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Berkeley

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Introduction

As a critic of John Locke and precursor of David Hume, George Berkeley presented a profoundly original perspective on some of the crucial questions in epistemology and metaphysics. Denying the existence of matter with remarkable ingenuity Berkeley initiated an outlook to which philosophy has been indebted ever since. George Berkeley, an Irish man, was born in 1685. After his schooling in Kilkenny he entered Trinity College, Dublin in his sixteenth year where he had a brilliant career, first as a graduate student and later as a tutor and fellow, for about thirteen years. In those days Trinity was deeply impacted by Newtonian science and the new philosophies of Descartes, Locke and Malebranche, and Berkeley with his keen intellect soon involved the young minds in scientific and philosophical deliberations.

Visiting London in 1713 he made an indelible impression upon the great literary men of the age like Swift, Steele, Addison and Pope. He devised a scheme for a college in Bermudas and for this purpose he went to America. But having spent three years (1728-31) in Rhode Island he relinquished the project and returned to England being excited about the future possibility of the new world. He wrote the poem containing the frequently quoted line, 'Westward the course of Empire takes its way' on account

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of which the town of Berkeley in California was called after him.

He married a young girl and said of her, 'I chose her for the qualities of her mind and her unaffected inclination to books. She goes with great cheerfulness to live a plain farmer's life and wears stuff of her own spinning wheel.'

In 1734 he became Bishop of Cloyne in the south of Ireland, where he led a retired life, engrossed with scholarly studies publishing books and articles from time to time but, above all, striving to ameliorate the wretched economic conditions of the peasants. When Berkeley's health began to fail he left Cloyne for Oxford at the age of sixty-seven and a year later in 1753 while sitting quietly at tea with his family he died. He was buried in Christ Church Chapel in Oxford.

Berkeley, with all his scholarship, lived a pious life and was described by Pope to possess every virtue under heaven. Alterbury said of Berkeley that he had, 'so much understanding, so much knowledge, so much innocence, and such humility I did not think had been the portion of any but angels till I saw this gentleman.'

Berkeley wrote extensively but his best work was over while he was still quite young. Some of his famous works are: *Commonplace Book* (1706-08), *A New theory of Vision* (1709), *The Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), *The Dialogues of Hylas and Philonous* (1713), *Alciphron* (1732) and *Siris* (1744). His writings after the age of twenty-eight were of less consequence. Berkeley wrote with great elegance and lucidity.

The Problem of Berkeley: Berkeley belonged to an age in which under the influence of developments within science a tendency towards materialism and atheism was beginning to strengthen. A deeply religious man,

Berkeley held out against such a disposition by declaring that the reality of the physical world is essentially spiritual for it is the manifestation of the activity of spirit and the goodness of God's Will. This spiritualism seemed so obvious to him that he did not find it necessary to defend it. It is the refutation of materialism that became essential to him and he executed the task by eliminating the inconsistencies involved in Lockean empiricism and taking it to its logical conclusion.

Refutation of Materialism

Treating Locke's 'commonsense' philosophy as a point of departure, Berkeley developed the most provocative thesis in all philosophy. It is termed subjective idealism. It declares that there are no material substances, no physical objects, just minds and ideas in the minds. This astonishing position arises from Locke's thesis by three simple moves. First, it is in agreement with the argument that it is not possible to form an idea about a substance for all that can be known of a thing are its sensible properties. Secondly, the distinction between primary and secondary qualities as Locke had argued, a distinction between properties inherent in the objects themselves as opposed to properties that the objects cause in us, cannot be. And, thirdly, that once it has been established that all knowledge of the world, except that of one's existence and God, must be acquired through experience, the question of anything other than our experience does not arise. Berkeley argued that a consistent empiricist must turn down not only the causal theory of perception but reject the notion of physical objects as well since what we can experience is neither the objects themselves nor their causation, but only their effects in the form of the ideas they cause in us.

