’s philosophy has received more attention in its “psychological, experimental and observational” aspects, rather than in its “conceptual, analytic, and argumentative” elements, almost exclusively focused on by interpreters belonging to the “Anglo-American analytic tradition”.\(^7\) It has also been considered from the perspective of its past,


\(^6\)Charles McCracken singles out a Cartesian way to immaterialism, starting from Descartes and coming to Arthur Collier through Malebranche and John Norris (“Stages on a Cartesian Road to Immaterialism”, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 24 (1986): 19–40), while Silvia Parigi argues that there is a unique road, both empiristic and Cartesian (“Is there a Cartesian road to Immaterialism?”, in *Berkeley et le cartésianisme*, ed. Geneviève Brykman (Nanterre, Université Paris X, 1997), 23–48).

rather than of its future,8 in some unusual topics and from different points of view.9 Analytical philosophers have begun to realize “the obvious problem of anachronism” (as P.J.E. Kail expresses himself, in the essay included in this volume) in their interpretive approach, while historians have not avoided facing the theoretical questions offered by Berkeley’s thought. They have also widened their usual chronological limits, considering Berkeley’s philosophy within Enlightenment(s),10 comparing his thought with some unusual contemporaries’,11 or placing not only his idealism,12 but his theory of vision and “medicine” as well,13 in a more ancient tradition.

Moreover, it may be suspected that the subtle analytical discussions on particular epistemological and metaphysical topics did eventually prove less palatable to philosophical readers, than an honest analysis of Berkeley’s works, taken in their chronological order and included in their contemporary philosophical, historical, political, theological and literary context.

Paraphrasing the very well-known Kantian sentence, we might affirm that philosophy without history is empty, while history without philosophy is blind: this is exactly the perspective that informs the present collection of essays, written by some leading European and American scholars. It focuses on an outstanding figure of eighteenth-century philosophical, scientific and theological thought, who deserves to be explored in all his interests and concerns, in the details of his many-sided life and works.

George Berkeley was in fact considered “the most engaging and useful man in Ireland in the eighteenth century”.14 This hyperbolic statement refers both to

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9For example, Geneviève Brykman stressed the importance of the “discursive context” (as Stephen Daniel calls it in his essay, included in the present collection) in her book: Berkeley et le voile des mots (Paris: Vrin, 1993).
12Gersh and Moran, Eriugena, Berkeley and the Idealist Tradition.
13As to the theory of vision, see Parigi, Il mondo visibile. George Berkeley e la “perspectiva”, chap. 1, where Berkeley’s theory of vision is put against the background of medieval “perspectiva”, starting from Alhazen and ending in Molyneux’s Dioptrica nova. As to tar-water, see Benjamin, “Medicine, Morality and the Politics of Berkeley’s Tar-Water”; Charles, “The Siris in the Age of Enlightenment”; Parigi, Introduzione to George Berkeley, Opere filosofiche (Torino: UTET, 1996), 9–51, where the origins of tar-water are traced back to Greek, Arabian, medieval and Renaissance medicine.
Berkeley’s life and thought; in fact, he always considered himself a pioneer called to think and do new things. He was an empiricist well versed in the sciences, an amateur of the mechanical arts, as well as a metaphysician; he was the author of many completely different discoveries (from the “new” theory of vision to the esse est percipi, from a “new” sensible geometry to tar-water), as well as a very active Christian, a zealous bishop and the apostle of the Bermuda project.

The previously unpublished essays collected in this volume aim to reconstruct the complexity of Berkeley’s figure, without selecting “major” works, nor searching for “coherence” at any cost. They focus on different aspects of Berkeley’s thought, showing their intersections; they explore the important contributions he gave to various scientific disciplines, as well as to the eighteenth-century philosophical and theological debate. They highlight, too, the wide influence that his presently most neglected or puzzling books had at that time; they avoid any anachronistical trial of Berkeley’s thought, judged from a contemporary point of view, in order to state whether what he maintained was (or rather is) right or wrong.

As Daniel claims, it is no longer the case to refuse, as confused and contradictory, whatever is simply difficult to interpret from our point of view, or cannot be constrained in the “Cartesian and Lockean framework”. It is not even proper to suppose changes, turning points and inconsistencies where a more accurate textual analysis and historical comprehension is just needed. Sure, it is easier to dismiss as not significant and “strange” those theories (“the language of nature, the semiotic character of things, spiritual substances, cosmic fire”) and works (Alciphron, Analyst, Querist, and, above all, Siris) that cannot be interpreted in Cartesian or Lockean terms. But, as Luc Peterschmitt efficaciously suggests, this is only “the effect of our ignorance”. In fact, it may be more comfortable to forget the context in which Berkeley lived and wrote, than to remember that he was a learned scholar, able to read Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Spanish and French, familiar with ancient and Renaissance sources. This is particularly important in the case of Siris, a work that has never ceased to puzzle scholars, because of its oddity and apparent lack of a causal order.

