

Review of George Berkeley: A Philosophical Life

George Berkeley: A Philosophical Life

Tom Jones

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The book under review here is a thorough and enlightening look at how Berkeley's life and philosophy intertwined. The fact that this review essay focuses on some points where I disagree with the author should not be read to indict the quality of the work as a whole.

The first of these points has to do with Jones's approach to writing the biography of a philosopher. He opens his book with a very strong claim:

"Berkeley's documented life and participation in various institutions and practices, such as those of the exclusive educational institutions of a Protestant elite, is inseparable from his treatment of major philosophical and social issues" (3).

Jones does not contend that on occasion, we might get insight into a thinker's philosophical position by examining that thinker's biography. No, he claims that Berkeley's (and I assume not just Berkeley's: more on this below) philosophical ideas are "inseparable" from his biography. Should we accept or reject immaterialism based on what we think of how Berkeley led his life? Many people have read Berkeley's argument for immaterialism and discussed it without knowing anything about his biography. Were they all mistaken to do so?

I am assuming Jones would make a similar contention vis-à-vis any philosopher's work. Am I justified in this assumption? A subsequent quote might be used to argue that I am not: "I want to suggest that the consideration of the central topics in Berkeley's immaterialism offers a justification of a biographical approach to his philosophical career..." So perhaps there is something about Berkeley's philosophy that especially demands a biographical approach to understand it? But the passage continues: "but one that might first require us to rethink our ideas of what people are and how they know one another" (4). Therefore, this biographical approach, given it is based upon a certain understanding of "what people are", ought to apply to philosophers in general. And as we read on in Joneses work, what we will discover is not that he suggests that Berkeley's philosophy particularly *demands* a biographical approach, but that his philosophy *supports* one. Let's take a look at this passage:

"But it is perhaps surprising that Berkeley's immaterialism, his insistence that there is only one substance — spirit — and that ideas are merely passive effects of spirits to exist in willing some conceived and quite possibly indistinct good, lends its support to a biographical approach to his philosophy." (12-13)

Jones's contention above is imprecise: if Berkeley's arguments for immaterialism are wrong, they do not lend support to *anything*: they are simply mistakes. But if Berkeley's arguments *are* correct and if Jones's link between immaterialism and philosophical biography stands, then they lend support to analyzing the work of *any* philosopher biographically.

To make this point clearer, let us consider an analogous situation, where we are writing a biography of a thinker, say Smith, who believes that human personalities are actually just very sophisticated computer programs, and suggests we can best understand them by "studying their source code" (however that might be done). It would be incorrect for us to contend that, because Smith views human beings this way, the best way to write a biography of *him* would be by "studying *his* source code." If Smith's view is correct, then that is the best way to not only write about Smith, but to write about anyone whomsoever. But if his view is wrong, then it is not a good way to write about anyone, not even Smith.

It is true that understanding Berkeley's life better does cast new light on his works. But as far as the claim Jones makes, that Berkeley's life and his philosophy are "inseparable," this juror must bring in a verdict of "Unproven." For instance, Berkeley certainly was inspired to debunk the newly fashionable theory of matter put forth by figures such as Descartes and Locke based on the fact that he felt it promoted skepticism. But Berkeley's arguments as to why matter, as his targets understood it, was an untenable concept, do not depend upon his motivation in making them. They either succeed or not on their own merits. It is very interesting to learn about Berkeley's intimate involvement with elite Protestant education, his desire to defend and promote Anglicanism, and his efforts to gain better positions within the church. But numerous people at the time were educated in elite Protestant institutions, promoted Anglicanism, and sought better jobs. But only one of them wrote famous books arguing for immaterialism.

If we cannot consider a thinker's arguments apart from that thinker's life history, then Jones's book itself is radically incomplete: every copy ought to be shipped with a biography of Jones. And unless that is an autobiography, that biography should come with a biography of the person who wrote *it*. And so on, ad infinitum.

The above contention, that Berkeley's philosophy itself somehow justifies Jones's approach to biography, is my most serious issue with this book. But there are others as well. For instance, an unfortunate recurrence is a certain temporal parochialism, an apparent conviction that the current ideas are the best ideas (so far, at least), and that when they disagree with past ideas, clearly the past ideas are to blame. This shows up early on when Jones writes, "Perhaps not everyone feels that Berkeley's God is an embarrassment ..." (15). Countless thinkers in the past would have found today's presumption of materialism an embarrassment. And many of them were very bright people. They might all have been wrong, but showing that requires an argument, not merely noting that many current thinkers find their ideas to be "an embarrassment."

Another example of this temporal bias is Jones's puzzle here: "Here, as in so many other locations in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century social thought, the possibility that rank

produces, or is otherwise complicit in, the adumbration of natural rights to justice and equity is mysteriously invisible" (192).

Jones should remember the parochialism is not limited to earlier ages: It is quite possible that a social thinker from the 1700s would note how mysterious it is that 21st-century social thinkers believe that rank is in conflict with natural rights to justice and equity.

In what appears to me as one more case of "presentism," while discussing Berkeley's work *Alciphron*, Jones seems overly anxious to assure the reader that Berkeley's "right thinkers" are just as subject to prejudice as are his "free thinkers." For instance, Jones quotes Berkeley:

"[W]ho would choose for his Guide in the Search of Truth, a Man... whose Education hath been behind a Counter, or in an Office? Or whose Speculations have been employed on the Forms of Business, who are only well read in the ways and commerce of Mankind, in Stock-jobbing, Purloining, Supplanting, Bribing?"