Making use of the basic tenets of empiricism laid down by Locke, Berkeley establishes idealism thereby refuting

materialism and atheism. Following Locke's claim that sensation and reflection are intrinsic to all knowledge, and ideas are all we know, it becomes inconceivable to know a world of bodies i.e. a material world external to us. Our states of consciousness are limited to ourselves and any comparison of our ideas with these corporeal substances cannot be achieved for we are ignorant as to what they are and whether they are.

Berkeley further says that if an independent substance like matter and a world of pure space were to be possible, then an infinite, eternal and immutable reality would co-exist along with God thereby limiting Him or even tending to negate the very existence of God. The belief in matter forges the path towards atheism and materialism which can be avoided by disclaiming the premise that nurtures these tendencies – the assertion that matter exists.

Rejection of Abstract Ideas

In conformity with the practice of the preceding modern philosophers, Berkeley begins his *Principles of Human Knowledge* by cleansing the clutter of what he believed to be the false presuppositions of the past. Locke had discarded innate ideas and Berkeley, in advancing empiricism, further rejects abstract ideas. Locke started by declaring that only particular things exist but he further said that making a comparison of these things with each other it becomes viable to abstract common characteristics and assign names such as 'extension', 'colour', 'motion', 'man', 'animal' etc. He went so far as to maintain the existence of a 'substratum' which holds together the diverse qualities of material objects, although he did admit that a direct experience of such a substratum is not possible nor is it feasible to explore its true nature or the relation it bears to the ideas in our experience which we link it to. Berkeley insists that we

can never experience any such abstract idea, and the terms by which they are referred to are simply names, for there is nothing in reality that corresponds to them.

Berkeley was agitated with philosophers who joined up with scientists in complicating relatively simpler things by confusing the common man in saying that the authentic means to apprehend reality was not through perception but through an insight into universal concepts. This in turn led to doubt regarding certainty of knowledge giving rise to skepticism.

The emphasis of the prevalent science of the day on the rationalistic approach to reality together with the Lockean conception of the unknown substance incited a revolt from Berkeley, a staunch defender of morals and religion. In a closely Cartesian mode science discards the ability of senses to deliver certain knowledge and thereby scientific laws and glorifies reason as the arbiter of truth. Berkeley expressed his complete dissent with a stance such as this and argued that scientists themselves made use of the empirical method though also continually discrediting it. He said that, 'starting from his awareness of *visibilia* and *tangibilia* he (the scientist) proceeds to the discovery of certain *invisibilia* and *intangibilia* underlying the world of senses. Eventually, he takes up the paradoxical position of asserting the real existence of the *invisiblia* and *intangibilia* and denying reality to *visibilia* and *tangibilia*, from awareness of which he started.' Berkeley was opposed to the scientist's subscription of a rationalist viewpoint, for the subsistence of physical sciences in the absence of observation was inconceivable. Berkeley's thought was an endeavour to redeem the harm done to religion and morals by skepticism and atheism by demonstrating the incongruity in belief in abstract ideas as well as matter.

Hume remarked that Berkeley's dismissal of abstract ideas was 'one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries that had been made of late years in the republic of letters.' Berkeley himself considered his rejection of abstract ideas as a vital component in the argument for immaterialism, for 'if we thoroughly examine (the belief in unperceived objects) it will perhaps be found at bottom to depend on the doctrine of abstract ideas.'

Berkeley's arguments were designed with the dual purpose of achieving an immediate target and a remote target. The immediate target lay in countering Locke's account of the ideas of determinable or generic things such as red as opposed to any particular shade of red or triangle as opposed to an isosceles triangle or a right angled triangle. The remote target was to dismantle any doctrine of concepts that allows that they are, in any sense, intrinsically universal. Berkeley was trying to work to completion the idea that everything is particular, whether it lies within the mind or outside it. In doing so his intention was to disengage his philosophy of the perennial problem of universals, which in some form or the other had been pivotal to scholastic metaphysics. Berkeley's theory declares that not only are there no forms, species or universals in the world but even concepts are, in themselves, purely particular. Locke, too, maintained particularism, but according to Berkeley he endorsed an incoherency inherent in it. Locke's particularist programme is confronted with a dilemma for the concept of red, for example, is by definition something that includes many things and is incapable of simply being a particular. Locke's defense is, "words become general by being made the signs of general ideas.' He grouped all mental contents, including concepts together as ideas and treated ideas as mental images. To further elaborate it: a mental image is quite clearly a particular, but a particular is incapable of accommodating

