

Getting Beyond ‘The Curtain of the Fancy’: Anti-Representationalism in Berkeley and Sergeant

Abstract: This paper argues for a re-evaluation of the relationship between Berkeley and his predecessor, the neo-Aristotelian thinker John Sergeant. In the literature to date, the relationship between these two thinkers has received attention for two reasons. First, because some commentators have attempted to establish a *causal* connection between them – specifically, by focusing on the fact that both thinkers develop a theory of ‘notions’. Second, because both Berkeley and Sergeant develop ‘anti-representationalist’ arguments against Locke’s epistemology. The first issue has received much greater attention, particularly from commentators seeking an explanation for Berkeley’s use of the term ‘notion’. Only one scholar, G. A. Johnston (in 1923), has considered Berkeley and Sergeant’s anti-representationalism in any depth. In this paper, I argue that the weight given to the causal connection between Berkeley and Sergeant’s ‘notions’ is misplaced since the evidence in favour of this connection is weaker than is usually acknowledged. Instead, I build on Johnston’s analysis of the *conceptual* connection between Berkeley and Sergeant’s anti-representationalism. I first corroborate Johnston’s claim that there are striking similarities between their criticisms of Locke before going beyond that analysis by identifying two important similarities between their anti-representationalist arguments.

Colour, figure, motion, extension, and the like, considered only as so many *sensations* in the mind, are perfectly known, there being nothing in them which is not perceived. But, if they are looked on as not images, referred to *things* or *archetypes* existing without the mind, then we are all involved in scepticism. (Berkeley, *Principles*, §87)

We cannot possibly know at all the Things themselves by the Ideas, unless we know certainly those Ideas are Right Resemblances of them. But we can never know (by the Principles of the Ideists) that their Ideas are Right Resemblances of the Things; therefore we cannot possibly know at all the Things by their Ideas (Sergeant, *Solid Philosophy*, 31-32)

Introduction

According to many Early Modern philosophers, we can only gain knowledge of external things in virtue of having ideas in the mind which represent them. In the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century, this view was referred to as ‘ideism’ or ‘the way of ideas’, while in contemporary historical

literature it is more commonly known as ‘representationalism’.¹ Representationalists are those who posit a *tertium quid* in the process of cognizing the external world, namely, ideas. Push-back against this view, amongst Early Modern thinkers, is evident in early critical responses to Locke’s *Essay*. Several treatises criticising Locke’s epistemology had already been published by the end of 1697 (three years after the second edition of the *Essay* in 1694).² These early criticisms of Locke bear a close resemblance to Thomas Reid’s critique of the way of ideas at the end of the eighteenth-century. Whilst these critics of Locke and other ideists hold a variety of different ‘positive’ views about the nature of reality and the *right* way to understand knowledge of the world around us, there is a central line of argument that is at the heart of their respective epistemologies. The argument is as follows: any view that leads to scepticism should be rejected; representationalism leads to scepticism; therefore, representationalism should be rejected. As such, this line of thinkers can appropriately be characterised as *anti-representationalists*. In this paper, I focus on two critics of Locke who adopt this ‘anti-representationalist’ line of argument: John Sergeant (1623-1707) and George Berkeley (1685-1753).

Scholarship on the relationship between Berkeley and Sergeant has run in one of two directions. First, several commentators have turned to the possibility of a *causal* connection between Sergeant’s writing and Berkeley’s thought to explain Berkeley’s decision to introduce the technical term ‘notion’ into the revised editions of his *Principles* and *Three Dialogues* in 1734.³ The case for this interpretation rests on Sergeant’s own use of the term ‘notion’ and textual evidence that Berkeley read Sergeant (which I discuss in section one). The second way the Berkeley-Sergeant relationship has been explored is in regard to similarities between their ‘anti-representationalist’ arguments. Rather than a *causal* connection, this line of interpretation seeks to identify a *conceptual* connection between Berkeley and Sergeant’s thought (i.e., this connection could still stand even if Berkeley never read Sergeant). However, G. A. Johnston, in his *The Development of Berkeley’s Philosophy* (published in 1923) is the only commentator to examine this side of the Berkeley-Sergeant connection in any depth.⁴ Thus, while the possibility of Berkeley’s having inherited his

¹ John Yolton (1984 and 1996) argues against attributing representationalism to the likes of Descartes and Locke (1984, 113; see also Cook 1974). I do not take my claims in this paper to depend on the accuracy of scholarly claims about representationalism. For, even if it is inaccurate to talk of a representationalist tradition (i.e., even if Yolton is right), both Berkeley and Sergeant explicitly situate themselves in opposition to views that *they* take to be representationalist.

² The publication of the *Essay* led to a flurry of critical writings, including James Lowde’s *A Discourse Concerning the Nature of Man* (1694), Henry Lee’s *Anti-scepticism* (1702), and Edward Stillingfleet’s correspondence with Locke (*Works* 1823). For discussion of the early reception of Locke’s *Essay*, see Yolton 1951, 528-32; Yolton 1956 (especially 1-26); Levitin 2010, 457-58; Pearce 2014, 423-24. For a comparison of Berkeley and Lee’s criticisms of Locke, especially his theory of abstraction, see Benschop 1997.

³ See, e.g., Luce 1934, 104; Flage 1987, 174; Pearce 2014, 425 & 2017, 126.

⁴ Kenneth Winkler does note the relevant similarities but does not examine them in depth (1989, 246, fn. 18).

theory of notions from Sergeant has received a good deal of scholarly attention, the relationship between Berkeley and Sergeant's anti-representationalism has been neglected for almost a century. In what follows, I argue for a re-evaluation of that relationship.

