



Berkeley Alfred William Benn

George Berkeley (1684-1753) was born and educated in Ireland. The fact is of no racial or national importance, but interests us as accounting for his having received a better training in philosophy than at that time was possible in England. For the study of Locke, then proscribed at Oxford, had already been introduced into Dublin when Berkeley was an undergraduate there; and it was as a critical advance on Locke that his first publication, the *New Theory of Vision* (1709), was offered. Next year came the epoch-making *Principles of Human Knowledge*, followed in 1713 by the more popular *Dialogues*. At twenty-nine his work was done, and although he lived forty years longer, rising to be a Bishop in the Irish Church, after projecting a Christian Utopia for the civilisation of the North American Indians that never came to anything, and practising “every virtue under heaven,” he made no other permanent contribution to thought.

Berkeley is at once a theorist of knowledge and a metaphysician, combining, in a way, the method of Locke with the method of Descartes and his successors. The popular notion of his philosophy is that it resolved the external world into a dream, or at least into something that has no existence outside our minds. But this is an utter misconception, against which Berkeley constantly protested. His quarrel was not with common sense, but with the theorists of perception. To understand this we must return for a moment to Locke’s teaching. It will be remembered in what a tangle of difficulties the essay had left its author. Matter had two sets of qualities, primary and secondary, the one belonging to things in themselves, the other existing only in our minds; yet both somehow combined in real substances independent of us, but acting on our senses. Substance as such is an unknown and unknowable postulate; nevertheless, we know that it was created by God, of whom our knowledge is, if anything, inconveniently extensive. Now Berkeley, to find his way out of these perplexities, begins by attacking the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. For this purpose his *Theory of Vision* was written. It proves—or attempts to prove—that extension is not a real attribute of things in themselves, but an intellectual construction, or what Locke would have called an “idea of reflection.” Till then people had thought that its objectivity was firmly established by the concurrent testimony of two senses, sight and touch. Berkeley shows, on the contrary, that visible and tangible extension are not the same thing, that the sensations—or, as he calls them, the ideas—of sight and touch are two different languages whose words we learn by experience to interpret in terms of each other without their being necessarily connected. A man born blind would not at first sight know how to interpret the visual signs of distance, direction, and magnitude; he would have to learn them by experience. These, in fact, are ideal relations only existing in the mind; and so we have no right to oppose mind as inextended to an extended or an external world.

Having thus cleared the ground, our young idealist proceeds in his next and greatest work, *Of the Principles of Human Knowledge*, to attack the problem from another side. The world of objects revealed through sensation and reflection is clearly no illusion, no creation of our own. We find it there, changing, when it changes, without or even very much against our will. What, then, is its origin and nature? Locke’s view, which is the common view, tells us that it

consists of material bodies, some animated and some not. And matter, the supposed substance of body, is made known to us by impressions on our organs of sense. But when we try to think of matter apart from these sensible qualities and the relations between them it vanishes into an empty abstraction. Now, according to Berkeley there are no abstract ideas—i.e., no thoughts unassociated with some mental image besides a mere word; and Matter or inanimate substance would be such an idea, therefore it does not exist. There is nothing but mind and its contents—what we call states of consciousness, what Locke and Berkeley called ideas. Whence, then, come the objects of our consciousness, and whither do they go when we cease to perceive them? At this point the new metaphysical system intervenes. Berkeley says that all things subsist in the consciousness of God, and by their subsistence his existence is proved. The direct apprehension of a reality that is not ourselves only becomes possible through what would be called in modern language a subjective participation in the divine consciousness, more feebly reflected, as would seem, in the memories, imaginations, and reasonings of our finite minds.

In pursuing these wonderful speculations Berkeley deviated widely from the direct line of English philosophy, and it is difficult not to believe that the deflection was determined by the influence of Malebranche, especially when we find that the writings of the Oratorian Father were included in his college studies. Moreover, a parallel line of idealistic development derived from the same source was evolving itself at the same time in English thought. John Norris (1657-1711), a correspondent of the Platonist Henry More, an opponent of Locke, and a disciple of Malebranche, had himself found an enthusiastic admirer in Arthur Collier (1680-1732), whose *Clavis Universalis* professed to be “a demonstration of the non-existence or impossibility of an external world” (1713). Both Norris and Collier, like Malebranche and Berkeley, were Churchmen; but so strong was the drift towards idealism that Leibniz, a layman and a man of science, contributed by his *Monadology* to the same current. Malebranche neither was nor could he be a complete idealist in the sense of denying the reality of matter; for the dogma of transubstantiation bound him, as a Catholic, to its acceptance, while Berkeley, Collier, and Leibniz, as Protestants, were under no such obligation. His idealism agreed more nearly with the Neo-Platonic doctrine of Archetypes in the divine Reason among which Matter was one. On the other hand, Berkeley probably borrowed from him the notion of a direct contact with God, the difference being that with the Cartesian it is conceived as an objective vision, with Locke’s disciple as (if the expression may be permitted) a subjective con-consciousness. Leibniz, again, while abolishing Matter, retains an external world composed indeed of spirits and so far immaterial, but existing independently of God.

All these systems involve the negation of two fundamental scientific principles. The first is that every change must be explained by reference to an antecedent change to which it bears a strict quantitative relation. The second is that no particular change can be referred to another change as its necessary antecedent unless it can be shown by experience that a precisely similar couple of changes are, in fact, always so connected. Let me illustrate these principles by an example. I leave a kettle full of cold water on the fire, and on returning after a sufficient interval of time I find the water boiling. Had I stayed by the fire and watched the process, my kettle would—a popular proverb to the contrary notwithstanding—have certainly boiled as soon, but also no sooner for being helped by my consciousness. The essential thing is that energy of combustion in the fire should be turned into energy of boiling in the water. Now, what is Berkeley’s interpretation of the facts? Fire, kettle, water, and ebullition are what in his writings are called “ideas”—i.e., phenomena occasionally in my mind, but always in God’s mind. And according to this view the necessary antecedent to the boiling of the water is not the fire’s burning, but God’s consciousness of its burning, his perception being the essence of the operation. But it is proved by experience that neither my perception nor anyone else’s ever

made a single drop of water boil. In other words, perception is not in this instance a *vera causa*. Why, then, should the perception of any other mind, however exalted, have that effect?

Nor is this all. How does Berkeley know that God exists? Because, he says, to exist is to be perceived, and therefore for the universe to exist implies a universal Percipient. But he got the idea of God from other men, who certainly did not come by it as a generalisation from their perceptions; they got it by generalising from their voluntary actions, which do produce the changes that perception cannot produce. It will be said that volitions and the feelings that prompt them exist only in consciousness. In whose consciousness? In that of a spirit. And what is spirit apart from sensation, thought, feeling, and volition? Simply one of those abstract ideas whose existence Berkeley himself denied.

Alfred William Benn. *History of Modern Philosophy*. London: Watts and Co, 1912.

© SophiaOmni, 2008. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.

