Editor’s Note
The Karlsruhe Conference: Highlights, Prospects

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In August scholars from throughout Europe and North America met at the University of Karlsruhe in southern Germany to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the publication of Berkeley’s *Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709). Organized by Wolfgang Breidert and Bertil Belfrage and sponsored by the International Berkeley Society, the conference revealed how after three centuries Berkeley’s work continues to generate a variety of interpretations.

At the end of our meeting I was asked to summarize a few of the points that emerged from our discussions. Here are my comments:

It would be presumptuous on my part to pass judgment on the value of our deliberations over the past four days. As with all events such as this, we probably won’t know for some time (if ever) what the effects of our conversations will be. Certainly, the work done here is most immediately felt in our having been forced to think more about topics and problems in the preparation of our papers, in our struggles to understand the papers of others, and in having to reconcile our own prejudiced (and of course, informed and “considered”) views with those of others.

As Wolfgang Breidert will tell you, however, administrators here at the University (and no doubt, elsewhere) are interested in how we would justify our spending this week talking about Berkeley. We will also be asked by colleagues and other Berkeley scholars who are not here how the conference went—which can be understood generally as a question about what we have learned from one another and how what we have learned compares with what has come out of similar conferences.

It is not enough to say that we discussed various features of Berkeley’s thought (especially those raised in the *New Theory of Vision*), for there is nothing distinctive about that. What is distinctive, however, is the fact that we have thought about these issues within the shared context of these papers. And within that context, I think we can discern a theme that runs through most, if not all, of our papers.

Not surprisingly, that theme is quite broad: it is Berkeley’s effort to explain exact what the objects of our experience are. At first glance, it seems that we can describe such objects simply (or at least) as the things we see or touch. But as we have heard, the things we see and touch may be “referred to” ideally or by means of imagination sometimes in purely heuristic ways in order to promote our achievement of practical ends or to enhance our apprehension of the value-laden character of even the most seemingly neutral relations of perception (e.g., regarding distance). The apprehension of the interrelatedness of ideas can be understood either from the standpoint of the mind that perceives them—in which case we tend to think of Berkeley in idealist terms—or from the standpoint of the significatory or semiotic character of the ideas themselves—in which case we think of Berkeley in phenomenalist terms. Or to put this contrast differently: we can think
of Berkeley’s project as an effort either to reconcile the heterogeneity of our experiences or to show how associations between ideas (especially between ideas of sight and touch) express links between signs and the things they signify without collapsing them into one another.

This recognition of the immediate and unavoidable differentiation of objects constitutes the possibility of our experience of both time and motion, and it indicates why attempts to gloss over the discontinuous nature of our ideas (e.g., in Euclidean geometry) fail. Even the possibility of interruptions in the continuity, unity, or harmony of our experience (e.g., in the case of shadows) reaffirms the coherence and intelligibility of the world. It does so by highlighting how irreducibly heterogeneous elements and radically different strategies of explanation complement one another in Berkeley’s thought. Even though his science of vision and metaphysics of objects and their causes encompass different domains, they are nonetheless united by the pragmatic and theologically-contextualized assumption that all things should be recognized as expressing value.

Indeed, the failure to see sensible ideas as fore-shadowing the afterlife is a symptom of the myopic and truncated experience of those who cannot or will not see how objects in nature are works of a divine art intended to promote human perfection and pleasure. We experience such pleasure whenever we recognize how our perceptions are always of objects with which we are engaged. This recognition of the inherent intentionality of thinking constantly reminds us of our dialogic engagement with an other who ties together everything we experience. So just as all the varieties of color (i.e., the immediate objects of vision) are contained in solar light, so all objects in experience are united in a God to whom we are inextricably linked.

Perceiving or “imaging” a world can thus simultaneously be the imagination of its unity, the moral affirmation of God’s comprehension of all things. Such an affirmation guides Berkeley’s arguments demonstrating how visual and tactile objects of sense can be coordinated. It also can guide our efforts to understand his philosophy as a totality rather than as a series of discrete examinations of indirectly associated topics.