My aim in this paper is to push the discussion about the Berkeley-Sergeant connection back in the direction that Johnston took it in. I do so by showing that we stand to learn more about both thinkers' views by examining the similarities between their anti-representationalist arguments than we do by focusing on the possibility of Berkeley's having been (causally) influenced by Sergeant. Two important insights come out of an exploration of the *conceptual* connection between Berkeley and Sergeant's arguments. First, it becomes clear that the relation of *resemblance* is crucial to their shared commitment to the view that representationalism leads to scepticism. According to both Berkeley and Sergeant, if ideas are meant to *resemble* their objects, then ideas cannot do the (epistemological) work that representationalists take them to do. Second, I show that both Berkeley and Sergeant think a relation of *identity* between things in the world and things in the mind is necessary to avoid scepticism. In other words, the relation of resemblance underlies their 'negative' attacks on representationalism while the relation of identity underlies their own anti-sceptical, 'positive' views. In this way, I argue that a comparison of Berkeley and Sergeants' arguments provides us with important insights into the kind of anti-representationalist attacks with which Locke's *Essay* was met.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In section one, I show that the emphasis on the possibility of a *causal* connection between Sergeant and Berkeley in the literature to date is misguided. I demonstrate that the case a causal connection remains tenuous at best. In sections two and three, instead, I corroborate Johnston's claims about a *conceptual* connection between Berkeley and Sergeant's thought. In section two, I outline Sergeant's arguments against ideism, with particular emphasis on his view that resemblance (between ideas and external things) will not suffice to provide genuine knowledge. In section three, I focus on Berkeley's own arguments and, again, show that his views on resemblance underlie his attacks. In section four, I demonstrate that both Berkeley and Sergeant confront Locke (and other representationalists) with a dilemma. I do so because holding up these two dilemmas alongside one another makes clear the important similarities between both their 'negative' attacks on representationalism and their own 'positive' anti-sceptical epistemologies.

1. The Berkeley-Sergeant Connection

In this section, I make the case for thinking that there is *not* enough evidence to establish a *causal* connection between Berkeley and Sergeant – contrary to a range of interpretations available in the literature.

Of course, one of these thinkers will be more familiar to most readers than the other so it's worth briefly introducing Sergeant's philosophy before proceeding. In the final decade of the seventeenth-century, having previously written on theological matters, Sergeant published two philosophical tracts in an effort to 'beat down' scepticism (*Method*, Preface 22).⁵ The first, *The Method to Science* (1696), is an attempt to reinstate Aristotelian syllogistic reasoning as the true grounds of science and refute the ideism of Descartes and the Cartesians.⁶ The second, *Solid Philosophy Asserted Against the Fancies of the Ideists* (1697), is a criticism of the ideism that Sergeant finds in Locke's *Essay*. Sergeant's view is that ideism leads to numerous errors of reasoning (SP, Epistle 5).⁷ Consequently, he explains, 'I saw it was necessary to Stub up by the Roots that *Way* [of ideas] *it self*' (SP, Epistle 8-9). Sergeant therefore sets out to instigate a 'Reformation' in philosophy where the way of ideas will be completely rejected (readers familiar with Reid will recognise the similarities with his own 'common sense' philosophy).

While several scholars have provided in-depth studies of Sergeant's philosophical writings,⁸ even by comparison to other thinkers outside the canon, such as Malebranche, Gassendi, Newton, and Reid (Shapiro 2016, 366), it remains the case that Sergeant has received very little airtime in Early Modern scholarship.⁹ Indeed, although it is something of an overstatement, not a great deal has changed since Norman C. Bradish claimed, in 1929, that 'there are few names in the history of philosophy as little known as that of John Sergeant.'

Having said that, Sergeant's name *does* appear quite frequently in discussions about the sources of Berkeley's thought. Indeed, the idea that that there is a causal connection between Berkeley and Sergeant's views has several advocates. Most commentators who focus on this connection subscribe to the line of thought that Sergeant's writing influenced Berkeley to introduce the term 'notion' in the revised 1734 edition of the *Principles* and the *Three Dialogues*. In these revised editions, Berkeley uses 'notion' to refer to the kind of knowledge we have of spirits

⁵ For discussion of the connections between Sergeant's theological work and his philosophical work, see Levitin 2010.

⁶ For discussion of Sergeant's Aristotelianism and his advocacy of syllogistic reasoning, see Krook 1993; Southgate 2000; Levitin 2010; Adriaenssen 2017, ch.6; Connolly 2021.

⁷ For example, Sergeant suggests that had Locke concentrated on the nature of *things* and not his own ideas, he would not have concluded that 'none knows what a *Thing* or *Substance* is' (SP, Epistle 7).

⁸ Krook 1993. Southgate 2000, and Adriaenssen 2017, ch. 6.

⁹ For example, despite their non-canonical status, Malebranche, Gassendi, Newton, and Reid have dedicated *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* pages. Sergeant only appears in the SEP twice, in articles on real essences and personal identity in Locke's philosophy.

and relations (PHK §89). To say that we have notions of spirits or relations, Berkeley explains, is to say that we ‘know or understand the meaning of those words’ (PHK §27 & §140).¹⁰ While Berkeley also uses the term ‘notion’ in earlier editions of the texts, he does so much less frequently and in those cases the term seems to be roughly synonymous with ‘idea’.¹¹ A. A. Luce, Daniel Flage, and Kenneth Pearce are all proponents of the view that Berkeley inherited his account of ‘notions’ from Sergeant.¹² Pearce even goes so far as to suggest that Sergeant’s influence on Berkeley was ‘likely quite significant’ (2014, 425).

However, there is another reason to compare Berkeley and Sergeant. On this line of interpretation, the important connection between Berkeley and Sergeant is not a *causal* one, but a *conceptual* one (that is, a connection that does not depend on Berkeley’s actually having read Sergeant). The important *conceptual* connection between the two thinkers is that they both develop criticisms of Locke’s epistemology that can appropriately be described as ‘anti-representationalist’. To date, only one commentator has suggested that *this* is the most important reason to examine the Berkeley-Sergeant connection. G. A. Johnston, writing in 1923, notes that the similarities between Berkeley and Sergeant’s argument are striking, that at times it seems as though Sergeant “almost stumbles upon” Berkeley’s own idealist views, and that their mutual concerns “bear a remarkable testimony to the existence at the time of an atmosphere of opposition to Locke” (1923, 66-67). In the remainder of this section, I show that those commentators who, unlike Johnston, focusing on the theory of ‘notions’ are misguided since the evidence for there being a causal connection is weaker than is usually acknowledged.

The case for thinking there is a causal connection between Sergeant and Berkeley rests upon a crucial piece of evidence; an entry in Berkeley’s *Notebooks* in where he writes: ‘I say not with J.S. that we see solids I reject his Solid Philosophy, Solidity being only perceived by touch’ (NB 840). This indicates that Berkeley was aware of Sergeant and at least one of his philosophical texts since Sergeant published under the initials ‘J.S.’ and ‘Solid Philosophy’ was the title of his

¹⁰ For in-depth discussion of Berkeley’s theory of notions, see Park 1972; Flage 1987, Adams 1991, and Frankel 2009.