It may appear quite obvious that a volume collecting different contributions is not written from a unique, or prevailing, point of view: nevertheless, in my opinion there is a link among the distinguished Berkeleian scholars’ essays collected here: that is to say, a clear consciousness of the insufficiency of the “standard approach” – whether analytical or historical – and a peculiar attention to the history of ideas, in that it may make a deep exploration of the relationship between philosophy, science and religion in Berkeley’s works possible (also through the reading of non English-written books).

In fact, the essays that compose this volume suggest new interpretations of Berkeley’s thought (Daniel, Hight, Kail, Berman, Schwartz, Parigi), as a whole (Daniel), or as

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regards certain topics; they focus on usually neglected works (Caffentzis, Airaksinen, Bertini, Peterschmitt, Parigi), or propose an historical reading able to widen the common Cartesian-Lockean-Malebranchian perspective (Brykman, Charles, Menichelli, Berman, Bertini, Schwartz, Airaksinen, Peterschmitt, Parigi).

The final outcome is a less pacific portrait of the “good Bishop”: for example, he was fascinated by Spinoza’s powerfully heretical thought (Brykman), and was in fact accused of spinozism and atheism by some of his contemporaries (Menichelli); but, at the same time, he was an adversary of that movement of thought that Jonathan Israel has recently called “Radical Enlightenment” (Brykman). He could be considered as the exponent of a theology based on personal, sensible and emotive experience – in a word, on a kind of non-rational experience usually called “faith” (Bertini) – or, on the contrary, he should be seen as the proposer of a rational religion, based on philosophical reasoning (Berman). He was the follower of Greek and Renaissance theory of the cosmic spirit, and at the same time of Newton’s anti-mechanistic doctrine of aether (Parigi).

According to the interpretive perspective outlined in this introduction, the essays that compose the present volume have been divided into three groups: those proposing new suggestions as to the meaning of Berkeley’s thought; those focusing on some neglected Berkeleian works and aspects of the Bishop’s thought; and those aimed at widening and clarifying the historical context in which Berkeley’s works have to be placed. Nevertheless, many essays could have been included in more than one group.

In order to achieve a correct interpretation of Berkeley’s works, Stephen Daniel proposes to simply follow Berkeley’s own suggestion, stated in one of his letters to Samuel Johnson: to read his works in their chronological order. He shows the unity and coherence of Berkeley’s philosophy both regarding the conception of bodies as powers (in his youthful notebooks) and the conception of mind as a created active being. Its aim should not be to gain a “homogenous unity”, but “to achieve harmony in an ever-increasing variety of expressions”; not “to remove differences”, but “to create multiplicity” – in accordance (I would add) with the Baconian tradition.¹⁶

In the second essay, Marc Hight claims, too, the unity and consistency of Berkeley’s epistemology as regards a particular version of instrumentalism, that he thoroughly examines. Hight agrees with Daniel in stressing the importance of Berkeley’s doctrine of signs: scientific concepts are signs (i.e. instruments), able and useful in explaining and organizing phenomenal experiences, in their variety and regularities.

Also Peter Kail – who analyses and compares Berkeley’s and Hume’s treatment of causal relation, from the point of view of some current perspectives in philosophy of language – argues that all the causal relations among ideas should be substituted, in Berkeley’s opinion, by conventional sign/signifier relations.

¹⁶In Novum Organum (I, 112), Francis Bacon wrote: “Interim particularium multitudinem nemo reformidet, quin potius hoc ipsum ad sperum revocet” (“In the meantime, let nobody fear the multiplicity of particulars; on the contrary, let it be a reason of hope”; translation mine).
The second section of the present collection groups different papers, dealing with some rather neglected topics and works. Claire Schwartz argues that Berkeley’s philosophy of mathematics should not be interpreted as a “formalist” one, at least in the sense currently attributed to that word, which is deeply connected with an instrumentalist conception of truth. That is to say, it is not correct to apply the historiographically uncomfortable label of “precursor” to Berkeley. Some of his well-known contemporaries – Descartes, Malebranche, and in particular Leibniz – were “more in advance with the notion of a free constitution of formal systems”, in consequence of their ontology, though it would not be proper to use the category of “formalism” as regards their philosophies of mathematics as well. Once again, from Schwartz’s essay the importance of Berkeley’s doctrine of signs stands out, as to the domain of mathematical thought.

