



Berkeley's Half-Way House

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Abstract

George Berkeley's *New Theory of Vision* is frequently read as a simple precursor or “half-way house” to his later metaphysics. As a result, some allege the value of the *New Theory* has been overlooked as critics judge it by its association with immaterialism. In this piece I examine the ongoing debate over the nature of the connection between Berkeley's early work on perception and his later immaterialist tracts. I identify four principal positions on the nature of the connection that have been advanced in the scholarly literature, critically engage the evidence for and against them, and finally weigh in by arguing that an excellent case can be made for thinking that the *New Theory* is a half-way house to immaterialism after all.

In the introduction to his now classic work on Berkeley's theory of vision (1960, introduction and 26), David Armstrong tells us that the traditional interpretation of the *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (NTV) is that of a “half-way house” to the mature immaterialist metaphysics of his *Principles of Human Knowledge* (PHK). Armstrong rejects this reading on the grounds that the *New Theory* does not in fact support immaterialism, while others have sought to reinforce traditional readings. Scholars like A. A. Luce and Robert Muehlmann (albeit for different reasons) see the connection between the works in the more tightly connected traditional way. Since Armstrong's book was published, a variety of competing interpretations have been advanced, led perhaps most forcibly by Margaret Atherton (1990), who seeks to alter the traditional reading of the *New Theory* and consider it as an independent philosophical text with something to offer on its own. In this piece I want to examine the ongoing debate over the nature of the connection between Berkeley's early work on perception and his later immaterialist tracts. I will lay out the four principal options that have been advanced in the scholarly literature, critically engage the evidence for and against the traditional reading, and finally weigh in by arguing that an excellent case can be made for thinking that the *New Theory* is a half-way house to immaterialism after all.

1. Connections

I start by invoking a general distinction between separate philosophical works that are *tightly* connected and those that are *loosely* connected. Two works

are tightly connected if their intended conclusions or goals are in fact the same. A loose connection is one where overlap in content appears merely as function of some similarity in the topics addressed. This might be attributable to one work “growing out” of the other. A work that consciously has a different intended conclusion will only be loosely related to another that explores roughly the same content. The *New Theory* and the *Principles* both involve an analysis – to varying degrees – of perception, so I shall take it for granted that they are at least loosely connected. What remains to determine is whether their connection is tighter yet.

Tight connections come in varying forms. Here I want to isolate two that seem relevant for our current purposes. The *New Theory* might be tightly connected to the *Principles* and later works because in fact all of them constitute a single integrated project. Let's call this first reading of Berkeley an *integral part interpretation*. A. A. Luce, for instance, represents this line of interpretation well.

So Berkeley's essay on vision, though presented as an independent work, and certainly possessing an independent value, is essentially and by origin an integral part of *his* new philosophy. (Luce 1967, 30)

The key here is to recognize that Luce and other tight interpreters of Berkeley believe that the NTV is *by origin* an essentially immaterialist work.

Another tight reading of the connection between the works on vision and the mature metaphysical works I call the *subterfuge interpretation*. According to this view, Berkeley aims to purposely mislead the readers of the *New Theory* in order to prepare them for the more radical conclusions of his full-blown immaterialism. Berkeley's goal is to advance arguments for claims that he does not accept for the purpose of pushing the reader to the genuine but less obvious truth of immaterialism. Robert Muehlmann is, to my knowledge, the only prominent advocate of this view. His work, however, is sufficiently detailed and coherent to rise to the level of a sophisticated and impressive interpretation of Berkeley's thought.

The task Berkeley must tackle is that of overcoming his readership's resistance to idealism. He knows he will have to proceed with great caution if he is to have any chance of success; he knows he cannot spring idealism into the literature of the world without first carefully paving the way. But, while idealism is indeed astonishing, [sic] what is even more astonishing and shocking is *the way* he proceeds to do this, his methodological madness. That last already alludes to the most general thesis of the present book. I want now to state, and state bluntly, that most general thesis both in short form and in long. The short is that Berkeley *deliberately subverts* his vision theory in order to provide a platform on which his readership can stand before they are then confronted by the idealism of the *Principles*. (Muehlmann forthcoming, 28.¹)

Both tight readings require that Berkeley wrote the *New Theory* with the goal of advancing immaterialism explicitly in mind. That is, it is not enough to say that Berkeley was thinking idealistic thoughts independently while

he wrote his tract on vision; Berkeley wrote the *New Theory* with the goal of eventually establishing the truth of immaterialism.