¹¹ For example, he writes (in the 1710 edition): ‘it is evident there can be no idea *or notion* of a spirit’ (PHK §138, my emphasis). The term ‘notion’ was omitted from this section in the 1734 edition. As an anonymous reviewer pointed out to me, Berkeley’s early use of the term ‘notion’ may have been influenced by Locke; specifically, his comment in the *Essay* that the term ‘idea’ is used “to express whatever is meant by Phantasm, *Notion*, Species, or whatever it is, which the Mind can be employ’d about in thinking” (Essay 1.1.8, my emphasis).

¹² See Luce 1934, 104; Flage 1987, 174; Pearce 2014, 425 & 2017, 126. Stephen Daniel suggests that Berkeley “retrieves” Sergeant’s concept of notions (2021, 99). However, Daniel does not say enough to make it clear whether he is identifying a causal or a conceptual connection.

1697 treatise. The suggestion, then, has been that this reference provides *prima facie* evidence that Sergeant was read by Berkeley.

Yet, the actual *content* of this notebook entry makes it far less obvious that Berkeley engaged with Sergeant in any depth. For Berkeley seems to be using Sergeant's reference to 'Solid Philosophy' as a foil for his own views concerning the heterogeneity of the objects of vision and touch that would later appear in the *New Theory of Vision* (1709). If one had never read Sergeant, it would be reasonable to take from this remark that Sergeant's 'Solid Philosophy' refers to the view that we can perceive solidity (a sensible quality) by means of another of the five senses (e.g., sight). But this is not what Sergeant means *at all*. When Sergeant talks of 'Solid Philosophy' he means philosophy grounded upon certainly known (often self-evident) first principles (SP, Epistle 2). He is *not* referring to solidity construed as a sensible quality of things in the world around us. In other words, the 'solid' in 'Solid Philosophy' is a metaphor; he is not talking literally.

With this background knowledge in mind, Berkeley's remark in NB 840 starts to look quite odd. It seems uncharitable to suggest that Berkeley is responding to the *title* of Sergeant's work alone – but then again Berkeley's *Notebooks* were never intended to be published. He composed them early in his career and they do not constitute a polished philosophical treatise. In any case, the content of this notebook entry clearly dampens the suggestion that Berkeley was significantly influenced by Sergeant. Consequently, it cannot be taken as a decisive indicator of whether Berkeley actually read Sergeant. The Berkeley-Sergeant connection, construed as one of causal influence, thus remains ambiguous.

The case for a causal connection is further weakened when we consider what Berkeley and Sergeant actually *mean* by the term 'notion'. To have a notion of something, for Sergeant, is for that thing to come to exist in the mind. Berkeley, however, only uses the term when referring things (like spirits and relations) of which we cannot possibly have ideas. What's more, Sergeant's use of the term 'notion' is likely to have been influenced by his engagement with the Blackloists' epistemology of 'common notions' (see Krook 1993 and Blank 2007 for discussion). There is no evidence that Berkeley was drawing on talk of 'common notions' in his own use of the term.

In fact, there is quite clear evidence that the term 'notion' is not unique – or even original – to Sergeant (or, indeed, the Blackloists). As Johnston notes (1923, 166), another contemporary of Sergeant, Richard Burthogge, also uses the term 'notion' in his *Essay upon Reason and the Nature of Spirits* in 1696. And even prior to Burthogge, Margaret Cavendish uses the term 'notion' to describe the kind of concepts (like infinity or nothingness) that we cannot clearly picture in the mind (*Philosophical and Physical Opinions*, 89). All of which shows that, prior to Berkeley, 'notion' was

not a term found peculiarly in Sergeant's writings. As it turns out, then, the 'evidence' that Berkeley read Sergeant, or *must* have inherited his use of the term 'notion' from him, is not very compelling at all.

I stated in my introduction that there are two routes one might take when exploring the relationship between Berkeley and Sergeant. One of those routes, the one which considers the possibility of causal influence, is well-trodden. But, as I have emphasised, the evidence for any *causal* connection is tenuous at best. The other route, taken by Johnston,¹³ compares Berkeley and Sergeant because of the insights this comparison can provide us concerning "an atmosphere of opposition to Locke" at the turn of the eighteenth-century. In the remainder of this paper, I set out on the same route that Johnston embarked on nearly a century ago – one that leads to a *conceptual* connection between Berkeley and Sergeant.

2. Sergeant's Anti-Representationalism

2.1 *The problem with ideas*

Like Berkeley,¹⁴ Sergeant maintains that God has provided us with the means of gaining true knowledge of the world around us. He explains that 'Mankind was put into a plain Road-way of gaining *Clear Intellectual Light*, by the Common Providence of our Good Creatour' (SP, Epistle 2). It is for this reason that Sergeant argues we should only accept an epistemology that provides us with *solid* philosophy: because only philosophy immune to scepticism is consistent with God's benevolence.¹⁵ A solid philosophy, for Sergeant, is one in which we have direct knowledge of the very 'Natures of Things' in the world. For example, Sergeant claims that, unlike Modern ideists, 'those who follow'd *Aristotle's Principles* (as the great *Aquinas* constantly endeavoured) did generally discourse even in *such* Subjects... very *solidly*' (SP, Epistle, 3).

What was it about Aristotle and Aquinas' views that made them 'solid'? According to Sergeant, it was their commitment to an epistemology of *forms*. To gain genuine knowledge of something, according to the Aristotelian scholastic tradition that Aquinas was a part of, is for the

¹³ More recently, Kenneth Winkler briefly notes that Sergeant and Berkeley both argue that representationalism leads to scepticism (1989, 245-46). Winkler (1989, 246, fn. 18) also doubts that the connection between the two is one of causal influence.

¹⁴ In the Introduction to the *Principles*, Berkeley writes: "We should believe that God has dealt more bountifully with the sons of men, than to give them a strong desire for that knowledge, which He had placed quite out of their reach." (PHK, Introduction §3).