a generic concept such as red or triangle. According to Berkeley, Locke's explanation to this is that such an image has an indefiniteness to it: 'Does it not require some pains and skill to form the general idea of a triangle… for it must be neither oblique nor rectangle, neither equilateral, equicrural nor scalenon, but all and none of these at once. In effect, it is something imperfect that cannot exist, an idea wherein some parts of several different and inconsistent ideas are put together.' So there is an indefiniteness implicit in this which manifests itself in two different ways. On the one hand the image is triangular without itself being either scalene or equilateral and, on the other, it is all of these incompatible properties at once, for it includes them all. In this way one has a particular object – the image – which both excludes all specific forms, and is a superimposition of the specific forms, thus encompassing just the right generality of things. Berkeley's objection is that one can have neither indeterminate particulars lacking a specific form, nor contradictory ones containing incompatible forms. Thus Locke's attempt to combine imagism with intrinsic generality fails.

To further clarify Berkeley's position, it is an impossibility to be able to perceive 'space' or 'bare extension' which is neither a line, nor a surface, nor a solid and can form no such ideas. To form an idea of a triangle which is neither oblique nor rectangle, neither equilateral, equicrural nor scalenon but all and none of these at once is inconceivable. The definition of a triangle as 'a plane surface comprehended by three right lines' ignoring the specific peculiarities of any particular triangle applies to all triangles, but this in no way implies that we actually have an abstract idea of triangle in general. Similarly, it is not possible to form an abstract idea of colour in general that is neither blue nor green nor orange nor any other determinate colour.

Strictly conforming to the empirical doctrine that all knowledge arises from the simple ideas of sensation and reflection Berkeley establishes the impossibility of abstract ideas for they appear in neither. He further says that any word used to designate common features of particular objects of our experience can only be a name and not the description of a fact. He called this theory nominalism that claimed that abstract ideas or universals are just names. Berkeley was of the view that the use of words that correspond to nothing in actual experience has only contributed to disorientation on account of confusing words with realities. Berkeley's suggestion is to attend to ideas actually experienced. He says, 'No one can be led into an error by considering his own naked undisguised ideas.'

Esse Est Percipi

Berkeley's astounding and provocative statement was that 'to be is to be perceived,' or esse est percipi, which entailed that if something were not perceived, it would not exist. This most naturally raises the question whether it exists when it is not being perceived. For Berkeley the entire issue depends on how we understand or interpret the word 'exists'. He writes, 'The table I write on I say exists; that is, I see it and feel it: and if I were out of my study I should say it existed; meaning thereby that if I were in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it.' By this he means to say that there can be no imaginable situation where the term 'exists' is put to use without simultaneously assuming that a mind is constantly perceiving it.

The impossibility of an unperceived body follows from the idea of body as held by Locke. A body according to Locke is a solid, extended, figured substance possessing the power of motion, a certain colour, weight, taste, smell

