

**James Hill.** *The Notions of George Berkeley: Self, Substance, Unity and Power.* Bloomsbury 2023. 184 pp. \$115.00 USD (Hardcover 9781350299689); \$39.95 USD (Paperback 9781350299726).

In *The Notions of George Berkeley: Self, Substance, Unity and Power*, James Hill explores the epistemology of Berkeley's positive metaphysical project in which mind is the sole substance in a universe devoid of matter. Across eight chapters, Hill argues that Berkeley utilises a sharp demarcation between knowledge of sensible things and non-sensibles to coherently respond to epistemological puzzles and controversies such as the nature of self-awareness, knowledge of other minds, and knowledge of God. Central to this response is Berkeley's mid-career introduction of notions to denote knowledge of non-sensibles. This innovation is, on Hill's reading, a terminological clarification which need not imply any doctrinal change, knowledge of spirit by way of idea having been dismissed by Berkeley in his early career notebooks.

In the concise Introduction, Hill situates his work against the tendency to interpret Berkeley as adhering to the Lockean 'empiricist paradigm' (3). According to Hill, Berkeley instead navigates a path between early modern empiricism and rationalism: knowledge of perceived objects must, in keeping with empiricism, be sensory or at least derived from the sensory, while knowledge of spirits, in resemblance with rationalist innatism, consists in non-perceptual cognition. The result is a complementary system reflecting the particular truths, as Berkeley understands them, alighted upon by each tradition. This Berkeley is thoroughly committed to an 'idea-spirit dualism' (13) where the sensible and the mental are known by completely different means while both remain directly known; the former by way of idea and the latter by notion.

In Chapter 3, Hill suggests that the doctrine of notional knowledge enables Berkeley to sidestep sceptical worries generated by the widely acknowledged philosophical view that humans lack an idea of the self. Such lack need not signal a limitation endemic to human faculties, but rather uncovers a difference in kind between knowledge of active things (spirits) and their operations and knowledge of passive things (ideas). Hill presents Berkeley as articulating a non-representational understanding of our immediate access to our own mind, an account sensitive to the divergent natures of ideas and spirits. Spirits are the wrong type of thing to be represented by idea (38); the causal power of spirit, for example, is transparent to us in our volitional activity while ideas are solely concerned with effects and never causes. We have knowledge of causation, on this account, from the inside (40).



Arguably the most important aspect of Hill's interpretation is that Berkeley's notions are not objects or items of knowledge detached from the things to which they afford access. Rather, 'they are the epistemological transparency of the active mind to itself' (45). The notion of the self, for example, is intuited whenever we act, activity itself being enough to furnish its own knowledge. Conscious experience, therefore, comprises two distinct components, inert perceptual objects, namely the ideas about which we operate in our mental lives, and the operations themselves which are known through themselves.

Hill uses this reading in Chapter 4 to argue that Berkeley holds conceptual empiricism to be true with respect to the objects of perception, they are either sensory or founded upon the sensory, while understanding the rationalist tradition as true with respect to intellectual elements such as self, causation, and substance, of which we have notions (68-9). These notions, however, differ from the innate ideas of the rationalist since they are in symbiotic relation with ideas of sense, never isolated from them as discrete objects of knowledge.

But doesn't this focus on Berkeley's understanding of minds as essentially active contradict his commitment to the passivity of perception? Hill's resourceful solution in Chapter 5 (esp. 78-84) is that Berkeley's perceiving minds should be understood as creators of the form and constitution of physical objects, that which resolves the manifold of sensorially experienced ideas into coherent unities, such as the individuated physical objects of experience. In the perception of sensible phenomena, human minds are constantly active, always directly involved in the process of making sense, as it were, of the sensory input passively received, spontaneously tying a multiplicity of data lacking intrinsic unity into singular things. The simplicity of Berkeleian spirits enables this process of parcelling out into particulars, and while this active conception of spirit excludes inertness, it does not exclude passivity understood as the suffering of external action. Through this textually sound understanding of minds as possessors of synthesising power, Hill identifies a proto-Kantian strain in Berkeley's thought.