¹⁵ For Sergeant, a solid philosophy must leave *no room for scepticism at all*. This is a very strong position; one which, we might think, is only plausible when backed up by appeals to the nature of God or perhaps (in the style of G. E. Moore) dogmatic appeals to common sense.

form of that object to come to exist in the mind. As we will find, Sergeant also maintains that knowledge involves the form of an object coming to exist in the mind (as what he calls a ‘notion’). But this is *not* possible if one accepts ideism. This is because ideism entails that the mere *ideas* of things, rather than their true natures or forms, come to exist in the mind. One of Sergeant’s primary aims is to show if ideists are right then human knowledge is not solid but built upon “*Fantastick Resemblances*’, ‘Imaginary and Visionary *Ideas*’, or ‘unsolid *Aiery Bubbles*’ (SP, Epistle 6). In fact, he argues, knowledge built on the ideas of things and not the things themselves is no more reliable than ‘a Looking-glass’ or ‘a Dream... composed of Fancies pretty well Coherent with one another’ (SP, 49). In other words, there’s no clear indication that such ‘knowledge’ reaches out into the world and informs us about anything beyond itself.¹⁶

Sergeant claims that knowledge gained via an idea is akin to knowledge gained by looking at a picture. For example, he explains that without prior knowledge of what trees are really like, *a painting of a tree* would merely appear to be ‘a Cloth, Board, or Paper, this figured and colour’d’. In other words, a painting of a tree, in and of itself, cannot provide knowledge of the *nature* of trees. This is because, when we look at a painting of a tree, it is the nature of the *painting* (and not an actual tree) that we are acquainted with. Likewise, he argues, a painting of a tree cannot (alone) provide knowledge of the *existence* of that tree, for ‘it might be some Fancy of the Painter, for ought I know by the Picture’. Sergeant’s point is that familiarity with a picture does not provide any certain knowledge that it actually represents something. Likewise, perceiving an idea is not enough, in and of itself, to provide us with certain knowledge that the idea accurately represents what we take it to represent. In fact, we have no good reason to believe it *represents* at all. As such, he thinks, if we directly perceive *only* ideas, we have no basis on which to assume that ideas really are representations of things in the world.

It is worth emphasising, at this point, the important role that the *resemblance* relation between an idea and its object plays in Sergeant’s argument.¹⁷ This ‘resemblance thesis’ dictates that the mechanism by which an idea represents its object is resemblance. In other words, to accept the resemblance thesis is to accept that underlying any representation relation is a resemblance relation. Sergeant assumes that, according to his opponents, it is this kind of representation mechanism that is supposed to be at work when we talk about ‘ideas’. This encourages him to

¹⁶ It is worth noting that Sergeant (and Berkeley) is working on the ‘internalist’ assumption that unless we *know* that a particular relation holds between an idea and its object (i.e., that the idea represents its object), we cannot be said to have gained knowledge of that object via its idea. For a critical discussion of this kind of internalist view, in an Early Modern context, see Greco 1995.

¹⁷ See Glauser 1988, 586; Adriaenssen 2017, 205.

draw an analogy between ideas and paintings since, he thinks, in both cases, if they represent something, then they do so by virtue of *resembling* their object.

Sergeant's argument rests on the claim that to know that two things resemble one another, we must *already* be familiar with both. As he puts it, we simply cannot know, with any certainty, that a 'Prototype' and its apparent 'Likeness' are genuinely alike, 'unless they be both of them in our Comparing Power' (SP, 32). To know with certainty that our ideas resemble what *we take them to resemble*, Sergeant argues, both 'the *Thing it self*, as well as the *Idea*' would need to be subject to our mind's comparing power. But, as he points out, this is 'directly contrary to their [i.e., ideists'] Principles' (SP, 32) since ideism entails that we only have ideas (and not things) in the mind. On this basis, he argues:

We cannot possibly know at all the Things themselves by the Ideas, *unless we know certainly those Ideas are Right Resemblances of them*. But we can never know (by the Principles of the Ideists) that their Ideas are Right Resemblances of the Things; therefore we cannot possibly know at all the Things by their Ideas (SP, 31-32, my emphasis)

Once again, Sergeant employs an analogy involving paintings to illustrate his point:

I [may]¹⁸ walk in a Gallery, and see a Hundred Pictures in it of Men, and many other Things in Nature; and yet not know one jot the better, any one of the Things represented, unless I had known them formerly... [although] I may *remember* them *again*, indeed, if I had known them *before* (SP, 340).

I might be able to judge of a portrait whether it is an accurate representation of a friend (by considering whether it is an accurate likeness), but it would be impossible for me to do so in relation to an individual who I was entirely unfamiliar with (*I cannot determine whether a statue accurately represents Caesar, for example, since I have never encountered him*). If ideism is right, Sergeant argues, our knowledge of things in the world would be closer to the latter case, because ideism dictates that the *very first* knowledge we receive of a thing is via an idea which represents it (SP, 340); there's no prior acquaintance with the thing itself for us to draw on. The problem with ideism, for Sergeant, is that we already need to be acquainted with a thing's nature to know that it has genuinely been represented (say, in a portrait), while ideism entails that *we only ever access* representations. Consequently, were ideists right, our knowledge of the external world would be like that of a person walking around a gallery, unable to know with certainty whether any of the people and places depicted do or do not exist. And even if they did exist, Sergeant maintains, we

¹⁸ The text itself (mistakenly, I take it) reads 'way'.

could never know if they were accurately represented. We would be forever trapped behind what he calls ‘the Curtain of the Fancy’ (SP, 20).¹⁹

It is also worth bearing in mind that *Solid Philosophy* was, first and foremost, a criticism of Locke’s *Essay*. Indeed, in questioning whether ideas are ‘Right Resemblances’ of their objects, Sergeant is drawing on Locke’s own discussion of ‘real knowledge’. Locke explains that ‘wherever we are sure those *Ideas* agree with the reality of Things, there is certain real Knowledge’ (ECHU IV.iv.18). Sergeant’s claim, in response, is that ideism thus entails we can never have any real knowledge of anything all. This is because, according to Sergeant, the *only* way to confirm that ideas ‘agree with the reality of Things’ would be to compare an idea and its object in order to discern whether they are ‘Right Resemblances’; something that is impossible.