and sound. This latter set of qualities are simply the effects of the body that are produced in the perceiving subject and hence are present in the perceiver and do not reside in the body itself. They are not inherent in the body and are for that matter to be called secondary qualities. On the other hand are the qualities that are inherent in the substance, i.e. the body itself. These are primary qualities. Extension, figure, solidity, motion and rest are such primary qualities. Berkeley disagrees with this distinction drawn by Locke and says that the so called primary qualities are just like secondary qualities. He says that the ideas of solidity and extension which Locke claims to be of primary qualities, are acquired through the sense of touch and become sensations in my mind much like the secondary qualities. It is not possible to disentangle the idea of extension from the idea of colour and other such secondary qualities. Besides, an extended thing which is not at the same time coloured cannot be perceived. The primary qualities are thus inseparably integrated with the secondary qualities making it impossible to cull out the secondary qualities leaving behind an extended solid substance, which is just that and nothing else. If we examine an object of our knowledge, a table, for instance, we do not find that its shape is 'out there' while its color is 'in here.' Thus the distinction that Locke makes between primary and secondary qualities is redundant. What is seen is not the coloured and the extended but the coloured extended object.

Locke had said that substance, or matter, supports or acts as a substrate to the qualities we sense. In Berkeley's First Dialogue between Hylas and Philonous, Hylas expresses Locke's view that 'I find it necessary to suppose a material substratum, without which (qualities) cannot be conceived to exist.' Philonous answers that the word substratum has no clear meaning for him and he needed

to 'know any sense, literal or not literal, that you understand in it.' Hylas conceded his inability to assign a definite meaning to the term substratum, saying, 'I declare I know not what to say.' From this it is concluded that 'The absolute existence of unthinking things (matter) are empty words carrying no meaning.' This is however not to say that sensible things do not possess reality but only that sensible things exist only insofar as they are perceived. This in other words means that only ideas exist. To this Berkeley adds that 'I hope that to call a thing 'idea' makes it no less real.' He says that whatever we see, feel, hear, or any way conceive or understand, remains as secure as ever, and is as real as ever. To this the question arises as to why should one say that only ideas, instead of things exist? This, Berkeley says, was to eliminate 'the futile concept of matter:' 'I do not argue against the existence of any one thing that we can apprehend, either by sense or reflection.... The only thing whose existence we deny is that which philosophers call matter or corporeal substance.'

Since it was the science of his day, in particular, physics that leaned so heavily on the notion of matter, Berkeley realized the necessity to challenge its basic assumptions and methods. What agitated Berkeley most was that scientists made use of general and abstract terms as though they had reference to real entities, in particular to an underlying material substance in nature. Berkeley protested that we never encounter such a substance, for substance is an abstract idea, a misleading inference drawn from observed qualities. He said, 'As several of these (qualities) are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one *thing*. Thus for example, a certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted as a distinct thing, signified by the name 'apple'; other collections or ideas constitute

a stone, a tree, a book and the like sensible things.' He aspired to clarify the approach of scientific language wherein terms such as force, gravity and causality refer to nothing more than an assembly of ideas, which our minds derive from sensation.

The more Berkeley examined the functioning of his mind and grappled with the relation of his ideas with objects outside his mind the more certain he became that no object independent of his ideas could be discovered. He said 'when we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies we are all the while contemplating our own ideas.' He said there is nothing out there of which we do not have some perception.

As a clinching argument Berkeley remarked that 'an idea can be like nothing but an idea,' and so when Locke says that ideas and real things are different; ideas being mental and real things material and mental and material being disparate in nature, there is a contradiction evident in his views. Berkeley says if mind and matter are unlike each other and if knowledge depends upon the likeness of the unlike then it is an absurdity. For Berkeley if my ideas are like anything outside my mind, it must be another idea in another mind. Since he had refuted Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities, which is the very essence of Locke's thought, he has in effect refuted the entire system of representative realism.

God and the Existence of Things

A thing, says Berkeley, must needs be experienced in order to exist. This means if I see an object then it exists as I see it. But then the question remains if I do not see an object how would I know whether it exists or not and how then shall we account for the seeming reality of objects when they are not observed since Berkeley had

neither denied the existence of things nor their order in nature. To this Berkeley responds by saying, 'When I deny sensible things an existence out of the mind…There is… some other mind wherein they exist during the intervals between the times of my perceiving them.' And because all human minds are intermittently diverted from things 'there is an omnipresent eternal Mind, which knows and comprehends all things, and exhibits them to our view in such a manner and according to such rules as he himself hath ordained, and are by us termed the Laws of Nature.' The existence of things, in other words, depends upon the existence of God, and God is the cause of the orderliness of things in nature.

