

BERKELEY'S LASTING LEGACY:
300 YEARS LATER

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STOICISM IN BERKELEY'S PHILOSOPHY

ABSTRACT

Commentators have not said much regarding Berkeley and Stoicism. Even when they do, they generally limit their remarks to Berkeley's *Siris* (1744) where he invokes characteristically Stoic themes about the World Soul, "seminal reasons," and the animating fire of the universe. The Stoic heritage of other Berkeleian doctrines (e.g., about mind or the semiotic character of nature) is seldom recognized, and when it is, little is made of it in explaining his other doctrines (e.g., immaterialism). None of this is surprising, considering how Stoics are considered arch-materialists and determinists. My aim is to suggest that our understanding of Berkeley's philosophy is improved significantly by acknowledging its underlying Stoic character. I argue that Berkeley proposes not only a semantic ontology based on assumptions of Stoic logic but also a doctrine in which perceptions or ideas are intelligible precisely because they are always embedded in the propositions of a discourse or language.

INTRODUCTION

It is not unusual to find references to Stoic themes in accounts of Rene Descartes' ethics or Baruch Spinoza's treatment of freedom and determinism. Indeed, one has to look no further than G. W. Leibniz to see how Descartes and Spinoza are understood as "new Stoics."¹ Recent studies have highlighted how Thomas Hobbes, Leibniz, John Locke, A. A. Cooper (third Earl of Shaftesbury), and Joseph Butler also appropriate tenets of Stoicism – especially as developed in the Neo-Stoicism of Justus Lipsius (1547-1606).² In Hobbes's case, the Stoic contribution is most explicit when he appeals to

1 Leibniz 1677-80, 282-283. Cf. Miller 2003, 126-35; Rutherford 2004, 178; Rutherford 2001, 138-164; James 1993, 289-316; and Kristeller 1984, 1-7.

2 See Long 2003, 9-17, 27-28, and Moreau 1999b, 23-25.

Lipsius to show that the Stoic concept of fate is consistent with the Christian doctrine that God is the necessary cause of all things.³ Locke and Shaftesbury appeal to Stoic ideas in developing their doctrines of virtue; and Leibniz endorses the Stoic view that human beings attain happiness by acting in accord with the rationally ordered cosmos.⁴

Regarding Berkeley and Stoicism, commentators have not said much. Even when they do, they generally limit their remarks to Berkeley's *Siris* where he invokes characteristically Stoic themes about the World Soul, "seminal reasons," and the animating fire or ether of the universe.⁵ The Stoic heritage of other Berkeleian doctrines (e.g., about mind or the semiotic character of nature) is seldom recognized; and when it is, little is typically made of it in explaining features of his thought (such as immaterialism) for which he is most well known.⁶

Recently, however, Jeffrey Barnouw has argued that Berkeley's theory of signs parallels the Stoic treatment of how things in the cosmos are related.⁷ And Geneviève Brykman has proposed that Berkeley's account of human freedom is similar to that of the Stoics, Shaftesbury, and even Spinoza, in that "for all these thinkers, liberty is connected with the comprehensive knowledge and understanding of nature."⁸ Such interpretations are problematic, however, considering how the Stoics are commonly portrayed as extreme materialists and determininists. Neither of which views Berkeley endorses.

My aim here is to indicate how the common portrait of Stoicism fails to acknowledge certain features that appear in Berkeley's philosophy as well. Even though those features are not typically emphasized in popular accounts of Stoicism, they are crucial for showing how other Stoic doctrines are related to one another. By recognizing how they function in Stoic thought, we are better prepared to see not only how Berkeley adopts Stoic ideas but also

3 See Hobbes 1656, 242-243. Cf. Kassler 1991, 54-55.

4 Cf. Mitsis 2003, 45-61; Rutherford 2003, 62-89; and Forman 2008, 206-211.

5 Cf. Moked, 126-127; Leduc-Fayette 1997, 414, 419; and Jacob 1991, 115. Berkeley, *Siris*.

6 Cf. Bracken 1974, 137.

7 See Barnouw 2008, 170-172.

8 Brykman 2008, 243-244.

how disparate aspects of his philosophy – from its earliest expressions about mathematics and the epistemology of vision to the metaphysics and cosmology of *Siris* – can be understood as more unified than has previously been noted.

