

BOOK REVIEWS

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George S. Pappas, *Berkeley's Thought*. Cornell University Press, 2000. Pp. xi, 261.

By his own account, Pappas "focuses on three core elements" of Berkeley's thought: abstraction, immediate perception, and common sense (ix). The reader will also find interesting commentary on numerous other aspects of Berkeley's thought, including detailed treatments of the *esse is percipi* principle and Berkeley's claimed avoidance of skepticism.

Pappas's commentary is original and analytically rigorous, and his claims are generally well documented with texts. Readers will learn as much about the broader philosophical issues at play as about Berkeley. Pappas's most provocative work stems from his efforts to work out the full interpretative implications of Berkeley's views of abstraction.

In what follows, I'll focus attention on Pappas's treatment of Berkeley on the relation between abstraction and realism, the role of abstraction in Berkeley's so-called Master Argument, and Berkeley's claims of being in accordance with common sense.

**The relation between abstraction and realism.** Pappas makes a convincing case that Berkeley's views of abstraction play a more important role in his broader philosophical program than is typically acknowledged. Less convincing is Pappas's own explanation of that role. His explanation revolves around a thesis he attributes to Berkeley, one I'll refer to as the Abstraction in Relation to Realism thesis (ARR):

ARR: If there are abstract ideas, then the *esse is percipi* principle is false.  
(36)

ARR, and variations on it, are ubiquitous in this book. Pappas employs it to ground numerous interpretative hypotheses. From where does ARR derive?

Pappas purports to derive ARR from *Principles* 5, where Berkeley writes:

If we thoroughly examine this tenet [the opinion that sensible objects have mind-independent existence], it will, perhaps, be found at bottom to *depend on* the doctrine of abstract ideas. For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects [i.e., collections of ideas] from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived? (my italics)

On a "natural reading," writes Pappas, the appeal to *dependence* is to be understood "in terms of a sufficient condition" (36). Berkeley is thus putting forth ARR. Since Pappas's entire case for ARR rests on his understanding of this text, his exegesis takes on significant weight.

Let's consider the passage carefully. How does Berkeley understand claims of the form, "x depends on y"? Pace Pappas, Berkeley uses such claims in the usual way: 'depends on' means *requires*, but not *is required by*.<sup>1</sup> Such claims imply

that *y* is a necessary condition of *x*.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, a better rendering of the passage has the implication going the other way:

ARR' If the *esse is percipi* principle is false, then there are abstract ideas.

Though ARR' provides a better reading, it is not yet on the mark. Berkeley is in no position to affirm ARR' (nor ARR), as he maintains that both its antecedent and its consequent are inconceivable.<sup>3</sup> The broader context suggests that the relation of dependence is intended to hold *not* between the relevant philosophical theses—those stated in the antecedent and the consequent of ARR'—but between the *mistaken supposing* of each. Berkeley thinks that philosophers mistakenly suppose themselves to conceive of mind-independent objects. On his diagnosis this mistake depends on a yet further mistake, that of supposing oneself able, by an abstraction of thought, writes Berkeley, "to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived" (Prin. 5). Berkeley's intended thesis just is this diagnosis:

ARR" If one mistakenly supposes oneself to have conceived a mind-independent object, then one is mistakenly presupposing the success of a particular abstraction.

Berkeley can consistently affirm ARR", but ARR" does not entail ARR'.

**Abstraction and the Master Argument.** Among the alleged interpretive benefits of ARR, Pappas takes it to help explain Berkeley's moves in the so-called Master Argument—Berkeley's notorious challenge to the effect that mind-independent objects are not so much as conceivable. Of the two key passages in which the Master Argument is presented (*Principles* 22–23, and First Dialogue), Pappas writes:

The important point is this: if there were abstract ideas of sensible objects, and also an abstract idea of existence, then one *could* successfully carry out this conceiving. ... Hence, in the master argument itself, Berkeley must be assuming that there are no abstract ideas of either existence or of sensible objects. (67; cf. 85f.)