Thus, the efficacy of Sergeant’s critique depends on the plausibility of reading the resemblance thesis into Locke’s own epistemology (and those of other representationalists). This is something that Locke himself picked up on when he encountered Sergeant’s arguments. In his own copy of *Solid Philosophy*, Locke made several marginal notes where he denies having accepted the resemblance thesis it. For example, Locke notes: ‘he [Sergeant] will have Mr Locke to mean resemblances by Ideas though Mr L says expresley he does not’ (SP [Locke’s copy], 137; see also 23 and 37).²⁰ Here, Locke seems to be picking up on his claim in the *Essay* that only ideas of primary qualities resemble their objects while ideas of secondary qualities do not (ECHU II.viii.15). Locke, it seems, realised that the resemblance thesis was crucial to the kind of objection raised by Sergeant.²¹

2.2 Sergeant’s notions

For Sergeant, Locke’s epistemology is not ‘solid’ because it leads to scepticism. In turn, this means that, along with other ‘ideist’ theories, it is inconsistent with the benevolence of God and ought to be rejected. Instead, Sergeant argues:

¹⁹ In doing so, Sergeant pre-empts more recent discussions about whether thinkers like Locke are committed to a ‘veil of ideas’ or ‘veil of perception’. For such discussion, see, for example, Bennet 1971, 69 or Newman 2004.

²⁰ I use the original spelling in citations from Locke’s marginal notes.

²¹ As Locke’s comments suggest, an ideist might simply contest Sergeant’s characterisation of ideas as resemblances. In Sergeant’s defence, he does explicitly claim that his reasoning applies to all relations whatsoever, and not just resemblance relations. He writes: “No Relation can be known without Knowing both the Correlates: Therefore no Idea, which being a Resemblance of the Thing must necessarily be related to it, can be known without knowing also the Thing to which ‘tis related as that which is resembled by it.” (SP, 32) Whatever the mechanism of representation between idea and thing turns out to be, the two, Sergeant argues, must be related in one way or another. And we cannot know any relation, he thinks, without knowing both the *relata*.

Things themselves, and not Ideas, Resemblances, or Fancies, (which can never make us know the Things,) are and must be the only Firm Foundation of Truth, and of our Knowledge of all Truths whatsoever. (SP, Preface 13)

A plausible epistemology, Sergeant maintains, must explain how we gain knowledge of ‘Things’ and not just ideas. He claims that his theory of notions does just that.

According to Sergeant’s theory of notions, what comes to exist in the mind, in an instance of genuine knowledge acquisition, is not an idea – a mere resemblance of an object – but something that is *identical* to that object: what Sergeant calls a *notion*. Note, then, that the relation of *identity* is at work here – rather than the relation of resemblance which, Sergeant assumes, is what the representationalist’s epistemology relies on. A notion, Sergeant explains, is ‘the very thing it self existing in my understanding’ (SP, 27) and ‘that Object in my mind which informs my Understanding Power, and about which that Power is Employed’ (SP, 26; see also *Method*, 100-101). Since notions just are things themselves which have come to exist in the mind, they *can* provide us with genuine knowledge of things and, in turn, are an appropriate basis on which to build solid philosophy. As he puts it, they are the very ‘Seeds’ (SP, Epistle 2) or ‘Embryo’s of Knowledge’ (*Method*, 4). When we have a notion in the mind, we can be sure that it reaches out into the external world it purports to inform us about because it is *identical* with its object.²²

Ideas, according to Sergeant, have ‘*nothing at all* of the Thing’ in them since they exist in the mind alone and are mere resemblances of those things (SP, Epistle 6). Therefore, acquaintance with an *idea* is not the same as acquaintance with a genuine thing in the world. However, when the mind has a *notion* of a thing, that thing is ‘within her [i.e., the mind]... as the things in Nature *are*’ (SP, 42). For instance, Sergeant explains that to have a notion of a church bell is to ‘have the Bell existent in the Steeple *within her* [i.e., the mind], but also... the Bell in the Steeple is *without her*’ (SP, 43). To have an *idea* of the church bell, on the other hand, is merely to have a *resemblance* of it – and not *it* – in the mind. Sergeant’s claim is that having a *notion* of a thing, unlike having a mere *idea* of a thing in the mind, constitutes genuine knowledge. In Locke’s terms, Sergeant thinks we can be sure that we have ‘real knowledge’ since there’s no room for doubt that notions ‘agree with the reality of Things’ (ECHU IV.iv.18). Again, it is important to note that, for Sergeant, *identity* relations can do what resemblance relations cannot: ensure that we have genuine knowledge of things in the world.

²² Note that Sergeant must have numerical, rather than qualitative identity. in mind here. For Sergeant, a resemblance relation (even a very strong one) simply isn’t enough to guarantee knowledge; only an identity relation will suffice.

Sergeant's view is that genuine knowledge involves having notions of things in the mind which, he explains, is one and the same with having *that very thing itself* existing in the mind. This is a striking claim to say the least, and we might justifiably ask how Sergeant can plausibly maintain that something which exists in the mind is identical to something which exists out there in the world. Sergeant's theory comes equipped with an answer. He explains:

I deny that either its Existing, or Manner of Existing do enter into the Notion... but that the Notion is the Thing, precisely according to what is Common to it both in the Understanding, and out of it, abstractedly from both those Manners of Existing. (SP, 38)

Sergeant's answer is that a notion of a thing – that which comes to be known – is abstracted from *the way* in which it exists (see also *Method*, 3; Yolton 1951, 548). Sergeant claims that God is the only being for whom existence is essential and that no created being contains its manner of existing in its nature, for it cannot be said of any created being that it exists *necessarily*.²³ Thus, an exhaustive description of the nature of a created being would not include its existing either *in* or *externally to* the mind. This allows Sergeant to consistently maintain that an object, once known, exists both within *and* externally to the mind. It follows that what we come to know are abstract entities: they are abstracted from their manner of existence. Having a notion of a tree means conceiving of the tree and all that is included in its nature, but that does not include any particular *way* that the tree exists.

Two further points are worth raising at this stage. First, while Sergeant's claim that knowledge involves having the thing known come to exist in the mind may sound surprising to the contemporary reader,²⁴ it is possible to situate this claim within the Aristotelian framework Sergeant saw himself as working in. For, rather than replacing a flawed epistemology with a novel one, Sergeant's aim is to revive Aristotelian epistemology as a buttress to scepticism. As I previously noted, Sergeant claims that unlike Modern ideists, Aristotle and Aquinas were able to develop *solid* philosophies which left no room for scepticism (SP, Epistle, 3). This is because both Aristotle and Aquinas developed epistemologies in which knowledge involves the *form* of an object

²³ This raises a question about human knowledge of God: can we have a notion of God? If so, does that mean that God (for whom his manner of existing *is* part of his nature) comes to exist in the mind? Locke raises this issue in a marginal note, writing: 'It should have been inferred according to wt JS says in this § by wch the soul becomes god' (SP [Locke's copy], 40). I think this question is worth addressing, but it is beyond the scope of this paper.