Alternatively, one might think that the connection is loose. Loose connections also come in different flavors, two of which are prominent in the scholarly literature. The first I call the *independent interpretation*. On this view, the NTV overlaps in content with the later works, but not because Berkeley had an explicitly immaterialist agenda in the *New Theory*. Instead, Berkeley had a separate, independent, task in mind when he wrote on vision. That the *New Theory* happens to cohere with his later works might be a testament to the depth and fecundity of his thought, and of Berkeley's ability to pursue multiple lines of inquiry. In a similar vein, one might suppose that the *New Theory* was written to be consistent with immaterialism, but in fact aimed to establish distinct conclusions. Margaret Atherton wants to revive studies of the Irish philosopher along these lines. Thus Atherton concludes at the end of her introduction to her book on Berkeley's theory of vision that,

I shall eventually be arguing that what is of primary importance to Berkeley's account is his theory of visual representation *rather than* what is often stressed, his theory of visual experience, which is to say, his idealism. (Atherton 1990, 15, my emphasis)

According to Atherton, the *New Theory* is principally concerned with attacking a number of optic writers who were contemporaries of Berkeley. His theory of visual experience does indeed get developed in the *Principles* and elsewhere into a more substantive metaphysic, but that is not strongly relevant to his *intentions* and actual arguments in the NTV.

Lastly, one might take the comparatively bland view that the connection is loose because Berkeley in fact developed his metaphysics as a result of his work in the *New Theory* and elsewhere. Let's call this the *groundwork interpretation*. The *New Theory* is literally the groundwork that eventually develops into immaterialism, but full-blown immaterialism is not *explicitly* present or assumed in the earlier work. This is not a widely held view (for reasons we will explore shortly) and one that is not easy to identify. George Stack probably comes closest. He writes:

The conclusions which Berkeley reached at the end of the *Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* provided the groundwork for, and led ineluctably to, his positive conception of immaterialism. Armed with the notion that the objects of sense are those phenomena which are immediately perceived (i.e., "ideas"), Berkeley is prepared to argue that *esse est percipi*. (Stack 1991, 38)

Because Stack is initially hesitant to commit himself to the claim that Berkeley was *in fact* defending immaterialism in his earliest work, he is best placed in this category. His Berkeley is "prepared" to argue for immaterialism, but he has not actually made that step. For advocates of this final reading, whether the thoughts being articulated in the *New Theory* lead "ineluctably" to immaterialism is not really relevant. What matters for this

category is that Berkeley is not consciously arguing for immaterialism *yet*, even if his arguments should logically drive him to that conclusion in the future.

One should note that the difference between the tight integral view and the loose groundwork view is comparatively slight from one perspective. Luce holds that the *New Theory* prepares Berkeley to argue for the *esse percipi* thesis because Berkeley consciously recognized that he needed to do that spadework first. Stack takes the weaker position that the book on vision leaves Berkeley ready to argue for immaterialism, but not due to any particular conscious pre-planning. Thus the difference essentially comes down to a judgment about Berkeley's *intentions* when composing the *New Theory*. Although attempting to interpret a work by accessing the intentions of its author is a notoriously hard road to travel, most of the key interpretive disputes in fact rest on this very question. What was Berkeley's intention in the *New Theory*? What is the best way to understand the relationship between it and the *Principles of Human Understanding*? It is to these questions we now turn.

2. Constant Immaterialist

We have evidence that Berkeley was committed to his immaterialist program even earlier than the *New Theory*. If nothing else, the fact that the *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), in which Berkeley first launches his complete immaterialist metaphysic, follows hard on the heels of the *New Theory* (1709) itself should be enough to give one pause. But this could be misleading. Their relative closeness in time might also make apparent overlaps in content look more meaningful than they in fact are. What we require is some independent corroboration, which in fact we have.

The standard case for thinking that Berkeley was an immaterialist even before the *New Theory* is straightforward: Berkeley says that he was. Stung by accusations of insincerity about his newly published *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley writes to Percival on September 6, 1710:

God is my witness that I was, and do still remain, entirely persuaded of the non-existence of matter and the other tenets published along with it. . . . I may add that the opinion of matter I have entertained some years; if therefore a motive of vanity could have induced me to obtrude falsehoods on the world, I had long since done it when the conceit was warm in my imagination and not have staid to examine and revise it both with my own judgment and that of my ingenious friends. (Berkeley 1948–57, VIII, 37)

Here Berkeley simply asserts that he was an immaterialist long before he published the *Principles*, which would make it likely before he published the *New Theory* as well. The draft introduction to the *Principles* has been dated as early as the summer of 1708 (Belfrage 1987, 20–1), lending credence to this assertion. When we turn to Berkeley's notebooks, we also find ample evidence that he was carefully thinking about a full-blown immaterialist

metaphysic before he published his thoughts on vision. One simple entry will suffice for our purposes here.

