

The Retrieval of the Letter ‘To the Author of the *Minute Philosopher*’ from September 9th, 1732: A Note

Manuel Fasko

In 1732 George Berkeley published *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher* to which he appended a slightly revised version of his 1709 book *An Essay Towards A New Theory of Vision* (NTV). One of the first known reactions to *Alciphron* is an anonymously written letter which appeared a few months after its publication in the newspaper *The Daily Post-Boy* (September 9th, 1732).¹ Although the author found some words of praise for *Alciphron*, she or he expressed concerns pertaining to NTV, particularly to Berkeley’s thesis that vision is the language of God (e.g. NTV § 147).² After a few months Berkeley reacted to this anonymous critique with his *Theory of Vision or Visual Language shewing the immediate Presence and Providence of a Deity Vindicated and Explained* (TVV).³

Berkeley appended a copy of the anonymous critic’s letter to TVV.⁴ However, until now an original copy of *The Daily Post-Boy* issue had yet to be discovered. As a result, there was no way to verify if and in what respects the annexed version is faithful to the original. Additionally, there are questions that have arisen regarding the publication history of the *Theory of Vision Vindicated* because, as Luce already remarked, the pamphlet was “more or less, lost to sight” for almost a century after its original publication (W 1: 243).

The first currently known republication is Cowell’s heavily annotated version from 1860. In his Preface Cowell raises further questions:

‘Of English Philosophers of the very highest note’, Sir William Hamilton has observed, ‘(strange to say!) there are now actually lying unknown to their Editors, Biographers, and fellow-Metaphysicians, published treatises of the highest interest and importance [as of Cudworth, Berkeley, Collins, &c.]’. To this class belongs the present work [TVV], which I think it at once a duty and a pleasure to rescue from the neglect into which it has fallen.

¹ See Anonymous, “To the Author of the *Minute Philosopher*,” *Daily Post-Boy* issue no. 7024, September 9, 1732, printed for T. Warner at the Black-Boy in Paternoster Row, London.

² See *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne* [W], ed. A. A. Luce & T. E. Jessop (9 vols.; London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1948–57), 1: 277.

³ We know the exact publication date for neither *Alciphron* nor the *Theory of Vision Vindicated*. The first edition of *Alciphron* was most likely published in February (W 3: 1) or March [see *The Works of George Berkeley: Philosophical Works*, 4 vols., ed. Alexander Campbell Fraser (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), II: 5] 1732 with a second edition following a couple of months later. TVV was probably published between January [see Jean-Paul Pittion and David Berman, “A New Letter by Berkeley to Browne on Divine Analogy,” *Mind* 78 (1969), 376] and March (W 1: 243) of 1733. I use the Gregorian calendar throughout.

⁴ Cf. *The Theory of Vision Vindicated & Explained*, ed. H. V. H. Cowell (London: Macmillan and Co., 1860), 137-41; W 1: 277–79.

Its substance was inserted in ‘The Daily Post-Boy’, of September the 9th, 1732. The next year it was reprinted in a separate form; but it has not been included in any of Berkeley’s collected works, nor had it been noticed. (v–vi)

Cowell suggests there could be two versions of the *Theory of Vision Vindicated*. At least, he seems to maintain that there are two answers by Berkeley, when he writes (referring to TVV) its “substance was inserted” in the *Daily Post-Boy* issue of September 9th, 1732 and then reprinted the next year in “a separate form.” Thus, Cowell implies that this issue of the *Daily Post-Boy* might contain an answer by Berkeley, thereby raising the question about whether there are in fact two answers by Berkeley and whether there is a hitherto unknown piece of philosophical writing by Berkeley.

Now, we can say that it is possible to tackle these questions because I was able to retrieve an original copy of the *Daily Post-Boy* issue no. 7024 from September 9th, 1732 from a private seller. (A transcription is attached at the end of this article.) I conferred with Dr. Urs Leu, Head of Department for *Alte Drucke und Rara (Old Prints and Rarities)* of *Zentralbibliothek Zürich*. He pointed out the excellent condition of the document, and he observed that the print and paper of the copy are consistent with the methods used at the time. Therefore, and in the absence of any indication to the contrary, there is currently no good reason to doubt the authenticity of the document.

In the following I will answer the three questions raised so far by analysing the document and providing a comparative analysis of the original letter and the version appended to the *Theory of Vision Vindicated*.