George Caffentzis proposes an inherit reassessment of the Hegelian triad: Locke, Berkeley and Hume are re-examined as philosophers of money, after answering the following questions: what does “philosopher of money” mean? Which conditions are to be fulfilled, in order to be considered a philosopher of money? What are the relationships between Locke, Berkeley and Hume’s philosophies of money and their philosophies (i.e. ontologies and epistemologies, theories of ideas and mind)? Textual evidence is drawn from Querist, “a supposedly marginal text of eighty pages consisting all and only of questions”, on whose importance Caffentzis began to bet nearly ten years ago. Moreover, he stresses the necessity of an historical approach to the philosophy of money, not forgetting the fact that “economics did not exist in its contemporary meaning until the later part of the nineteenth century”.

Among Berkeley’s puzzling and embarrassing works, Siris certainly holds the supremacy: it is not surprising, therefore, that it has long been neglected by scholars, who for many years spoke of Berkeley’s “second” philosophy. In partial satisfaction of that, three essays deal with Siris, in the second section of the present volume. Luc Peterschmitt focuses on Section 202, questioning Berkeley’s identification of Newton’s acid with Homberg’s sulphur, and of them both with Newton’s aether, and Berkeley’s aether or fire. In Peterschmitt’s opinion, the effort Berkeley made to build a unified chemical theory (that did not actually exist in 1744) had the purpose to give a “convincing basis” to his “natural theology, starting from tar-water to trace back the chain of beings to God”. To that end, chemistry was judged more suitable than other more “mature” sciences, such as mechanics or astronomy. Nevertheless, even if the Berkeleian reading of Newton and Homberg was not correct, Peterschmitt shows that there were good historical reasons to think that it was right. That is to say, Berkeley’s reading was the “common way of reading” in his time.

Timo Airaksinen and Silvia Parigi both acknowledge the strong influence that Newton’s Opticks (especially some queries) had on Siris, and Berkeley’s constant approval and admiration towards the Newtonian natural philosophy in its whole. But, while Airaksinen points out a tenseness (or rather a paradox) between Berkeley’s critique of “mechanistic science of his own day” and his intention “to make a contribution” to corpuscular physics, Parigi refuses the dominant identification of corpuscularianism with mechanism. In her opinion, neither Newton nor Berkeley were mechanistic philosophers, though both of them defended some version of corpuscular philosophy.
Moreover, Airaksinen stresses Newton’s difficulties in explaining both gravity and attraction (i.e. the core of his physics) “in terms of the properties of this occult medium, aether”, about which Newton himself had to admit (in query 21): “I do not know what it is”. Berkeley too, a “Newtonian natural philosopher”, was not able to give a satisfying mechanistic explanation of gravity in terms of an alleged corpuscular light/fire/aether (in the Appendix to his essay, Airaksinen offers a useful list of synonyms and expressions used to refer to it). “The problems of interpretation are immense”, Airaksinen concludes: “how light/fire actually works as a causal factor in natural philosophy requires a separate study”.

But what would happen if the mechanistic explanatory model was not the unique one, and if Berkeley had not adhered to that paradigm? What if corpuscularianism should not simply be considered as a synonym of mechanism? If a corpuscular, but non-mechanistic natural philosophy did exist, and it was in fact Newton’s and Berkeley’s theory? Parigi maintains that it is necessary to distinguish between two different models of explanation: a historically dominant causal paradigm (scire per causas), and a minor analogical theory, based on the hermeneutic value of signs (scire per signa). While Descartes and Newton – that is to say, the two opposite scientific authorities in Berkeley’s time – adhered to the dominant model, Berkeley was deeply attracted by the other one, going back to the ancient Stoics: there is wide textual evidence showing this, from his youthful works to (above all) Siris. That is the reason why Berkeley may consistently be, at the same time, a corpuscularian and a critic of the mechanistic, Cartesian conception of the world: there are not, therefore, any drastic changes of mind or turning points in his thought. Its unity and consistency may be historically proved once again. Looking closer at Berkeley’s sources (and, perhaps, to Newton’s as well), it may happen to find out some forgotten authors, like Marsilio Ficino, a leading figure of Renaissance Neo-Platonism: his (and the Renaissance) widespread concept of “spirit” was constantly present in Berkeley’s mind in his “esoteric” speculations about aether.

The five essays collected in the last section also aim at widening the traditional historical background of Berkeley’s philosophy, in order to better comprehend it. Daniele Bertini proposes a comparison between Berkeley’s philosophy of religion – based on the mere experience of God that necessarily belongs to each spirit, provided that it exists – and Scholastic rational theology. In Berkeley’s opinion, the schoolmen made the same mistake as the freethinkers: an excessive attention to details, that prevented them from catching the “universal meaning of any knowledge”. Bertini and Airaksinen agree on the little interest Berkeley showed towards Biblical exegesis, but while Airaksinen draws the picture of a man of science, definitely far from the abhorred enthusiasm,17 Bertini insists on faith, considered as the fundament of Berkeley’s religion. In his opinion, theology should be a “way of life”, similar to “a kind of wisdom”, rather than “a positive science”. To sum up: “theology is the experience of the divine”.

