

Manuel Fasko & Peter West (Eds.). *Berkeley's Doctrine of Signs*. De Gruyter Brill 2024. 240 pp. \$109.00 USD (Hardcover 9783111197289); \$00.00 USD (OA eBook 9783111197586).

As noted by the editors in their Introduction, this collection of essays is the first published volume on George Berkeley's doctrine of signs. 'Doctrine' is used in a broad sense not intended to refer to any particular theory to which Berkeley subscribes, or has invented, but rather to his thoughts with respect to the phenomenon of sign-usage, particularly the usage where one perceivable thing is employed to stand for some other thing. The volume is intended to be of interest to specialists and advanced students in early modern philosophy, and is not aimed exclusively at scholars familiar with the Berkeleian secondary literature. Nevertheless, given the nature of the subject matter, it is hard to envisage the appeal of the book extending much beyond those with a special interest in Berkeley.

The book features eleven original essays as individual chapters arranged broadly thematically. The first three chapters (Schwartz, Bartha, Fasko) investigate Berkeley's understanding of perception and representation, chapters 4 and 5 (Saporiti, West) tackle matters of Berkeleian epistemology, chapters 6 and 7 (Atherton, Fields) are concerned with Berkeley's philosophy of language, chapters 8 and 9 (DeRose, Slater) delve into the divine language hypothesis, while the two closing chapters (Moriarty, Stoneham) focus on the relevance of the doctrine of signs with respect to Berkeley's philosophy of mathematics and account of natural desires respectively. While all the essays demonstrate a high level of scholarship, and are in the main very well composed, space constraints preclude detailed discussion of each. I will therefore concentrate on two of the most thought-provoking: "Is There Anybody Out There? Berkeley's Indirect Realism About Other Minds" by Peter West and "Does Berkeley Have a Theory of Meaning?" by Margaret Atherton.

West focuses on a potential inconsistency in Berkeleian epistemology: that the structure of Berkeley's account of knowledge of other minds appears troublingly similar to the account of knowledge of material objects given by indirect realists, an account which Berkeley rejects on the grounds that it induces scepticism. According to West, Berkeley argues in the *Principles of Human Knowledge* that perceptual experiences such as seeing an animate human body illustrate to us, through our knowledge of our own case, that there is a mind associated with said body. Twenty-two years later, the titular *Alciphron* suggests, in a similar vein, that our observations of language use provide good evidence about the existence of other minds which resemble our own. In both



cases the key point is that we attain knowledge of other human minds by way of the intervention of ideas and our inferences from them.

West acknowledges that there is a structural similarity between Berkeleian knowledge of other minds and the indirect realist account of knowledge of material objects. In both cases direct access to their own ideas allows humans to gain indirect knowledge of some other thing which the ideas represent. But on West's interpretation, Berkeley avoids being hoist by his own petard by way of the claim that in order to have knowledge through representation we must first have prior knowledge that our representations are accurate with respect to what we understand them to be representations of. By making this a requirement for what qualifies as indirect knowledge, Berkeley signals that our knowledge of other minds is based upon our immediate knowledge of our own. Such foundational, prior knowledge is absent in the case of indirect knowledge of material objects, and thus by the standard articulated by, for example, Locke, we cannot be said to have real knowledge since we can never be sure that our representations of the world, that is, our ideas, are accurate. Our prior, immediate knowledge of our own mind and the causal relation with its associated ideas, confers the very certainty in our knowledge of the existence of our own mind which enables us to use it as the basis for our inferences to other minds, certainty which is not afforded to indirect realists with respect to mind-independent material objects. In this way, Berkeley can offer an indirect account of other minds immune from the sceptical charge he levels at indirect realists about the material world.

West's compelling account of a particularly thorny issue in the literature is long overdue. Since at least the time of Thomas Reid, Berkeley scholars have struggled to charitably reconstruct his thoughts on knowledge of other minds, that is, without saddling Berkeley with making some sort of fundamental howler, and West's sympathetic paper makes real progress in this direction. A perennial difficulty with any attempt to pin down Berkeley's thoughts on this matter is the paucity of his writings on the topic, but West marshals the available evidence skillfully in order to build a plausible, if not absolutely knock-down, argument which invites discussion and response. For example, although acknowledged in a footnote, West evades the question of what the causal agency of human minds amounts to in a world comprising sensible ideas caused by God. Perhaps supplementing the main thrust of West's thesis with a filling out of this occasionalistic aspect will prove to be a rewarding research project.