In chapter 6, Hill illustrates that such conceptual thought need not involve abstract mental content. For Berkeley, concept possession is *doing* something: a dynamic activity whereby we use some perception of some particular to delineate the class of other particulars which are subsumed under the same class, for example, the use of some triangle as representative of other triangles via selective attention to certain features (91-2). This process, Hill argues, is denoted by Berkeley as 'consideration' (95). Competent generalised thought emerges through our consideration of

particular ideas in relation to others. General concepts move beyond the phenomenal content of perceptions, being concerned with networks of relations between ideas which are themselves not passively perceived, depending instead on the performance of the mind. Conceptual thought is thus a function of the notional content of the mind. For Hill, Berkeley's inclusion of notional knowledge of relations from his mid-career onwards illustrates another affinity with Kantianism.

The remaining two chapters concern Berkeley's application of his doctrine of notions to three other areas of direct awareness: goodness, number, and God. Knowledge of goodness is a disposition to act in such and such a manner requiring no theory or abstract representation of the good. The good is a unifying feature of spiritual activity emanating from and expressing the very nature of spirit itself. Number is likewise an active outpouring of the essential simplicity and unity of spirit, numbering being indicative of human consideration of phenomena. Finally, Berkeley's notion of God is a purified version of the notion of ourselves: we know ourselves as active beings with elements of passivity, while God is purely active and contains nothing passive. In the closing paragraphs, Hill provocatively signals that Berkeley leaves open the possibility that our knowledge of God is derived from the pure intellect.

While Hill's monograph is aimed primarily at Berkeleian scholars, there is detailed historical contextualization in the early chapters that should make this work valuable to anyone interested in the history of early modern philosophy. The text is lucid, concise, and engaging throughout, well signposted and structured. Hill's treatment of Berkeley is thoroughly sympathetic, presenting a unified thinker who has in place from the start, at least in his own mind, the fundamentals of an epistemology and ontology whose full articulation came later.

Hill's interpretation admirably rises to the challenge of marrying the passive reception of sensible qualities and minds understood as essentially active. The suggestion of human perception involving both passive reception and active participation is intriguing and gestures towards potential future work on the nature of Berkeleian sensible objects when understood as synthesised collections of sensible qualities. While the danger of anachronism lurks, Hill refrains from stretching the Kantian affinity too far, using it only to cast his Berkeleian interpretation in terms of a more familiar framework.

A minor quibble is that Hill's allusions to the capacity of the pure intellect with respect to spiritual knowledge are a little underdeveloped, arguing little more than Berkeley might accept such a talent. This interpretation is, as illustrated by Hill, textually sound, and may simply betray

Berkeleian caginess of the sort which should be familiar from the *Principles*' suggestion that we may not conclude that sensible objects cease to exist when unperceived by humans 'since there may be some other Spirit that perceives them, though we do not' (PHK 48), and the ambiguity surrounding the ontological status of tangibilia from the *New Theory of Vision*. In Hill's defence, Berkeley's references to the pure intellect may likewise be indicative of this non-committal attitude towards that which is understood as beyond the purpose in hand.

There is also some conflict between Hill's understanding of reflection as 'not a perceptual act' (52) and the first sentence of the main body of the *Principles*, which Berkeley never altered, which outlines the inventory of the 'objects of human knowledge'. The second type of such objects are those '*perceived* by attending to the Passions and Operations of the Mind' (emphasis mine), which appears to undercut Hill's understanding of notional knowledge of mental operations as self-transparent non-objects known by reflection. It would appear here that either Berkeley is not referring to knowledge by reflection, which seems a stretch, or else he is using 'objects of human knowledge' as a rough synonym for 'things about which humans can rightfully be said to know' in a turn of phrase with purely rhetorical value, which need not imply that such things are entities. Nevertheless, this puzzle may motivate scholarly research concerning Berkeley's tactics and argumentative structuring in his works, and his intellectual relationship with his predecessors and contemporaries (for example, is he just trying to sound Lockean in an attempt to get the reader on side from the start?).

All in all, an excellent and original book that should reward further study.

**Craig Martinez**, Manchester Metropolitan University