Though Pappas's account of the Master Argument helps establish the importance of both abstraction and ARR, Berkeley's own account is in fact neutral with respect to his views of abstraction. As Pappas acknowledges, Berkeley takes the objects of non-abstract, veridical sensation to be none other than ideas—the trees we sense just *are* collections of ideas. Pappas's analysis assumes that from such sensory ideas we can form abstract ideas of trees, and thereby conceive of mind-independent trees. But this is to misunderstand the theories of abstraction available to Berkeley's intended opponents. There is no plausible understanding of the going empiricist theory of ideas (namely Locke's) that allows one to achieve a conception of mind-independent objects by an abstraction *from* ideas of mind-dependent objects. Abstraction yields a general conception of previously cognized objects, not a conception of wholly new objects.<sup>4</sup>

According to Berkeley, abstraction comes into play as follows. While sensing or imagining a tree, one is apt to *ignore* that the qualities of the tree *are* ideas

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and thus mind-dependent. Though this is mere selective attention, philosophers are apt to presuppose themselves to have abstracted away from all mental items. This mistake makes possible the further mistake of supposing oneself to be conceiving a mind-independent tree. This is the sequence of mistakes characterized in *Principles* 5 (discussed above) and stated in ARR". Though trees can be selectively attended to in this way, writes Berkeley,

it only shows you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind; but it doth not shew that you can conceive it possible, the objects of your thought may exist without the mind: to make out this, it is necessary that you conceive them existing unconceived or unthought of, which is a manifest repugnancy. When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas. But the mind taking no notice of itself, is deluded to think it can and doth conceive bodies existing unthought of or without the mind; though at the same time they are apprehended by or exist in it self. (Prin. 23)

On Berkeley's understanding of the Master Argument, our inability to conceive of mind-independent objects derives not from the objects of conception being non-abstract, but simply from their being ideas.

**Pappas on Common Sense.** Famously, Berkeley claims that his idealist principles are more "agreeable to common sense" than the principles of his realist adversaries. This strikes many readers as palpably false, or perhaps disingenuous. Assuming the claim ingenuous, how are we to adjudicate its truth? Pappas's procedure is to codify a set of common sense propositions (hereafter, CSP)—theses that are affirmed in common sense—and then check whether *more* CSP are affirmed by Berkeley or by his opponents. From the procedure, Pappas concludes that there is no resounding vindication of Berkeley's notorious claims (219f.).

Putting to the side whether this procedure is the right one, Pappas is too sanguine of having codified the right set of CSP. He arrives at a list of ten propositions, including the following three that Berkeley rejects (184ff.):<sup>5</sup>

- (a) All (macro) physical objects and at least some of their qualities exist independently of and are generally unaffected by perceptions.
- (b) No macro physical object has phenomenal individuals (ideas, *sensa*) as constituents.
- (c) It is false that in every perceptual experience, at least one phenomenal individual (*idea*, *sensum*) is immediately perceived.

Perhaps surprising is that these propositions presuppose a sophisticated repertoire of philosophical concepts. For Pappas that's okay, given his criteria of CSP. Let's consider the criteria.

Pappas distinguishes two sorts of CSP. *Ordinary* CSP include those propositions that a typical commonsense person "would assent to if queried" (214). *Reflective* CSP include those propositions that such a person would assent to "upon some unbiased reflection on the matter," including some propositions

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that the person, though not initially accepting, "would assent to were she to engage in the needed reflection" (214).

This account will hardly do. Pappas's criterion of *ordinary* CSP is dubious, since, by a simple manipulation of the query, typical persons can be induced to assent to contrary, even contradictory propositions. The very framing of a question can shift a respondent into a comparatively reflective context. Pappas's criteria of *reflective* CSP fare no better, as they exclude almost nothing. The propositions constituting Leibniz's *Monadology* certainly *should* be excluded from CSP—if any propositions should. Yet Leibniz would maintain that assent to the *Monadology* results from "an unbiased reflection on the relevant matters." And even if unbiased reflection did not initially lead to assent, the person surely "would assent were she to engage in the needed reflection." Given these criteria, none of (a) through (c) is more entitled to inclusion in CSP than is its negation.