The first section of Atherton's paper pushes back against a prevailing trend in recent

scholarship which argues that Berkeley intends his attack on abstract ideas in the Introduction to the *Principles* to be a refutation of a Lockean theory of meaning. As Atherton reads him, Berkeley's targets are instead the putative process of abstraction itself and the role abstract ideas are taken to play in early modern accounts of knowledge, accounts which open the way to a faulty, sceptical metaphysics. For Atherton, Berkeley endeavours to provide a theory of the powers of the human mind, one which does not rely upon the belief in the human production of metaphysically troubling objects such as abstract ideas, and which therefore does not encourage philosophical scepticism when the production of such objects fails. The early career Berkeley, according to Atherton, neither endorses nor rejects the Lockean theory of meaning.

The larger part of Atherton's essay is concerned with *Alciphron*. Through close textual analysis of the grace/force argument, Atherton argues that Berkeley does not articulate a non-ideational theory of meaning in this later work, as is often claimed in the literature, but rather offers a theory of knowledge whereby signs either indicate ideas or relations between other signs which terminate in ideas. As Atherton interprets him, Berkeley throughout his philosophical career opposes a Lockean theory of knowledge which demands necessary connections in the agreements and disagreements of ideas. Knowledge, for Berkeley, is not gained through the detached contemplation of ideas alone, but through skillful sign-usage by means of which general rules and theorems are accrued, and is shot through with practicality which is itself dependent upon general principles articulated and understood via signs. The extension of knowledge on this picture will oftentimes involve less *necessary* connection between ideas and more *arbitrary* regular connection of ideas as signs, where the learning of such arbitrary co-occurrence or signification affords foreknowledge. This centrality of signs to Berkeley's understanding of knowledge is shown by his contentions that fire is the sign of the pain associated with it, and that visual ideas are signs of which tangible ideas to expect, that is, to be forewarned of, in such-and-such circumstances. Atherton concludes with a "qualified no" to her titular question, and suggests that the contemporary search for a Berkeleian theory of meaning conceals the epistemic nature of Berkeley's investigations.

Atherton's essay makes a valuable contribution to the contemporary literature. Despite its clear flirtation with anachronism, the thought that Berkeley rejects some mostly unarticulated and rather inchoate Lockean theory of meaning is on the cusp of becoming the standard view, and Atherton's convincingly shows that the case for the "theory of meaning" reading is not so strong as some of its

advocates suggest. Her style of argument is less by direct objection to those influential interpretations with which she disagrees, and more by illustration of the plausibility that Berkeley was motivated more by epistemic matters, in particular with respect to uncovering mistaken understandings of how human minds work, than by issues concerning the meanings of words. For example, Atherton shows that the passage from *Alciphron* which tends to be interpreted as Berkeley contending that we have no idea of force at all instead finds him asserting that we have no *distinct* idea of force separated from its sensory determinations, that is, we have no *abstract* idea of force. Furthermore, Atherton shows that this lack of a distinct idea does not equate to force being merely a fictive device engaged in order to derive laws of motion, rather ‘force’ is the expression of a non-causal relation between two bodies, a sign which picks out such regularities in phenomena, regularities which can be expressed via signs in true propositions. This sensitivity to the nuances of Berkeley’s often deceptively simple presentations of his philosophy enable Atherton to build a subtle and compelling case which throws new light on Berkeley’s overall project.

Both West’s and Atherton’s essays are sure to repay further study and stimulate engagement, comments which also apply to the collection as a whole. The book is therefore a welcome addition to the Berkeleian secondary literature.

In closing, it warrants mention that while the hardback edition comes with a hefty, but not unexpected, price-tag, the publishers should be commended for the open access status of the electronic edition. This will be highly welcome to students with a particular interest in Berkeley, and it is hoped, perhaps somewhat ambitiously, that more academic books are similarly available in the future.

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