²⁴ In early critical responses to Sergeant's writing, this claim was subjected to heavy ridicule. For example, Sergeant's theory of notions was mocked in the satirical *A Dialogue Between Mr. Merriman and Dr. Chymist: concerning Sergents paradoxes, in his new method to science, and his solid philosophy*, published under the initials 'T.M.' in 1698 (London). There, Mr. Merriman, who takes Sergeant's theory of notions to be absurd, suggests that one could steal 'a Gold Watch, a Diamond Ring, a Rope of Pearl, a Purse of Gold' just by having a notion of them, since a notion just is the thing itself existing in the mind (1698, 13).

coming to exist in the mind. While Sergeant uses his own term, ‘notion’, his claim that the ‘Manner of existing’ (SP, 38) is not part of that notion is consistent with Aristotelian views where forms come to exist in the mind.

In the next section, it will become clear that Berkeley also maintains that a pre-requisite for genuine knowledge is that the thing known comes to exist in the mind. For Berkeley, that is, (as for Sergeant) an *identity* relation between an object in the mind and an object in the world is the only way to avoid scepticism.

3. Berkeley’s Anti-Representationalism

3.1 Are ideas ‘true representations’?

In both the *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley claims that scepticism arises because of a philosophical mistrust of the senses whereby, ‘we are not assured of the existence of things from their being perceived’ (DHP 167). This is particularly clear in §87 of the *Principles*, where he claims that if ideas are ‘looked on as notes or images, referred to things or archetypes existing without the mind, then we are all involved in scepticism’. Berkeley thus establishes a link between the view that ideas are ‘images’ of mind-independent ‘archetypes’ and scepticism.²⁵

Like Sergeant, Berkeley uses an analogy involving paintings to demonstrate that if his opponents are right then we cannot be certain that our ideas accurately represent their objects. In the *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley’s spokesperson Philonous points out that there is a difference between (i) seeing a painting of Caesar *as a representation* of Caesar and (ii) simply seeing it as ‘some colours and figures, with a certain symmetry and composition of the whole’ (DHP 203-4). Philonous goes on to explain that the difference lies in the fact that ‘reason and memory’ pertaining to prior knowledge of Caesar are required in order to know that the painting is indeed *of Caesar*. Note the similarity with Sergeant’s example of a painting of a tree. Both Berkeley and Sergeant point out

²⁵ It remains a live issue whether Berkeley himself is committed to some form of representationalism concerning human knowledge of divine ideas. Those who argue that Berkeley *is* committed to this sort of Malebranchean representationalism do so on the basis of Philonous’ acknowledgement of ‘a twofold state of things, the one ectypal or natural, the other archeptypal or eternal’ in the *Three Dialogues* (DHP 254) and a remark in Berkeley’s correspondence with Samuel Johnson where he writes: ‘I have no objection against calling the ideas in the mind of God archetypes of ours’ (Hight 2013, 318). For recent commentary on this issue, see Frankel 2016 or Fields 2018. I do not weigh in on this issue here because it does not have direct bearing on the aims of this paper but it should be noted that the citations above are outlier cases. For the most part, Berkeley explicitly rejects the representationalist model of knowledge of things in the world.

that without some prior knowledge, a painting is simply a collection of ‘colours’ and ‘figures’. Both also maintain that it is prior knowledge, or ‘reason and memory’, that makes for the difference between a *presentation* of colours and figures and a *re-presentation* of a person, a tree, or some other object.

Like Sergeant, Berkeley argues that the possibility of gaining genuine knowledge of things in the world via ideas depends entirely on those ideas being true or accurate representations;²⁶ what Sergeant calls ‘Right Resemblances’ (SP, 31-32). Similarly, Berkeley’s argument also draws on Locke’s talk of ‘real knowledge’:

It is your opinion, the ideas we perceive by our senses are not real things but images or copies of them. *Our knowledge therefore is no farther real, than as our ideas are the true representations of those originals.* But as these supposed originals are in themselves unknown, it is impossible to show how far our ideas resemble them, or whether they resemble them at all. We cannot therefore be sure we have any *real knowledge*. (DHP 246, my emphasis)

Like Sergeant, Berkeley takes issue with Locke’s talk of ‘real knowledge’ as the kind of knowledge that results from an assurance that ideas ‘agree with the reality of things’ (ECHU, iv.iv.18). As Berkeley sees it, *no knowledge* could be ‘real knowledge’, if Locke is right, because in order to discern whether an idea agrees with the reality of its object, we would need to determine whether that idea is a ‘true representation’. But since, Berkeley thinks, ideas are supposed to be ‘images or copies’ of things (DHP 246), the relevant relation would need to be one of resemblance. As such, as long we accept the representationalists’ epistemology, we are stuck with the same problem that Sergeant raised: trying to identify a resemblance relation between an idea and its object. The problem is that according to Locke (and other ideists) we can never be acquainted with an external object *except* via the idea that purportedly represents it. Thus, Berkeley maintains, if we accept Locke’s view ‘we are thrown into the most hopeless and abandoned scepticism’ (DHP 246).

It is worth explicitly noting that Berkeley also assumes that if his opponents are right then the mechanism by which ideas represent their objects is *resemblance*. Berkeley’s argument thus also depends on the resemblance thesis.²⁷ This is most evident in Berkeley’s argument against representationalism from what is known as the ‘likeness principle’. On the assumption that ideas represent by means of resembling their objects, Berkeley argues that representationalism should be rejected since “an idea can be like nothing but an idea” (PHK §8) (I discuss the likeness principle

²⁶ Note that Berkeley shares Sergeant’s ‘internalism’ about knowledge via representations.