M:N 71 By immateriality is solv'd the cohesion of bodies, or rather the dispute ceases. (Berkeley 1948–57, I, 14)

In his notes we can even see Berkeley grappling with anticipated objections to immaterialism, indicating an advanced line of thought quite early in his philosophical career. As the notebooks are earlier than 1709, there can be little doubt that Berkeley had worked out the basics of his metaphysics before he published the tract on vision.

Learning that Berkeley was deeply engaged in thinking about immaterialism and its consequences prior to the publication of the *New Theory* does not resolve this dispute in favor of his tight interpreters, however, for it remains to demonstrate that Berkeley *intended* his earliest work to *actually advance* these metaphysical theses. One might allege that even if the earlier work is consonant with his immaterialism, its aims are in fact not directed towards establishing immaterialism at all. Some scholars hold that Berkeley in fact *suppressed* his metaphysics in the *New Theory*. Michael Ayers, for instance, defends exactly this case.

The *Essay on Vision* is a special case, since in it Berkeley deliberately suppressed a part of his metaphysics, treating the objects of touch as independent and external in space. Its conclusions are nevertheless essential or conducive to the whole theory. (Berkeley 1975, xxxvii)

Ayers nonetheless believes that the claims of the *New Theory* are “essential” to his metaphysics. Thus we have now located a key issue in the interpretive dispute. Armstrong argues that the *New Theory* does not support the claims of Berkeley’s mature metaphysics. It would appear that there can be no tight connection if in fact the *New Theory* is inconsistent with the *Principles*. In fact, there are two routes one might take at this juncture. We might argue, as Muehlmann does, that any apparent inconsistencies are a part of a deceptive rhetorical and argumentative strategy employed by Berkeley. Alternatively, we might simply deny that the two works are inconsistent at all. I choose the latter course (regrettably I have not the space here for an analysis of Muehlmann’s hypothesis) and thus must now turn to analyze why some scholars think that the *New Theory* and the mature metaphysics are incompatible.

3. Theories of Incompatibility

There are many reasons why one might think that the *New Theory* is incompatible with the assertions of the *Principles*, but almost all of them depend on essentially uncharitable readings of Berkeley. The analysis here has already been partly presaged by Atherton, but differences in emphasis will matter (Atherton 1990, 221–9). Nonetheless, we come to the same

conclusion: nothing in the *New Theory of Vision* is really inconsistent with immaterialism.

The most obvious candidate for inconsistency is Berkeley's adherence to the so-called "vulgar error." In the work on vision Berkeley assumes that tangible objects have a mind independent existence. What is worse, much of his analysis of the geometry of vision implicitly assumes that there exist objects, such as light rays, that are not perceivable (and are not minds). Such posits appear at odds with the claims of the *Principles*. But oddly enough, when Berkeley refers to his earlier work in the *Principles*, he does not seem to think that there is any inconsistency at all.

The ideas of sight and touch make two species, entirely distinct and heterogeneous. The former are marks and prognostics of the latter. That the proper objects of sight neither exist without the mind, nor are the images of external things, was shown even in that treatise. Though throughout the same, the contrary be supposed true of tangible objects: not that to suppose that vulgar error was necessary for establishing the notions therein laid down, but because it was beside my purpose to examine and refute it in a discourse concerning vision. So that in strict truth the ideas of sight, when we apprehend by them, distance and things placed at a distance, do not suggest or mark out to us things actually existing at a distance, but only admonish us what ideas of touch will be imprinted in our minds at such and such distances of time, and in consequence of such or such actions. It is, I say, evident from what has been said in the foregoing parts of this treatise, and in Sect. 147, and elsewhere of the essay concerning vision, that visible ideas are the language whereby the governing Spirit, on whom we depend, informs us what tangible ideas he is about to imprint upon us, in case we excite this or that motion in our own bodies. But for a fuller information in this point, I refer to the essay itself. (Berkeley 1948–75, II, 58–9, PHK 44, my italics)

Denying the vulgar error was beside his purpose. Thus Berkeley's apparent goal in the *New Theory* was to establish a particular thesis about the nature of vision and its role as the language of nature. As he sees it, nothing in the *New Theory* actually requires that the objects of touch exist independent of the mind. He allowed us to assume it in order to achieve his more narrow aspirations, but that in itself does not render it inconsistent with immaterialism.

We have reason, however, to doubt Berkeley's sincerity on this point. G. J. Warnock argues that what makes his analysis in the *New Theory* so initially plausible is that visual ideas are signs of tangible objects that really are independent and objective.