First, I want to address questions about whether the *Daily Post-Boy* issue of September 9th, 1732 contains an answer by Berkeley (and hence if there is more than one reaction to the anonymous critic by Berkeley). When analysing the *Daily Post-Boy* issue, the most fundamental thing to remark is that it in fact contains an article called “*To the Author of the Minute Philosopher*.” Thus, the information Berkeley provides is correct (TVV § 1).⁵ Unfortunately, the issue in question does not contain any response by Berkeley or, for that matter, any further content of (obvious) philosophical interest—with the exception of the article which caught Berkeley’s attention. Apart from this article, the issue contains a long article on the then Duke of Lorraine, Francis I (1708-1765), an *Extract of a Private Letter from Berlin, Ship-News*, some notes on deaths and marriages in London and Ireland, two notices on lost goods and several advertisements concerning the publication of books.

The document serves to remove any remaining uncertainty as to the local provenance of the newspaper. Luce has pointed out that A. C. Fraser probably made a mistake when he

⁵ Hence, we can with certainty exclude the (admittedly rather far-fetched) possibility that there was no letter and that there is another reason why Berkeley wrote the *Theory of Vision Vindicated* the way he did. Until now, we had only Berkeley’s *prima facie* trustworthy word that this letter exists but not really any *evidence* beyond this.

located the newspaper in Dublin instead of London (Fraser 1871: 363). However, without an original copy there is only circumstantial evidence to attribute a mistake to Fraser. For example, Luce argues Berkeley, in all likelihood, was in London at the time. He further remarks the *Dublin Post-Boy* was not published daily (W I: 244).⁶

While Luce's argument is *prima facie* convincing, the evidence he presents is not decisive for at least two reasons. First, it would have been possible that Berkeley made a mistake when writing down the name of the newspaper. In the absence of an original copy, it was, for example, impossible to verify that Berkeley spelled the title of the newspaper correctly or that it was not mistakenly changed in the century in which the *Theory of Vision Vindicated* dropped out of public view. Second, being in London would not have prevented Berkeley from obtaining a copy of an Ireland-based newspaper. For example, it would have been easy for anyone to bring or send him a copy from Dublin to London.

However, the retrieval of the original copy allows me to further substantiate Luce's claim, since the document indicates that the issue was "printed for T. Warner at the *Black-Boy* in Paternoster Row." While there are Paternoster Rows outside of London, the "T. Warner" in question is likely Thomas Warner (1675?-1733), a London-based "bookseller."⁷ This new information about the publisher of the newspaper, taken together with the points Luce has raised, as well as the certainty that Berkeley's information about the letter is correct, strongly suggest that, contrary to Fraser's claim, the newspaper containing the anonymous critique was in fact based and published in London at a time when Berkeley was there.

Finally, the retrieval does not shed any new light on the questions of authorship nor the reason *why* Berkeley chose to reply in the first place.⁸ In regard to the latter we only have Berkeley's brief explanation in a letter to his American friend Samuel Johnson (1696-1772) from April 4th, 1734 in which Berkeley states:

Nor should I have taken notice of that Letter about Vision, had it not been printed in a newspaper which gave it course, and spread it through the kingdom. Beside, the *Theory of Vision* I found was somewhat obscure to most people; for which reason I was not displeas'd at an opportunity to explain it. (Letter 246, Hight 2013: 375-76)

⁶ All of Berkeley's letters from July 25th, 1732 to April 16th, 1734 that indicate the place where they were written name "London" or "Green-Street" (in London) as their location. See *The Correspondence of George Berkeley*, ed. Marc A. Hight (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 345-77.

⁷ Cf. Karl Tilman Winkler, *Handwerk und Markt: Druckerhandwerk, Vertriebswesen und Tagesschrifttum in London 1695-1750* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993), 374, 384, 433. Winkler points out that although Warner was a trained cook and not part of the guild, he was nonetheless regarded as a "bookseller" (434). For more on Warner and his role in early 18th (newspaper) publishing in London, see Winkler chap. 6.4.3.

⁸ So far, the only speculation on the identity of the author can be found in Tom Lennon's article who argues it might have been Catherine Trotter Cockburn (1679-1749). See Thomas M. Lennon, "The Genesis of Berkeley's *Theory of Vision Vindicated*," *History of European Ideas* 33 (2007), 321-29, especially 328-29. While I was not able to establish if there was a personal connection between Cockburn and Warner, further research in that regard could prove to be fruitful.

Although, the difficulty scholars encountered the past decades when trying to find an original copy of the letter may cast doubt on Berkeley's claim about the reach of newspaper, it seems plausible that Berkeley was honest about appreciating the "opportunity to explain" his theory of vision again. However, the more general question of Berkeley's sincerity in this matter is altogether a different issue—one on which the retrieval of the letter does not shed any new light.⁹

University of Basel
manuel.fasko@unibas.ch

From *The Daily Post-Boy*

Number 7024

Saturday, September 9, 1732

To the Author of the Minute Philosopher.