²⁷ For discussion of *why* Berkeley might have accepted the resemblance thesis, see Hill 2011 and Fasko & West 2020.

in greater depth in the next section). Berkeley, like Sergeant, also places significant emphasis on the role of *comparison*. In entry 378 of his *Notebooks*,²⁸ Berkeley argues from the fact that (i) '[t]he mind can compare nothing but its' own ideas' and (ii) 'saying that two things are alike requires comparing them' to the conclusion that (iii) '[t]herefore, the only things I can say are alike are ideas'. Berkeley's point is that to *assert* that two things are alike we need to be able to *verify* that they are – by carrying out a comparison between the two. But, again, like Sergeant, Berkeley points out that the principles of representationalism render this impossible since the only things we can compare (on this view) are our ideas.

3.2 Collapsing the thing-idea distinction

I turn now to Berkeley's own epistemology. While Sergeant's aim is to replace the way of ideas entirely with his theory of notions, Berkeley's aim is to collapse the thing-idea distinction, upheld by representationalists, and thereby *turn ideas into things* (DHP 244). Note, then, that both Sergeant and Berkeley, albeit in different ways, render the objects of knowledge *identical* to things in the world. Thus, while both Berkeley and Sergeant's criticisms of representationalism depend upon claims about knowledge via *resemblance*, their own 'positive' views emphasise that only a relation of *identity* (between an object in the mind and an object in the world) will suffice to avoid scepticism.

However, their starting points *differ* when it comes to the philosophical traditions they take themselves to be working in. For Sergeant, as we saw, the objects of knowledge are Aristotelian forms or natures – he is thus placing himself in a tradition where a thing known has two instantiations: once in the mind of the knower, once externally to the mind.²⁹ However, Berkeley's starting point is closer to that of his contemporaries (like Locke). For, unlike Sergeant, he does accept one of the tenets of 'ideism'; namely, the claim that the only things we have immediate knowledge of are ideas (DHP 262).

From this starting point, Berkeley diverges from his contemporaries quite considerably. Contrary to the representationalist's account, for Berkeley, to gain immediate knowledge of an idea is *one and the same* with gaining immediate knowledge of the thing itself. Ideas are not *mere*

²⁸ For discussion of NB 378, with a particular emphasis on its relation to Berkeley's 'likeness principle', see Winkler 1989, 145-47; Ryan 2006; Frankel 2009. It is likely that in both Berkeley and Sergeant are drawing on Locke's own discussion of comparison in the *Essay*. There, Locke writes: 'The Understanding, in the consideration of any thing, is not confined to that precise Object: It can carry any Idea, as it were, beyond it self, or, at least, look beyond it, to see how it stands in conformity to any other.' (ECHU II.xxv.1).

²⁹ Thanks to an anonymous referee for this very helpful presentation of the differences between Berkeley and Sergeant's solutions to the sceptical problem.

appearances (or ‘resemblance’) of things, for Berkeley, but the very things themselves. Thus, the difference between Berkeley and his opponents is that while ideists take ideas to be *distinct* from things in the world, Berkeley takes things and ideas to be *identical*. This pushes Berkeley’s view much closer to Sergeants’, where to *know* something is for *it* to come to exist in the mind. There is no question, for Berkeley, of *how* we know that what exists in the mind accurately represents what exists in the world. This is because a thing’s existence is *constituted by* its being perceived. As Berkeley famously puts it, a thing in the world’s *esse* just is its *percipi* (PHK §3).

Thus, there are some important differences in how Berkeley and Sergeant go about providing a philosophy immune to the scepticism inherent in the way of ideas.³⁰ But it ought to be clear by now that both are driven by a commitment to the claim that it is *only* if it can be explained how things in the world, when known, come to exist in the mind, that we can avoid scepticism. That is, both argue that there must be an *identity* relation between what exists in the mind and what exists in the world for us to have genuine knowledge.

In the final section, my aim is to draw out the similarities between Berkeley and Sergeant’s anti-representationalism even further. I do so by demonstrating that both thinkers present representationalists with a dilemma. On one side of the dilemma is the view that things known come exist in the mind, while on the other side is a sceptical position that follows from thinking of ideas are mere *resemblances* of things in the world. By zooming in on these dilemmas with which Berkeley and Sergeant’s opponents are confronted, the similarities between both their ‘negative’ case against representationalism and the ‘positive’ case for their own views should become even clearer.

4. Two Dilemmas

³⁰ Johnston’s discussion of Berkeley and Sergeant includes a footnote outlining two further differences (1923, 166, fn. 1). First, that Sergeant thinks of ideas as mere copies of things and ‘has nothing corresponding to Berkeley’s idea-thing’. Second, that for Berkeley notional knowledge applies only in special cases (spirits and relations) whereas for Sergeant to know *anything* is to have a notion of it. On the first, I think Johnston is right to say that Sergeant construes ideas as mere copies but I’m not convinced he has *nothing* corresponding to Berkeley’s idea-things. As I have emphasised in this section, Berkeley’s aim in collapsing the thing-idea distinction is to provide an account of how things known come to exist in mind. Thus, Berkeley’s thing-ideas do play the a very similar role as Sergeant’s notions which are *identical* to the things known. On the second, I think Johnston is right and, as I noted in section one, further dampens the case for thinking Berkeley got his theory of notions from Sergeant.

To anyone familiar with Berkeley's argument from the likeness principle, one passage in Sergeant's *Solid Philosophy* will strike a very familiar tune. Sergeant begins the passage by re-affirming his commitment to 'solid philosophy' before presenting ideists with the choice between his own theory of notions or scepticism:

Philosophy is the Knowledge of Things; But if I have nothing but the Ideas of Things in my mind, I can have Knowledge of Nothing but those Ideas. Wherefore, either those Ideas are the Things themselves, as I put Notions to be, and then I have gain'd my Point; or else they are not the Things, and we do not know the Things at all; and so adieu to the Knowledge of Things, or Philosophy. (SP, 30)

The aim of this passage is to demonstrate that as long as we accept the principles of ideism we set ourselves on a direct path to scepticism. But Sergeant offers us another route: by accepting that things come to exist in the mind as notions we can avoid scepticism. Thus, the first horn of the dilemma results in Sergeant's own position where '*the very thing it self...* [exists] *in my understanding*' (SP, 27). If his opponents choose to avoid scepticism, by accepting this horn, then, as Sergeant puts it, 'I have gain'd my Point'. On the other hand, rejecting Sergeant's own view comes at the cost of bidding 'adieu' to philosophy entirely.

