

Samuel C. Rickless

Berkeley's Argument for Idealism.

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Berkeley's Argument for Idealism offers an incredibly thorough and deeply rich analysis of how and, and even more importantly, why Berkeley argues as he does for the idealist thesis that sensible objects are simply collections of ideas. Samuel Rickless does the work that many Berkeley scholars find too challenging: to provide a consistent interpretation of Berkeley that credits him for what he does right rather than a familiar listing of his many perceived failures. Rickless presents a comprehensive view of Berkeley's argument by examining his works as a whole and revealing the foundational principles underlying Berkeley's reasoning. This enterprise to demonstrate Berkeley's argument as sophisticated and well-reasoned is a unique, much needed addition to Berkeley scholarship.

Rickless sets about his designated task, to sketch out in great detail a logical reconstruction of Berkeley's deduction to idealism, with an abundance of textual support and an ever useful discussion of standard views on the matter. Each chapter presents a logical rendering of the key premises and conclusions drawn along with all relevant textual analysis. As Rickless shows what *is* the argument for Berkeley, he is adamant about what *is not* the argument for Berkeley. He spends copious effort in meticulously demonstrating why other reconstructions of the argument fail to capture what Berkeley is about. His dead-on criticism of other viewpoints make this interpretation of great value in deciphering how precisely Berkeley gets to his idealism and what is and is not involved in that pursuit.

Although Rickless agrees with the prevailing view that Berkeley's arguments for idealism in *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* fall short, he advocates for a holistic approach to how Berkeley argues for this controversial thesis. Rickless is convinced, and quite convincing, that Berkeley's motivation for writing *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* only three years later was to shore up that very argument for idealism he left so undefended in the *Principles*. According to Rickless, Berkeley offers two *Simple Arguments* for idealism in the *Principles* that rest on a few premises that are far from self-evident and only serve to beg the question. To make up for this inadequacy, Berkeley's argument for idealism in the *Dialogues* is designed to bolster those questionable premises and serve up something his philosophical contemporaries could not so easily refute. The logical framework of the arguments in Berkeley's works along with the interplay of critical examinations of other renditions make this project an exercise in clarity and precision, and of utmost value to those seeking to understand Berkeley's idealist thesis.

Rickless offers an innovative twist on how the argument operates from the *Principles* to the *Dialogues*. Contra received opinions, it does not rest at base upon immaterialism, anti-abstractionism, or even perceptual relativity. It is noteworthy that Rickless doesn't seek to embellish Berkeley's argument in some effort to strengthen its core. Instead, he is precise about the logical positioning of each reason within the argument noting its place, its purpose, and its strength. His goal is to offer *the* logical structure of the argument Berkeley *himself* thought he was giving to his philosophical contemporaries.

Ultimately, and quite originally, Rickless finds Berkeley's theory of perception to be at the heart of his argument for idealism. The first two chapters are devoted to an expansive exploration of Berkeley's works to flesh out the distinction between immediate and mediate perception. The distinction between immediate and mediate perception is, for Rickless, a difference in the use of an intermediary. Immediate perception is perception without intermediary and thereby involves the faculty of sense alone whereas mediate perception is perception with intermediary and thereby involves the faculty of imagination at the least. Working with this definition of immediate perception, Rickless argues that some sensible objects may be immediately perceived by sense so long as they are composed of simple ideas of one sense or many that are immediately perceived at a single time. If a sensible object is composed of simple ideas of one sense or many that are not immediately perceived at a single time, then that sensible object would be an object that is mediately perceived by sense. To save Berkeley from charges of inconsistency, his solution to the issue of whether or not a sensible object is immediately perceived by sense is that some are and some are not.

This understanding of immediate perception is the crux of Rickless' assessment of Berkeley's argument as he concludes that there are two crucial premises making or breaking a sound move to idealism: (1) sensible things or objects are perceived by sense and (2) whatever is perceived by sense is immediately perceived. Rickless holds the view that sensible objects such as mountains, rivers, and tables are immediately perceived so long as the perceptual experience fits his criterion of immediate perception at a single time. However, this position assumes that *sensible objects* refer to named, identified bundles of sensible qualities such as mountains, rivers, and tables. Though Berkeley does state that objects are immediately perceived, there is an ambiguity in what *object* means. *Sensible object* may refer to a named, identified grouping of sensible qualities, or it may refer to non-specified, cotemporaneous sensible qualities. Berkeley uses the term *object* and *thing* in both ways throughout his works. It is of concern, then, that Rickless makes the assumption that *object* for Berkeley is the named, identified groupings of sensible qualities such as mountains, rivers and tables. The passages in which he takes Berkeley to be explicit that named, identified objects are immediately perceived are not as clearly unambiguous as he takes them to be.

For Berkeley, assertions that one can immediately perceive objects as non-identified, non-unified multiples of sensible qualities are consistent with his theory of mind. So the problem is not so much the equivocation, but how this affects Rickless' narrow definition of what it means to be *immediately perceived*. As Berkeley explicates in his man born blind examples, one would not be able to immediately perceive a chair as *a chair* unless the faculty of memory is involved relying on repeated experiences of that specific bundle of sensible qualities. Grouping together any sensible qualities as an *object*, as a collection or unit of those sensible qualities, requires mental work on the part of the finite perceiver. Even using Rickless' requirement that all the sensible qualities are immediately perceived at one time, the bundling together of those sensible qualities that constitute *an object*, a named identified collection of sensible qualities, requires more than just the faculty of sense. A revision of his definition of immediate perception to include more than just the faculty of sense would alleviate this concern, and could assist in his concluding worry that Berkeley may equivocate on what it means to perceive a sensible object by sense, in part or in whole.

Further, limiting immediate perception to the faculty of sense may create problems for other key steps in the argument for idealism. The *Identification Argument* postulates that secondary qualities are phenomenologically identical to hedonic sensations of pleasure and pain. If Berkeley's statements in his *Philosophical Commentaries* can be taken as indicative of his view, then all hedonic sensations involve desire and aversion, i.e. volition. As the argument in the *Dialogues* relies on the

premise that whatever is immediately perceived by sense is a sensible quality, a narrow understanding of immediate perception to involve the faculty of sense exclusively would preclude the will's involvement here. Incorporating other faculties into his version of immediate perception may allow Rickless to continue to maintain that Berkeley is consistent in all aspects of his philosophy.

Not only does Rickless work to advance a charitable, consistent interpretation of Berkeley, he also seeks to show the logical worth of his argument. He finds the argument for idealism to be overall valid, but perhaps ultimately unsound. Rickless is innovative in his approach to how the complete argument operates and successfully demonstrates how the *Dialogues* is not simply offering another version of the argument, but rather the support required for the *Principles*' argument. Given this agenda, it is a tad disappointing that what is intended as support for the *Principles*' is itself in need of support. Rickless never shies away from critically analyzing how crucial steps in the *Dialogues* may need further work to advance them. He should be aware, then, that it appears that the same problem keeps repeating itself: an argument for idealism is given with premises inadequately supported. The *Principles*' argument for idealism might get an extra layer of protection, but that protection is itself left unprotected. Still, Rickless applauds Berkeley's logical work, and concludes with the bold assertion that Berkeley's argument achieves dialectical success among his philosophical contemporaries.

Berkeley's Argument for Idealism is a valuable contribution to Berkelian interpretation in its logical rigor, its clarity and completeness of all principles and issues involved in each step of the arguments, and its accessible style of exposition. It is a necessary read for anyone interested in Berkeley's idealist position.

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