Reverend Sir,

I Have read over your Treatise called *Alciphron*, in which the Freethinkers of the present Age, in their various shifted Tenets, are pleasantly, elegantly and solidly confuted; the Style is easy, the Language plain, and the Arguments are nervous; but upon the Treatise annexed thereto, and upon that Part where you seem to intimate that Vision is the sole Language of God, I beg leave to make these few Observations, and offer them to yours and your Readers Consideration.

I. Whatever it is without that is the Cause of any Idea within, I call the Object of Sense; the Sensations arising from such Objects I call Ideas: The Objects therefore that cause such Sensations, are without us, and the Ideas within.

II. Had we but one Sense, we might be apt to conclude that there were no Objects at all without us, but that the whole Scene of Ideas which passed through the Mind, arose from its internal Operations; but since the same Object is the Cause of Ideas by different Senses, thence we infer its Existence. But though the Object be one and the same, the Ideas that it produces in different Senses have no manner of Similitude with one another. Because,

⁹ The research on this essay was carried out as a part of my Doc.CH grant by the Swiss National Science Foundation (<http://p3.snf.ch/Project-172060>) for whose financial support I am very grateful. The same goes for Urs Leu who took the time to analyse the document I retrieved. Furthermore, I extend my sincerest gratitude to Bertil Belfrage who not only inspired me to look for an original copy of the *Daily Post-Boy* in the first place, but has been tremendously helpful with his critical feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. Finally, I wanted to thank Tom Stoneham and Peter West for their comments on previous versions.

III. Whatever Connection there is betwixt the Idea of one Sense, and the Idea of another, produced by the same Object, arises only from Experience. To explain this a little familiarly; let us suppose a Man to have such an exquisite Sense of feeling given him, that he could perceive plainly and distinctly the Inequality of the Surface of two Objects, which by its reflecting and refracting the Rays of Light, produces the Ideas of Colours. At first in the Dark, though he plainly perceived a Difference by his Touch, yet he could not possibly tell which was red and which was white, where as a little Experience would make him feel a Colour in the Dark, as well as see it in the Light.

IV. The same Word in Languages stands very often for the Object without, and the Ideas it produces within, in the several Senses. When it stands for any Object without, it is the Representative of no manner of Idea; neither can we possibly have any Idea of what is solely without us. Because,

V. Ideas within have no other Connection with the Objects without, than from the Frame and Make of our Bodies, which is by the arbitrary Appointment of God; and though we cannot well help imagining that the Objects without are something like our Ideas within, yet a new Sort of Senses, or the Alteration of the old ones, would soon convince us of our Mistake; and though our Ideas would then be never so different, yet the Objects might be the same.

VI. However, in the present Situation of Affairs there is an infallible certain Connection betwixt the Idea and the Object: And therefore, when an Object produces an Idea in one Sense, we know, but from Experience only, what Idea it will produce in another Sense.

VII. The Alteration of an Object may produce a different Idea in one Sense from what it did before, which may not be distinguished by another Sense. But where the Alteration occasions different Ideas in different Senses, we may from our infallible Experience argue from the Idea of one Sense to that of the other; so that if a different Idea arises in two Senses from the Alteration of an Object either in Situation or Distance, or any other way, when we have the Idea of one Sense, we know from Use what Idea the Object so situated will produce in the other.

VIII. Hence as the Operations of Nature are always regular and uniform, where the same Alteration of the Object occasions a smaller Difference in the Ideas of one Sense, and a greater in the other, a curious Observer may argue as well from exact Observations, as if the Difference in the Ideas was equal; since Experience plainly teaches us, that a just Proportion is observed in the Alteration of the Ideas of each Sense, from the Alteration of the Object. Within this Sphere is confined all the judicious Observations and Knowledge of Mankind: Now from these Observations rightly understood and considered, your new Theory of Vision must in a great Measure fall to the Ground, and the Laws of Opticks will be found to stand upon the old unshaken Bottom. For though our Ideas of Magnitude and Distance in one Sense are entirely different from our Ideas of Magnitude and Distance in another, yet we may justly argue from one to the other, as they have one common Cause without, of which, as without, we cannot possibly have the faintest Idea. The Ideas I have of Distance and Magnitude by feeling, are widely different from the Ideas I have of them by seeing; but that something without, which is the Cause of all the Variety of the Ideas within, in one Sense, is the Cause also of the Variety in the other;

and as they have a necessary Connection with it, we very justly demonstrate from our Ideas of feeling of the same Object, what will be our Ideas in seeing. And though to talk of seeing by tangible Angles and tangible Lines; be, I agree with you, direct Nonsense, yet to demonstrate from Angles and Lines in feeling, to the Ideas in seeing that arise from the same common Object, is very good Sense, and so *vice versa*. From these Observations thus hastily laid together, and a thorough Digestion thereof, a great many useful Corollaries in all Philosophical Disputes might be collected.

I am,

Your humble Servant, etc.