STOIC IMMATERIALISM

Our attending to Stoic themes in Berkeley's philosophy has the reflexive effect of making us reconsider aspects of Stoicism (e.g., materialism, determinism) that seem to conflict with Berkeley's views. This reconsideration is important because, as Anthony Long argues, the medieval assimilation of Stoic doctrines in Christian ethics and theology blurs the profound differences between Stoicism and Christian thought.⁹ In particular, Stoic teachings on perception, the passions, morality, and providence are recast by medieval thinkers in Platonic and Aristotelian terms and divorced from the distinctive logical and metaphysical contexts in which those teachings are inextricably grounded for their intelligibility. So in the effort to Christianize Stoicism, medieval thinkers gloss over differences between Stoic and Platonic/Aristotelian ways of thinking. And it is this gloss that produces the standard understanding of Stoicism that seems so contrary to Berkeley's immaterialism.

The appearance of Stoic themes in Berkeley's philosophy invites us to reconsider not only (a) how Stoicism allows for (and even requires) recognition of immaterial realities and freedom but also (b) how his Christianity accommodates the view expressed by the Stoic poet Aratus and repeated by St Paul, that in God we "live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). The key to this latter point lies in noting how Berkeley's emphasis on the discursive character of nature and his rejection of abstract ideas depend on his appeal to a form of Stoic metaphysics (and the propositional logic underlying it) rather than the metaphysics and predicate logic found in the Platonic/Aristotelian strategies appropriated by most of his contemporaries.

Typically the default way of treating Berkeley's metaphysics and logic is to claim that he at least starts with a version of Cartesian, Malebranchean, or Lockean metaphysics that is based on the kind of predicate logic proposed

⁹ Long 2003, 8.

in the *Port Royal Logic* and popularized by Locke. The problem with such a strategy is that it does not explain – nor does it attempt to explain – why Berkeley would adopt three doctrines that unite his thought: (1) The proper objects of perception constitute a divine language (which is what we learn from Berkeley’s works on vision and *Alciphron*); (2) that divine language is structured to enhance human well-being (about which we learn in the *Principles*, the *Three Dialogues*, and *De Motu*); and (3) the positing of objects within such a law-governed framework can be understood, epistemologically, as the perception of things by which they exist and are known to exist (*Principles* and *Three Dialogues*), and metaphysically, as products of an ethereal fire that providentially orders the cosmos (about which we learn in *Siris*).

If the “traditional” way of explaining Berkeley’s philosophy fails to provide an account that can accommodate all of these points in all of his writings – or worse, explains their variety by dismissing his remarks as merely metaphorical, contradictory, or instances of his changing his mind – that should tell us there is something wrong with the traditional approach and that we need to look elsewhere for an interpretive framework to discern the unity in his thought. That framework, I suggest, can be found in Stoicism.

Indeed, not only does Berkeley propose a semantic ontology based on the assumptions that inform Stoic logic, but he also insists on a doctrine in which perceptions or ideas (what the Stoics call presentations, *phantasiai*) always appear embedded in an aboriginal *logos*, and that that is what Berkeley means when he claims that reality is a *discourse* or *language*. By describing sensations as presentations initially intelligible only in terms of linguistic structures, the Stoics and Berkeley thus reveal how sensations are experienced as always already framed in propositions in terms of which they are intelligible.¹⁰ Accordingly, because the strategies that guide Stoic and Berkeleyan ethics and epistemology depend on a logic and a metaphysics that are inherently linguistic, they are significantly different from those developed by other contemporary thinkers.