17Airaksinen’s polemic is directed versus Patricia Fara’s interpretation of Berkeley’s philosophy.
David Berman gives a completely different, original portrait of the Bishop: he paints him as “a philosopher of little or no religious faith”. Though this assertion may sound paradoxical, Berman supports it with historical and psychological arguments: according to him, in his “heroic years” (1705–1707), Berkeley developed his immaterialist philosophy in order to avoid scepticism, that tempted him in his youth and was felt as a sort of “dark night of the soul”. The sceptical attitude was a main outcome of the new science and the new representationalistic or dualistic theories of ideas (starting from Descartes): both of them had created “a gap between what we experience and what exists”, but it was only Berkeley who did not feel at ease with that. The character of the “unhappy sceptic”, culminating in the Hylas of Three Dialogues, would be a proper description of Berkeley himself in his early years: in fact, no ancient or modern author, from Sextus Empiricus to Pierre Bayle, leads us to think that he was unhappy about his (more or less) sceptical philosophy.

Therefore, in Berman’s opinion, Berkeley was the first modern philosopher who was painfully aware of “the dire psychological consequences of the sceptical gap of the new science”. He was “depressed by the sceptical spectre”: the outcome of this unhappy state of mind and unsatisfactory epistemological theory was the esse est percipi thesis. That is to say, the “sceptical gap” should not be overcome by faith, as Malebranche and Bayle thought, but exclusively by reason, as Hobbes and Spinoza (two of the “three devils” of the early eighteenth century, along with Machiavelli) maintained. Nevertheless, Berkeley succeeded in finding a way between the “devils” and the “deep blue sea” of faith, that is to say (leaving these suggestive metaphors apart) between fideistic and theological arguments – which he did not like to refer to – and irreligion, heresy or atheism. I think that we should always remember a usually overlooked, but meaningful sentence that Berkeley (under the pseudonym of Misatheus) wrote in a letter published in the Guardian on Saturday 21 March 1713: “reason abandons men that would employ it against religion”.

Geneviève Brykman highlights the “equivocal” presence of Spinoza in Berkeley’s writings (from Philosophical Commentaries to Alciphron and Siris), both as a “similar” thinker – because of his monist doctrine of the infinite substance and his critique of abstract general ideas, that Berkeley shared – and as an adversary – he was undoubtedly considered, in Crito’s words, as “the great leader of our modern infidels”.

Caterina Menichelli faces a connected topic: the charges of spinozism and atheism levelled towards Berkeley’s philosophy at its early reception, from 1718 to 1751, for example by the French Jesuit Tournemine (in 1718), by an anonymous reviewer in Acta Eruditorum (1727), and then by some more famous thinkers, as Andrew Baxter, in his Enquiry into the Nature of the Human Mind (1733), Andrew Ramsey, in his Philosophical Principles (1748), and Robert Clayton, Bishop of Clogher, in his Essay on Spirit (1751).

The last essay, by Sébastien Charles, deals with a less analyzed topic: Berkeley’s conception of the animal. This was quite an uncomfortable argument for Berkeley, because he had to avoid two equal and opposite “heretical” positions: Descartes’ well-known theory of the animal as an automaton, and the free-thinkers’ attribution of a soul to the animal, which therefore dangerously ends up being like man himself. It is not surprising that Berkeley dealt with that topic above all in Philosophical Commentaries, in the essays published in the Guardian, in Alciphron and Siris, instead of writing about that in his “major” works. Charles solves Berkeley’s apparent inconsistencies (the animal perceives, therefore it should have a perceiving mind or soul) by referring to the Neoplatonic concept of the Great Chain of Being: that is to say, Berkeley does not think in terms of Cartesian dualism, but is rather inspired by an “ancient dualism”, both Platonic and Aristotelian, which distinguishes rational (immortal) soul and sensitive (mortal) soul, and by Leibniz’s theory of the hierarchy of souls. It is not incoherent, thus, to attribute to animals sensation, imagination and even a soul, provided that they are conceived as different from ours in their degree.

The coherence of Berkeley’s philosophy – which does not exclude, of course, persistent obscurities and elements of tenseness – stands out, if we are able to widen our historiographical perspective, and acknowledge the influence of ancient and Renaissance philosophy on Berkeley’s thought.
Part I
Interpretations of Berkeley’s Philosophy