Jones comments:

"In the choice of what kind of human character we wish to be led by... what sort of person we take to have clear and extensive views, Crito is set against anyone working in business and finance. This prejudice seems as unfounded as the freethinking prejudiced for nobility of rank..." (373)

However, Jones has left out important part of the quote from *Alciphron*; Crito also recommends against taking as a guide "a Man whose Thoughts and Time are taken up with Dress, Visits, and Diversions" (*Alciphron*, Second Dialogue, section XIX). Once we combine that with his "only well read", it is clear that Crito is claiming that a mind *consumed* by thoughts of fashion and socializing, or by thoughts of financial gain, will not make a good philosopher. That hardly seems to be a prejudice.

Jones also appears to have a mistaken notion of what Berkeley's immaterialism actually implies. For instance, he writes "The evidence of the senses might be taken as a report of what is out there in the world" (6). He goes on to say, "But Berkeley suggests that it is this attitude... that opens the door to skepticism" (6). But that is wrong: Berkeley is not saying that the evidence of the senses is not a report on what is "out there in the world": he is arguing that what is "out there in the world" are ideas, specifically, ideas in the mind of God.

Similarly, Jones writes: "For all that the world may appear to have physical being, tangible or visible extension, its real existence is as ideas" (141). This is a mistake made by many interpreters of Berkeley: he is **not** claiming that there is no physical world, or tangible or visible extension. He is claiming that the world's physicality is **itself** an idea, as is extension. These things are not illusions that must be dispelled by Berkeley's philosophy: they are realities whose basis it attempts to explain.

Berkeley's project of founding a university in Bermuda is a strange episode in his career, although Jones makes a good case that it should be understood as a facet of his larger project of Anglican education. But while discussing this topic, Jones makes a curious claim: "But his Bermuda project was obliquely complicit in the modern, import-oriented economy he despised and the full range of human cruelty it required – bondage, and forced movement of populations, and eradication of indigenous peoples and their ways of life and habitats" (348). Even though Berkeley's plan was to raise funds for his project through selling small land holdings on St. Christopher (St. Kitts), nevertheless this would "obliquely but ultimately require the dystopia of plantation colonialism and slavery" (348).

First of all, it is not at all clear what Jones means by "require" here: We found universities today, even on remote islands, without "requiring" plantation colonialism and slavery. It is true that what wound up happening on St. Christopher was that the land was dominated by large, slave-worked plantations. But this happened without Berkeley being involved in the land sales, and without his college ever being built. One can never prove historical counterfactuals, but perhaps if his scheme has gone through, the outcome on St. Christopher would have been different.

But even odder is this notion of "oblique" responsibility: Once we adopt such a flimsy standard for placing blame, it seems we have to condemn everyone alive at the moment some unpleasant event was occurring: Weren't even the Native Americans and the slaves "obliquely" responsible for what happened?

But enough complaints! Let me note a few highlights of what Jones reveals about Berkeley's life and thought. For instance, in discussing Berkeley's travels in England, Italy, and America, Jones highlights how prominent thoughts on social improvement were in Berkeley's life. Even his most famous "metaphysical" works partook of this tendency, as they were foremost intended as a means of defeating skepticism and atheism, which Berkeley saw as serious threats to social order.

In a chapter called "The True End of Speech," Jones turns his attention to Berkeley as a philosopher of language and semiotician. This is an aspect of Berkeley's thought that has garnered a great deal of attention lately. (See, for instance Kenneth Pearce's *Language and the Structure of Berkeley's World*.) Jones opens the chapter with a quote from Berkeley that shows that the bishop himself would have welcomed this emphasis:

"The Doctrine of Signs is a Point of great Importance, and general Extent, which, if duly considered, would cast no small Light upon Things..." (*Alciphron* VII.6, quoted on 379).

Jones notes that:

"The arguments Berkeley deploys in this account of language have a 20th-century field: his introduction of rules of conduct and changes of behavior as tests of whether a term is meaningful are revolutionary. He has been thought a precursor of Wittgenstein, Grice, and Austin." (384)

Another important aspect of Berkeley's thought that Jones points out, in both the chapter "Passive Obedience," and in "Discipline," is a conundrum that neither he nor I believe

Berkleley successfully resolved: As an advocate of passive obedience to the current secular rulers, would not Berkeley have to condemn the fact that they themselves gained power by overthrowing the Stuart dynasty? And in recommending that Christians accept the doctrines of the current (Anglican) established church and not engage in “free thinking,” how could he avoid the conclusion that the founders of the Anglican church were wrong in not accepting the doctrines of the Catholic Church and asserting their own right to “free thinking”? In fact, his embrace of passive obedience cost him preferment on some occasions, as critics rightly saw that it could be used to challenge the legitimacy of the House of Hanover. And, as Jones notes, his position on church authority was condemned by contemporaries as a “threat to the liberty from overbearing ecclesiastical authority that the Protestant movement itself represented” (421).

Of course, this essay can touch on only a small portion of the fascinating material on Berkeley’s life presented in this book. And despite the above quibbles, it is an excellent addition to the literature on Berkeley, one that gives the reader a rich feel not just for Berkeley’s own life and works, but for the context in which that life and those works took place.

Bibliography

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