Berkeley is doing something very similar in §8 of the *Principles*. The argument put forward in this passage, which relies on Berkeley's likeness principle, is much-discussed.³¹ The likeness principle is intended to undermine a version of representationalism where, even though ideas exist only in the mind, they represent to us, *by means of resemblance*, the qualities of mind-independent objects. Berkeley characterises representationalism as the view that

though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them whereof they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind in an unthinking substance. (PHK §8)

After considering this objection, Berkeley puts forward the likeness principle and points out that it is impossible to 'conceive a likeness except only between our ideas' (PHK §8), before pressing his opponents with a question:

³¹ There is considerable discussion amongst commentators as to how and if Berkeley provides an argument *in favour of* the likeness principle. For example, see Cummins 1966; Winkler 1989, 141-48; Ryan 2006; Frankel 2009; Dicker 2011, 154-63; West 2021; Bartha 2022. For my current purposes, I am simply interested in the structure of Berkeley's reasoning *from* the likeness principle.

I ask whether those supposed originals or external things, of which our ideas are the pictures of representations, be themselves perceivable or no?

Of course, Berkeley thinks this question only has two possible answers:

If they are, then they are ideas, and we have gained our point; but if you say that they are not, I appeal to any one whether it be sense to assert a colour is like something which is invisible; hard or soft, like something which is intangible; and so of the rest. (PHK §8)

The implications of Berkeley's question are clear: one can either answer 'yes' and accept that the purported external things are perceivable. Choose this option, Berkeley claims, and one can avoid the difficulties entailed by a 'no' answer but must also accept that "we [Berkeley, that is] have gained our point" for any perceivable thing *is* an idea (i.e., they would share an identity relation). Note the clear verbal parallel here with Sergeant's claim that "I have gain'd my Point" (SP, 30). The alternative is for his opponents to answer 'no' to the question which, Berkeley stresses, commits them to a highly implausible position: one in which colours, which are inherently *visual* qualities, resemble the qualities of invisible objects, and so on. But of course, Berkeley does not think his opponents can accept this position anyway because it undermines the likeness principle. Ideas cannot, in fact, represent unperceivable qualities by means of resemblance. Consequently, the representationalist is left without an explanation of how we get beyond our ideas and gain knowledge of things in the world. In other words, they are, by Berkeley's lights, reduced to scepticism.³²

Conclusion

In the work of Berkeley and Sergeant, representationalists are confronted with a dilemma: either accept that things known must exist in the mind or fall into scepticism. That is, accept that there must be an identity relation between what exists in the mind and what comes to be known in the world, or rely on a relation of resemblance between ideas and objects that can never be adequately established. Both thinkers' anti-representationalist arguments are intended to establish the second horn of the dilemma and thus that representationalism leads to scepticism. This leaves only the first horn: Berkeley and Sergeant's own views. Neither thinker is oblivious to the fact that their own views may sound strange or novel. Sergeant describes his theory of notions as just 'as strange as it is true' (SP, 27), while one of Berkeley's *Notebook* entries describes his own position as the

³² Berkeley characterises a sceptic as one who either 'denies the reality of sensible things or professes the greatest ignorance of them' (DHP 173).

‘obvious tho’ amazing truth’ (NB 279). Yet, even despite the novelties that their views entail, both argue that they *must* be true, for the possibility of scepticism *must* be stamped out.

As Johnston notes, Berkeley and Sergeant’s arguments bear witness to the fact that there was an ‘atmosphere of opposition to Locke’ soon after the publication of the *Essay*. More specifically, it is Locke’s representationalism that both thinkers take issue with. However, I have demonstrated that, going beyond Johnston’s analysis, a comparison of Berkeley and Sergeant’s arguments reveals that this ‘atmosphere of opposition’ was fostered by an assumption that *if* we gain knowledge of external things only in virtue of ideas which represent them then those ideas would have to do so by means of resemblance. With *that* account of representation in mind, it is natural for Berkeley and Sergeant to worry about an epistemology in which we are ‘veiled’ behind our ideas. But of course, as others have pointed out and as Locke himself makes clear in his replies to Sergeant, that may not be how Lockean representation should be understood.³³

Of course, there are limits to the comparison. For instance, Berkeley frequently expresses a distaste for Scholasticism, while Sergeant is committing to reviving Scholastic theories of cognition to combat scepticism. This suggests Berkeley would (if, indeed, he did read Sergeant) have been quite unsympathetic to his approach.³⁴ There are also questions over whether, despite their shared commitment to knowledge via identity, Sergeant would have considered Berkeley’s position ‘Solid Philosophy’. If a solid philosophy is one where there is a reliable connection between the mind and an extra-mental world, then of course Berkeley’s idealism is not solid.³⁵ But if solid philosophy is simply epistemology that is immune to scepticism, then perhaps there is a sense in which it is.

Despite such differences, I have shown that a comparison of Berkeley and Sergeant – one that establishes a *conceptual* rather than a *causal* connection – provides two important insights into their ‘anti-representationalism’. First, both think knowledge via resemblance (between idea and object) is not sufficient to avoid scepticism. Second, that, instead, both insist that we should adopt a position wherein we gain knowledge of the world via an *identity* relation. For Sergeant, that is identity between a notion as it exists in the mind and the form of a thing in world. For Berkeley, the identity is shared between ‘things’ and ‘ideas’ (although, of course, Berkeley maintains that these are really two names for the same thing).

³³ For discussion of Locke’s account of representation, see (e.g.) Lennon 2007; Ott 2012.

³⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for making this point.

³⁵ Thanks to another anonymous referee for making this point.

A comparison with Sergeant reveals that, far from being an outlier in arguing for idealism, Berkeley was in good company in developing an anti-representationalist epistemology where things known come to exist in the mind. In the context of Early Modern epistemology, a lot turns on the question of whether an idea represents by means of resembling its object. Berkeley and Sergeant's dilemmas effectively demonstrate that *if* the answer is 'yes' then representationalism faces serious difficulties. In Berkeley and Sergeant, we find is two thinkers – albeit with different methodological starting points – for whom only identity will suffice.³⁶

³⁶ A version of this paper was awarded the Colin and Ailsa Turbayne International Berkeley Essay Prize in 2019. Thanks to the judges of that prize for helpful comments. If you'd like to read that version of the paper, simply visit Berkeley's former home in Whitehall, Newport, Rhode Island, where you'll find a hard copy.

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