It is, after all, natural enough to regard the sense of touch as a special case. It is certainly different in important respects from the other senses; and we are perhaps apt to think that touching is particularly "direct" and "immediate." (Warnock 1982, 47)

A sign is a sign of something. Part of what makes the claims of the *New Theory* credible is that it preserves our sense that the tactile world is somehow

primary. The primary qualities advanced by Locke and Boyle are those associated with our sense of touch: solidity, shape, size, extension, motion. Part of what motivates the distinction between primary and secondary qualities is that the former seem intimately connected to our ordinary existence in a way that the latter do not. Whereas we can make sense of being color blind, or being deaf, and we can imagine lacking the capacity to smell or taste, we cannot similarly imagine functioning in a world where we are size blind or insensitive to all motion. We think of the world in which we live as being three-dimensional. Berkeley can plausibly argue that visual ideas are only in the mind at least in part because sight is not intimately connected to our foundational understanding of reality in the way that our sense of touch happens to be. So when Berkeley surrenders the claim that the ideas of sight are signs for an independent tactile reality and replaces it with the claim that ideas of sight are only signs for other mind-dependent ideas, one might reasonably think that Berkeley has abandoned the position he staked in the *New Theory*.

To make matters worse, the surrender of the tie to an independent tactile world seems to set Berkeley's metaphysics adrift. If visible ideas only signify other mind-dependent ideas, then what could explain why visible ideas are signs of tactile ones instead of *vice versa*? Why do we take sight to be a sign of the felt, instead of the felt a sign of the seen? Warnock alleges that the *Principles* departs from the *New Theory* precisely because of these sorts of problems. The two works cannot be genuinely consistent given these sorts of concerns.

Warnock's diagnosis of the inconsistency, however, relies on too shallow an application of the core theses of the *Principles*. Berkeley does not deny our intuition that the tactile world appears, as it were, "more real" than the visual world. Yet this does not require that the tactile world be mind-independent. It only requires that the represented content of tactile ideas be correspondingly richer (or perhaps more regular and ordered) than those of sight. As it turns out, this is exactly what Berkeley says. We do not see distance, but we *do* feel it. Contrary to what Warnock and others appear to assume, this does not require that the ideas be literally located in a mind-independent space or represent objects that are. If the tactile idea itself encodes the content of felt distance, then everything that Berkeley requires is available. Felt distance *is* distance. We cannot make sense of being primary quality blind because those ideas happen to be the ones that represent the most foundational content in terms of how we experience the world. Just as we cannot conceive of color without something colored, we cannot conceive of visual, auditory, or olfactory sensations without a previous stock of tactile ideas. Berkeley is not Kant, but the concept of prerequisite categories for certain kinds of experience is not utterly alien to empiricism (Locke, for instance, admits that there might be innate *faculties* even if no innate ideas). In the final analysis, I see no reason to believe on these grounds that the *New Theory* is incompatible with the later metaphysics.

It is worth briefly engaging one other commonly made argument for the incompatibility of the two works. Some allege that Berkeley is committed to a corpuscularian ontology in the work on vision. Dick Brook, for instance, points to the prevalence of materialist imagery in the *New Theory* (Brook 1973, esp. 43). The tract on vision assumes, not attacks, the materialist physics of the period. The *Principles*, it is alleged, launches a broadside against materialism writ large. But here again this reading is difficult to ascribe to Berkeley, who repeatedly argues that immaterialism is completely consistent with the science of his day (*cf.* PHK 58 – 63). Science concerns itself with organizing and explaining phenomena. The laws invoked in science are expressions of regularities, predictions in terms of what we should expect to experience in given situations. Berkeley preserves the phenomena and hence preserves the science.

There are other minor allegations of incompatibility between the two works, but none of them rise to the level of those already examined, all typically falling prey to the error of not reading Berkeley's own claims deeply and charitably. I conclude that there are no compelling reasons to deny that the core claims of the *New Theory* are consistent with those of immaterialism. I thus take Berkeley at his word when he claims that the *New Theory* is compatible with the tenets of immaterialism. Since Berkeley tells us that he was an immaterialist while writing the *New Theory* and given the textual evidence that corroborates that claim, we may justifiably conclude that the *New Theory* in fact *is* a sort of half-way house to the *Principles* and the *Three Dialogues*. Berkeley does wish to undermine rival theories of visual perception (as Atherton rightly notes), but all of the analysis of perception is a prelude to – or a perhaps a part of – the metaphysics that follows hard on its heels.

Note

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