In particular, when framed in Platonic and Aristotelian terms, Stoic doctrines always appear to be beside the point. The same result occurs if we attempt to frame Berkeley’s views in terms of Cartesian or Lockean filters that

¹⁰ See Imbert 1980, 185-186. Also see Daniel 2008b, 41-48, 52-53.

do not take seriously Berkeley's semantic ontology. So to wean ourselves away from the Platonic and Aristotelian preconceptions in logic and metaphysics that underlie the Cartesian and Lockean accounts often used to "explain" Berkeley, we need to know how the logic of the Stoics (and Berkeley) portrays all experiences as ineradicably linguistic. Furthermore, we need to understand how Berkeley's immaterialistic metaphysics is also compatible with Stoic metaphysics. This latter challenge is especially daunting, considering how Stoics are often portrayed as claiming that everything that exists is material. One of my aims, therefore, is to show that that portrayal needs to be qualified in such a substantive way that it loses any polemical punch it might have had when raised as an objection to a proposed Stoic–Berkeley connection.

We need to begin, then, with Stoic logic (or what the Stoics call dialectics). Dialectics is the art of the discursive practices in terms of which all things are discernible and relatable. Since discursive practices identify what it means for something to be intelligible, the art of dialectics forms the basis or rationale for all ontological, epistemological, and affective identity and relations. It thus identifies the natural vocabulary, semantics, and syntax by which the universe of things is made accessible for experience, thought, and practical engagement. So in addition to being the *art* of rational discourse, dialectics is also the *science* of the real nature of things, because all determinate, intelligible things exist and can be thought only in virtue of the discursive *logos* or *ratio* (or for Berkeley, the divine language) in which they are originally identified as entities.¹¹

That is why the Stoics claim that dialectics is concerned primarily with the incorporeal events that are expressed in and as propositions. It is also why (as Susanne Bobzien puts it), "Stoic logic is in its core a propositional logic," for no term is intelligible apart from its being presented in a proposition.¹² Furthermore, the things with which we are presented (*phantasiai*) are perceived and related to one another hypothetically, conjunctively, or disjunctively in virtue of utterances (*lekta*) that establish the limits or boundaries of those things and the propositional structures on which all inferences

11 See Long 1974, 121-122; and Long 1971b, 84. Cf. Neuchelmans 1980, 182-184.

12 Bobzien 2003, 85. Also see Mates 1961, 2.

about those things are based.¹³ Because the propositional placement by which a thing becomes a thing is not itself a thing – just as the limit of a thing is not itself a thing but rather the act by which something becomes that thing – the *lekta* expressed by these events do not exist but rather “subsist.”¹⁴ *Lekta* are thus the incorporeal propositions that enable perceptions to be objects of rational assent.¹⁵ “They” have no discernible identity apart from their being the active principles by which the things they identify come into existence. Or in more explicitly Berkeleian terms: thinking (i.e., perceiving, willing) consists in being the act whereby certain things become identified and related to one another.¹⁶ Accordingly, the pattern or set of actions we describe as a mind is only reflexively and derivatively said to exist in virtue of the body or bodies it is said to perceive.

The doctrine of the *lekton* is the most obvious indication that the Stoics definitely do not adopt a metaphysics that is exclusively materialistic. Indeed, the Stoics conclude that minds are material only in the sense that they do not exist (or more properly, “subsist”) apart from their activities of specifying bodies in relations. Berkeley reverses this insight by arguing that if the existence of bodies depends on the immaterial activity of positing the limits and relations whereby objects of perception are identified, then bodies must be understood in immaterial terms. Both the Stoics and Berkeley agree, however, that minds and bodies cannot exist or be conceived apart from one another. Regardless of whether one calls this a form of materialism or immaterialism, what is significant is how Berkeley agrees with the Stoics in rejecting the attempt to treat minds and bodies as abstractions. To be sure, Berkeley rejects all forms of materialism in which determinate bodies are said to exist independently of mind, or in which minds and mental activities are considered as epiphenomena of independently existing bodies. But such a description does not characterize the Stoic account of mind either, in that it ignores how (for the Stoics as well as Berkeley) incorporeal acts determine the identities and relations of bodies as elements in a system of signs.

