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Review of *Idea and Ontology. An Essay in Early Modern Metaphysics of Ideas* by Marc A. Hight

Ericka Tucker

Marquette University, [ericka.tucker@marquette.edu](mailto:ericka.tucker@marquette.edu)

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Ericka Tucker was affiliated with California State Polytechnic University at the time of publication.

Marc A. Hight. *Idea and Ontology. An Essay in Early Modern Metaphysics of Ideas*. University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008. Pp. xiv + 278. Cloth, \$58.00.

“Based on a true story: the early modern tale.” In *Idea and Ontology*, Marc Hight argues that the story we have been told about early modern philosophy is false. What Hight calls the “early modern tale” tells us that beginning with Descartes and ending with Berkeley, metaphysics began its slide into the historical dustbin, replaced by epistemology as first philosophy. The categories of medieval metaphysics, substance and mode, so the story goes, could no longer serve the needs of the moderns, specifically their questions about the nature of ideas. Ideas could not easily be categorized as either substances or modes, and because of this difficulty, metaphysical questions were abandoned in favor of epistemological questions about the nature of representation and certainty. Hight reexamines the early modern tradition to find the metaphysicians behind the epistemologists’ masks supposed by the early modern tale.

Once the metaphysical questions are revealed as central to early modern philosophy, Hight argues that Berkeley’s immaterialism, rather than ridiculous, is the final and triumphant conclusion of the metaphysical speculations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By showing that ideas were neither independent substances nor fully dependent modes, Berkeley solves the metaphysical problem of ideas that had vexed Descartes, Arnauld, Malebranche, Leibniz, Locke, and Hume. Only once we have seen the metaphysical character of early modern debates and abandoned the early modern tale can we finally recognize, Hight argues, the importance of metaphysics for contemporary philosophy, and thus the current relevance of Berkeley.

One could criticize Hight for failing to properly identify the tellers of this early modern tale, and for attributing too much to those he finally identifies: Yolton, Lennon, and Watson. But surely this is a story we all have heard. Although outside the Vienna Circle it might be hard to find anyone willing to express this sentiment explicitly, Anglo-American philosophy in the twentieth century hardly celebrated metaphysics. To be taken seriously, historians working on philosophers like Berkeley, a metaphysician if ever there was one, needed to rehabilitate them. Hight argues that by turning early modern philosophers into epistemologists, historians have done violence to those figures who were clearly metaphysicians and to debates that clearly concerned metaphysical questions.

Although I am sympathetic to Hight’s project, I did not find the strongest form of his thesis, that these figures were primarily interested in the metaphysical status of ideas, completely convincing. Part of the difficulty resides in Hight’s criteria for what counts as “doing metaphysics.” For Hight, using a substance-mode ontology is enough to make one a metaphysician, but even if this is what we might assume today, it is not at all clear that this was true for early modern thinkers. Because he identifies metaphysics “by our lights,” Hight manages to side-step the central issue in the early modern tale, namely, were the early moderns abandoning metaphysics *as they knew it*?

The problem of the ontological status of ideas was neither virgin territory nor scorched earth in the seventeenth century; on the contrary, it was well-tilled ground. Bracketing metaphysical questions leading to unwelcome conclusions was a genuine strategy that early modern philosophers adopted to avoid what they took to be scholastic quagmires or theological-political minefields. Trying to understand the status of metaphysics in the early modern period without this background is problematic, and without explicitly addressing it, Hight’s case that these figures were primarily interested in metaphysical questions is weaker than it should be.

Hight’s book persuasively shows that the early moderns were exploring the ways in which the scholastic metaphysical categories could and could not be extended to answer questions about the nature of ideas. While Hight sees only Berkeley as having innovated within this history, creating a concept of “quasi-substances,” and thus as the only philosopher who broke the chains of substance-mode ontology to finally solve “the early modern problem of ideas,” each of the figures he covers could be seen as having extended these notions.

However, given the trajectory of Hight's narrative, it is not surprising that the shrift given these figures is so short. Overarching narratives tend to distort the views of those who are, for their purposes, minor characters. By rewriting the history of modern philosophy and casting Berkeley as its hero, Hight goes too far, and ends up replacing one fictional narrative with another.

ERICKA TUCKER

*California State Polytechnic University, Pomona*