Suppose we replace Pappas's wildly inclusive criteria with an account that includes only those propositions that are *actually* affirmed in *pre-reflective* common sense. In that case, none of (a) through (c) is included in CSP. Both (a) and (b) presuppose some degree of philosophical reflection on, say, tables and rabbits as having a common *physical* nature. According to Berkeley, untutored persons acknowledge commonalities among individual tables, and commonalities among individual rabbits,<sup>6</sup> but they have no use for abstractions purporting to arrive at an essence common to both (cf. Notebook A, art. 703).<sup>7</sup> Proposition (c) presupposes comprehension of a host of philosophical notions, including those of (i) perceptual experience, (ii) immediate versus mediated perception, and (iii) contrasting views as to the objects of such immediate perceptual experience. Such comprehension is hardly to be included in the pre-reflective conceptual repertoire of the vulgar.

What *should* be included in CSP? This is not an easy question. Pappas's discussion is worthwhile, even granting my objections. Presumably, only a small subset of the total CSP are of interest to Berkeley, and it is these to which he is referring when making his notorious claims of agreement with common sense. Pappas's treatment of this problem is sensitive and informative.

More generally, this is an important book that every Berkeley scholar should read. Pappas asks questions that others have ignored, motivating a rethinking of neglected aspects of Berkeley's philosophy. Working through Pappas's account is rewarding, even if one does not adopt his interpretative conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Consider representative examples (my italics): "swiftness or slowness of motion *depends on* our ideas" (Notebook B, art. 99); "the set rules or established methods,

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wherein the mind [i.e., God] we *depend on* excites in us the ideas of sense, are called the Laws of Nature" (Prin. 30); "the most shocking paradoxes and intricate speculations in those sciences, *depending on* the infinite divisibility of finite extension" (Third Dialogue).

<sup>2</sup> It's of course *consistent* with such claims that  $y$  is a sufficient condition of  $x$ , but that is not what they *express*.

<sup>3</sup> The same cannot be said of the contraposition of  $ARR'$ , but I'm aware of no place in which Berkeley asserts, or argues, for such a principle.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, one might invoke a theory of abstraction available to early modern rationalists. Recall Descartes's wax passage, in which one arrives at the purely intellectual conception of the wax by stripping away its sensory features. But Berkeley means to be working out the implication of Locke's theory of ideas, a theory that does not countenance purely intellectual concepts.

<sup>5</sup> The lettering is not Pappas's.

<sup>6</sup> On this count, Berkeley accepts much of what Locke writes about nominal essences, though for Berkeley the nominal essence is as real as it gets (cf. Notebook A, art. 536).

<sup>7</sup> Berkeley would count the study of natural science occurring in our grade schools as philosophical reflection.

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Aaron Holland and Ram Neta for useful discussions of the ideas in Pappas' book.

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Karl Ameriks, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Pp. xvi, 306.

The contributions to this volume offer a rich, detailed, and in some respects innovative and remarkable account of that uniquely fecund and philosophically revolutionary epoch known as German Idealism. The epoch's historical context, its driving ideas, its post-Kantian development, and its repercussions in post-Hegelian philosophy are all presented competently and concisely. The editor also included essays on some of the philosophical ideas underlying the parallel phenomenon of German Romanticism (Early and Late), for good reasons, since some of the foremost poets and literary theorists of the age (such as Hölderlin, Novalis, and Schlegel) were philosophers in their own right, whose influence on the development of German Idealism was not insignificant. What emerges from this collection is the picture of a multifaceted philosophical movement embedded in and influenced by and in turn influencing a complex intellectual and literary environment. The reader of this volume will be in no danger of reducing German Idealism to a linear development that started with Kant and that was preordained to culminate in Hegel's system.

In his general orientation about the historical context of German Idealism, Frederick Beiser identifies two "fundamental principles of the Enlightenment" that were, however, vulnerable to generating unwelcome consequences. Beiser calls these principles "rational criticism" and "scientific naturalism" (18). While the former easily led to radical skepticism, the latter was liable to end in