13 Imbert 1980, 182-188, 191, 211.

14 See White 2003, 150; Long 1971b, 97; and Deleuze 1990, 4-5, 19, 21.

15 See Frede 1999, 307, and Annas 1992, 76-77.

16 Cf. Daniel 2004, 165; and Daniel 2008b, 212-223.

THE INHERENT LINGUISTICALITY OF EXISTENCE

No doubt, the Stoic focus on the discursive, linguistic rationale of the universe is often misunderstood in the predicate logic of substantialist metaphysics either as a substitution of rhetoric for metaphysics or as a metaphorical guide for understanding ontological relations. So Chrysippus' paradoxical remark "If you say 'chariot', a chariot passes through your lips" is typically cited in such a view as a confusion of mention and use. The question of how to defend the initial ontological distinction of things, ideas, and words is seldom asked; and if it is, answers are frequently couched in terms that attempt to disavow their communicative heritage.

In the Stoic mentality, though, everything is intelligible in virtue of signifier–signified relations. All reality is understood as inherently semiotic and comprises, as Berkeley puts it, a natural language of signs (TV 144, 147; TVV 40).¹⁷ For the Stoics, a natural sign is not a word or an idea that refers to some thing apart from itself; for if that were the case, then both sign and referent would be intelligible apart from their being related by the signifying event.¹⁸ Instead, a sign – or more properly, a signifier – has meaning to the extent that it is a function within a network of propositions. No thing exists or can be conceived apart from that network, because the determination of a thing as one thing rather than another depends on its place in that network. Such a placement requires that the thing have a case ending and appear in propositions that make explicit the mood and tense of the verbs that associate it with other things. From this perspective, any attempt to describe a metaphysics that is not inherently linguistic is bound to fail.¹⁹


This is not to say that Stoic semiotics (or Berkeleian ontology) is a version of linguistic idealism. For to think in terms of idealism, we would have to assume that the distinction between mind and matter can be made without acknowledging the unavoidably linguistic conditions in terms of which such an assumption is made. If anything, the self-conscious focus on what is most immediate in experience accounts, in part, for why Stoicism is often treated as a materialist philosophy. And when understood in terms of the substan-

17 Cf. Verbeke 1991, 19-20.

18 See Todorov 1982, 19-23.

19 See Deleuze 1990, 8-9, 22; Long 1974, 125.

tialist metaphysics or predicational logic of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, or Locke, Stoic doctrines about the materiality of truth or the reality of only the present seem to contradict the claim that meanings and the acts by which they are determined (*lekta*) are immaterial. But, as Gilles Deleuze notes, the Stoics avoid such apparent contradictions by focusing on the events that inscribe the surface of experience.²⁰ Beyond that surface, nothing can exist or be known, because even to allude to a beyond is to invoke a concept intelligible only in terms of discursive differentiations.

Here, even the distinctions between word and object, or linguistic surface and referent, are functions of the sensual expressions in terms of which things are identified and differentiated. In what Deleuze refers to as this *logic of sense*, “everything that happens and everything that is said happens  the surface,” for there is nothing other than the immediate events that introduce sense.²¹ The Stoics discover sense by recognizing how events establish the conditions by which propositions become intelligible (i.e., conditioned). Because events are themselves unconditioned, there is no “sense” of an event: as Deleuze says, “the event is sense itself and belongs essentially to language.”²² The event by which an expression becomes meaningful or significant is not linguistic in the sense of being distinct from the proposition that expresses either it or the mental state of the pronouncer or the state of affairs denoted by the proposition. Rather, the proposition, its intentionality, and its object are all intelligible only in terms of the event.