Berkeley says that in attempting to describe reality as I experience it, I realize that there are other persons like myself who are endowed with minds, much like my own mind, and just as I possess ideas other persons too have ideas in their possession. But above and distinct from my mind and the minds of other finite beings there is a greater mind and that is God's Mind. The regularity in nature is on account of God's Ideas. He further elaborates that the ideas that occupy the minds of human beings are God's ideas, which He communicates to humans. Thus the perceptions made on a day to day basis by humans are caused by God and not by matter or substance. Also, it is God who coordinates all experiences of finite minds, assuring regularity and dependability in experience which, in turn, enables us to think in terms of the 'laws of nature.' However there lies a disparity between the orderly and neat arrangement of ideas that belong to Gods mind and those which are transmitted from God's mind to the minds of human beings on account of the difference in competence between the divine and the finite mind. The ultimate reality is thus spiritual and not material in nature and the continued existence of objects when we do not perceive them is

explained by God's continuous perception of them. Berkeley applies a unique interpretation of causation when he suggests that the ideas in the minds of human beings emanate from God. He did not deny that we have an insight into causation but was resolute that our sense data do not disclose to us a unique causal power. It is just on account of our mental operations those causal connections are understood.

Refutation of Dualism, Atheism and Skepticism

Berkeley maintains that his idealistic theory eliminates several obscure and abstruse questions of philosophy. Apart from reducing human knowledge to knowledge of *ideas* and *spirit* it discards the dualism of objects in the mind (intelligible objects) and objects outside the mind (real objects). This dualism, he said, was the root of skepticism for how can we know that the things which are perceived conform to the things which are not perceived. If colour, figure, motion, extension etc. refer to things outside the mind, only appearances are perceived, not the real qualities of things. This distrust of the senses leads to skepticism which Berkeley believes is dispelled by the idealistic theory.

Berkeley held that the doctrine of matter was responsible for the prevalence of atheism and in discarding materialism the entire structure of atheism would collapse. He says if a self-existent, inert, unthinking substance is the origin of all things then naturally freedom, intelligence and design will have to be excluded from the formation of the universe. Berkeley also felt that idolatry persists on account of upholding matter as a permanent reality. If objects of sense are merely a cluster of sensations in the mind then it would be ridiculous for human beings to worship their own ideas. Further still he said if material substance were to be

stripped from what is seen and felt by every ordinary person as a body, which happens to be a combination of qualities or ideas, then every objection to bodily resurrection comes to nothing. Berkeley was convinced that by simply eliminating the hypothesis of matter, atheism, idolatry and irreligion would be empty of any support or justification.

Berkeley was confident that through his doctrine of *esse est percipi* he had convincingly undermined the position of philosophical materialism and religious skepticism. Building upon Locke's empiricism Berkeley made the decisive point that the human mind reasons only and always about particular sense experiences and that abstract ideas refer to no analogous reality. Hume, who later carried empiricism to its fullest expression, spoke of Berkeley as 'a great philosopher (who) had disputed the received opinion in this particular, and has asserted that all general ideas are nothing but particular ones.... I look upon this to be one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries that have been made of late years in the republic of letters.'

Conclusion

In this unit we have tried to understand the chief tenets of Berkeley's philosophy. Berkeley was an empiricist and his philosophy is called subjective idealism. He refuted the doctrines of the reality of material substances and abstract ideas. He gave his famous theory of 'esse est percipi' which meant that things are not out there in an external world to be perceived by man but are in man's perception of them. In other words, ideas of things in minds are their existence. Berkeley's views about the existence of God also came under discussion because according to him an external world exists only in so far as it is perceived by an eternally perceiving God. This

was followed by Berkeley's refutation of the theories of dualism. atheism and skepticism.

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