Berkeley’s contemporary, Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, puts it this way: even to refer to sensual actions or gestures as expressions of a language is already to appeal to a language in terms of which the distinction of world, thought, and language is itself intelligible.²³ This meta-language – for Berkeley, this divine speech – is the unconditioned expression of the events that establish the conditions for intelligibility. So in the matrix of events that form that aboriginal language, the differentiation of objects, ideas, and words is not simply accepted as an ontological given. Instead, existence or being is understood as intelligible only as a function of the structure of the

20 See Deleuze 1990, 105, 132-133.

21 See Deleuze 1990, 19, 21, 34, 132.

22 Deleuze 1990, 22; also see 181-184.

23 See Daniel 1990, 195-202; and Derrida 1980, 59-65.

determinations (or *logos*) of this discourse. In this logic of propositions, the ontological, epistemological, semantic, and affective features that identify, distinguish, and relate things in the universe (and thus allow things to make sense) are themselves recognized as intelligible only as functions in what the Stoics and Berkeley refer to as the book of nature or language of God.

For the Stoics, then, the event in which a proposition is expressed – that is, the expression itself – identifies things in relation to one another, thus making language and the states of affairs denoted by language meaningful. Since propositional terms are intelligible only in virtue of their associations with other terms in propositions, their juxtapositions are most properly expressed as apprehensions (“this A is B”), hypotheticals (“if A, then B”), conjunctions (“A and B”), or disjunctions (“A or B”). But because everything in the universe is intelligible only in terms of such associations, everything can legitimately be considered a function of a conditional expression (that is, as either a signifier or that which is signified). In this way, a sign is the antecedent that always and necessarily refers to the consequent of a conditional proposition.²⁴ Even though the antecedent is presupposed as the means for determining the sense of the consequent, it does not *cause* the consequent; rather, it situates the consequent in a domain of discursive exchange.

By specifying logical (antecedent–consequent) relations through determinate declensions and conjugations, the Stoic wise man thus unites what is expressed with what is meant. His pronouncements about the world of causal relations are infallible, in that his pronouncements articulate the ordered structure of reality.²⁵ His pronouncements are not “true” (as if there is some other standard on which they can be evaluated) as much as they are truth itself. He cannot be wrong, because error is possible only where there is an ontological discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. Since complete *lekta* are meaningful in virtue of their being propositionally expressed, they cannot be other than *what is the case*. That is, their case or tense is their fate. Only by being made determinate (by fate) can they provide the standard on which derivative, predicational thinking is judged as true or false.

24 Cf. Verbeke 1991, 21; Mates 1961, 13n; Gould 1970, 75-82; Deleuze 1990, 69; Kneale and Kneale 1962, 141; and Ebert 1987, 85.

25 See Long 1974, 130; Long 1971b, 102; Watson 1966, 42-43, 58.

In this sense, the expressed associations of things with one another in space, time, and experience seem (as Berkeley points out) completely arbitrary and (as the Stoics note) a matter of fate (Alc IV.7; IV.10).²⁶ The language of nature they inscribe identifies a thing as intelligible in virtue of its place within that matrix of differentiation. But since a thing has a determinate identity only as a function of the discourse that defines intelligibility, it (along with everything else) cannot be anything other than what it is. It thus discloses a divine rationale or order. That order (*logos*) is intelligibility itself, or simply mind. “Minds” (in the plural) are the means by which the ontological identification of things is manifested in propositional judgments.²⁷ Through such judgments, minds express the differentiation and association of things in the cosmos, but they cannot account for their own differentiation. That is, they cannot account for the strategies by which they originally become intelligible: in short, they cannot account for mind itself.

This insight is crucial for understanding how, for the Stoics and Berkeley alike, individual minds can be free. To the extent that we see the things we experience as parts of a divinely orchestrated harmony, we act according to reason and are not led astray by our passions. In this respect, we aspire to emulate the Stoic sage – not in the sense that we passively accept fate, but in the sense that with more familiarity with the workings of nature, we affirm our roles as parts of God’s plan that there be certain, determinate sequences of experiences whereby things are differentiated and associated. We thus contribute to the on-going creation of the world.

This is why, for the Stoics, mind is not simply another thing that exists in the universe. Rather, it is the intelligibility of all things, the invisible fire (the *pneuma*) that differentiates and permeates all parts of the cosmos.²⁸ It is the semantic and syntactic order of relations in which all things are united in a “universal sympathy” and on which divination and astrological reasoning is based. Berkeley picks up on this theme, commenting that “Providence or Mind was supposed by [the Stoics] to be immediately resident or present in fire, to dwell therein, and to act thereby” (*Siris* 172; see also 177). Mind is the intellectual fire that differentiates all things (*Siris* 190) and connects all

26 See Deleuze 1990, 34.

27 See Deleuze 1990, 176; Graeser 1978, 98; Long 1971b, 102; and Lloyd 1978, 237.

28 See Lapidge 1978, 163-170; Hahn 1977, 158-168; Long 1974, 154; and Cléret 1999, 67.

things (*Siris* 192) in a wise and provident manner (*Siris* 272). Berkeley concludes, therefore, that it is wrong to think then that the Stoics thought of this fire in a corporeal way, just as it is wrong to think that the Stoics confused mind with the system of sensible objects or described God as corporeal (*Siris* 323-324).

Berkeley has no problem, then, in saying that the “vegetative soul or vital spirit of the world” expressed in the aether or fire that accounts for all motion and change is corporeal, because in his view (and the view of the Stoics) the principle of the motion or change of any determinate body must itself be considered corporeal (*Siris* 152). But that does not mean that the principle by which those bodies become determinate is itself corporeal, for that would require yet another principle to account for its being determinate. Berkeley precludes such an endless regress by acknowledging that, even though the motions or changes that identify a body as this or that body must themselves be identified in corporeal terms, the principle by which those motions or changes themselves come about is not corporeal.

To ask for the cause of this or that body is thus to ask for a specific cause of this or that body. Likewise, to ask for the cause of the multiplicity of bodies in the universe is to ask for the specific cause of such multiplicity. In a Neoplatonic account, this differentiation would be explained in terms a prior differentiation of the ideas of such bodies (e.g., as archetypes in the mind of God). But such an account simply delays the question of how divine ideas or archetypes are differentiated in the first place; or worse, it subordinates the differentiation of divine ideas to the differentiation of bodies without explaining how bodies are initially differentiated.²⁹

Berkeley thus appropriates the Stoic strategy for God's immanence in the world by distinguishing the cause of corporeal differentiation (viz., the Stoic *pneuma* or “aethereal spirit”) from the Mind that activates it (*Siris* 258). This is what prompts Berkeley to insist (contra Leibniz) that even though the force that accounts for the differentiations and motions of bodies is mind, the actual differentiations and movements by which bodies are differentiated and related are corporeal (DM 16-18, 20, 34, 42).³⁰ We see the bodies and

29 Being caught up in the study of the secondary-cause workings of nature can also lead our thoughts away from the “governing spirit whose will constitutes the Laws of Nature” (P 32).

30 Cf. Daniel 2007b, 174-175.

their interactions, but we do not see the boundaries by which those bodies are *those* bodies, or the motions by which *those* interactions occur. Nonetheless, those bodies have limits and do interact, and for Berkeley the only way to explain this is in terms of something that is literally aethereal, namely, the Stoics' invisible elementary fire of the cosmos.

My conclusion, then, is that we can think of Berkeley's discussion of the aethereal fire in *Siris* in a way that is consistent with his earlier doctrines about mind and bodies by understanding those remarks in their distinctly Stoic context. In that context, the limits and relations of bodies are corporeal even though they are invisible; for if we were able to see them, we would see them only in terms of the limits and relations by which *they* are differentiated. To push the principles of such differentiation back into the mind of God (as divine ideas or archetypes) is merely to shift the location of the problem; for then, the issue turns to how God's ideas are differentiated (which, of course, raises another bugbear of Berkeley scholarship, namely, the relation of God's ideas to our ideas).³¹ Thankfully, the Stoic strategy of portraying individual minds as expressions of God's benevolent will that there be coordinated sequences of perceptions avoids that problem altogether.

³¹ See Daniel 2001a, 239-258.

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