

A Criticism of Berkeley's Theory of Knowledge.

The philosophy of Bishop Berkeley is of especial interest to the epistemological student in that it gives us the first example of thoroughgoing subjectivism in the history of modern philosophy. Subjectivism, as I understand it, is the theory which, while it affirms the externality of the subject to the act of thought, denies all externality and independence to the object thought of, thereby limiting the mind to the consciousness of its own states. The mind may take the form of a substance, or an organization of the ideas not determined by them, or any other form at all which gives the self a real existence apart from its objects, while the whole objective universe is reduced to the ideas of the mind.

This theory of knowledge has a very solipsistic appearance, but differs from solipsism in that it does not limit the number

of possible subjects to one, - the individual thinker himself. Nevertheless, there is always the great danger to subjectivism that it will slip into the absurdity of solipsism, and in the investigation of any subjectivistic theory care must be taken to discover any solipsistic tendencies of the argument.

An excellent statement of the position of subjectivism is to be found in the Third Dialogue between Hylas and Philonous, written by Berkeley in 1713. It goes as follows: - "How often must I repeat, that I know or am conscious of my own being; and that I myself am not my ideas, but somewhat else, a thinking, active principle that perceives, knows, wills, and operates about ideas. I know that I, one and the same self, perceive both colors and sounds: that a color cannot perceive a sound, nor a sound a color: that I am therefore one individual principle,

distinct from color and sound; and for the same
 (reprint edition in Gale Hall Reading Room, #A.9.96
 all my references to the Dialogues will be to this
 edition.
 2nd edition, p.

reason, from all other sensible things and inert ideas. But, I am not in like manner conscious either of the existence or essence of matter.¹⁾ On the contrary, I know that nothing inconsistent can exist, and that the essence of matter implies an inconsistency."

The two writings of Berkeley which are most to the point in a criticism of Subjectivism are Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, published in 1710, and the Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, published in 1713. Since the Dialogues are the later work, and since the arguments of the two books are practically identical, the Dialogues will be chiefly referred to here.

The first point which Berkeley tries to establish is what Professor Perry calls Epistemological Monism, — that is, that the knowledge of a thing and the thing known

are not mutually exclusive.²⁾ He begins by
¹⁾ Berkeley's conception of reality is that of substantial reality, so all objective reality is summed up for him in matter.

²⁾ Journal of Phil., Psych., and Sci. Meth., Dec. 23, 1904

stating that sense-perception is immediate, and that we do not perceive the causes of our sensations, but our sensations themselves." ^{Now, it} ~~is~~ is certainly an undeniable fact that in the analysis of experience we must sooner or later come to elementary experiences whose meaning and existence cannot be separated. The sensation, blue means nothing more nor less than the sensation blue, - it need not imply a subject that perceives it or a ~~blue object~~ which is perceived, simply because subject and object have not been differentiated from one another in the act of thought. But we must remember that this immediacy of crude perception tells just as much against our intuitive knowledge of the subject as against our intuitive knowledge of the object.

Berkeley's next argument is ^aboth sound and ~~subtle~~. A warm ^{heat} ~~fire~~, he says gives us a sensation of warmth, whereas a hot one gives us a sensation of pain." Now, no man in his senses

¹¹ First Dialogue, p. 108, first Edition.

¹² Ibid., p. 112 ff.

will assert that the pain is in the fire. But the two cases are precisely parallel. Moreover, the same object may feel hot and cold at the same time, whereas we cannot conceive anything real by its own right as both hot and cold. It follows that all sensations which either have an affective connotation or are relative in ^{their} nature cannot be the inherent qualities of ~~an~~ a substance, ^{external} independent of the act of thought. It will be observed, however, that this is no proof of the dependence of these qualities on the mind of the thinker.

But the qualities that satisfy the above requirements include all sensible qualities, both secondary and primary. The object that looks small to a man must look comparatively large to a mosquito. To take an example which Berkeley does not give, it is a familiar fact that when a man returns to a place ~~at~~ which he has only known as a small child, all the objects around him seem to him strangely cramped

and again,
 and dwarfed. What seems a fact, ^{face} to the poor runner
 may seem slow to the practiced athlete. So
 we see that we have no right to hypostatize
 the primary qualities. There can be no such
 thing as a sensation of absolute extension, for
 all that exists is particular (that is, exists
 by virtue of its existence in particular in-
 stances.)¹⁹ Moreover, primary qualities never
 exist alone, but only in combination with
 secondary qualities.²⁰ Pure intellect cannot
 separate primary and secondary qualities,
 for they are sensible ~~things~~ ^{by nature}, and it is
 their relation in sense-perception with
 which we are concerned. Therefore, we have
 no right to postulate an external spatial
 reality, without other sensible qualities,
 for it is inconceivable.²¹

I have given this argument rather
 in full, for it is really Berkeley's greatest
 contribution to the theory of knowledge.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 37. 39
²⁰ Ibid., p. 38. 40
²¹ Ibid., p. 72. 41

The affective states had long been realized as subjective; Locke had resolved the secondary qualities into mere sensations; it was left for Berkeley to show that the primary qualities were amenable to similar analysis.

After showing that it is ^{incorrect} false to distinguish in each particular sensation the sensation itself and the act of sensation¹⁾, he goes on to demonstrate the falsity and superfluity of assuming some unknowable substratum in which qualities inhere²⁾. He shows that the use of any expression like substratum or substance for this unknowable thing involves a contradiction, for such terms imply a space-relation to have any meaning whatsoever. Moreover, a sensible experience cannot represent in any pictorial fashion an insensible reality; the ever-changing cannot correspond to the changeless³⁾.

Taken as a whole, Berkeley's arguments against the external existence of Material

1) 9 bid. ~~41-44~~ 43 ff.
2) 9 bid. ~~44-47~~ 49 ff.
3) 9 bid. ~~48-50~~ 62 ff.

Substance are sound. They show that sensation is not a mirroring of some external reality, but a direct presentation of reality (the idea) to the mind of the thinker. They demonstrate that our knowledge of ~~reality~~ is immediate in the literal sense of the word. When I look at this paper before me, 'this paper', and 'my ~~new~~ sensation of this paper', are one and the same thing. It will be observed, however, that nothing that has been said goes to show that the object perceived is not the perception of the object, and something more. I have never seen the other side of the moon, and what is more, nobody has, and perhaps no thinking being has an image of its appearance, but I have not the slightest doubt that it is there; none of the arguments that Berkeley has given so far would go to disprove it.

Berkeley now goes on to try to show not only that the knowledge of reality is direct,
 'See Knowledge as Presentation, Helen Wodehouse, Mind n. 5 Vol 18.

but ~~that~~ also that the entire reality of the object of thought consists in being known. 'Esse est percipi.' Berkeley does not make any definite distinction between the two points, and so the arguments for epistemological monism and for what we may call, following Professor Perry, ontological idealism, are not kept distinct. The argument is as follows. In the act of conceiving anything, I imagine it in my own mind. I cannot think of an object as unimagined, therefore, without imagining it, ^{which is absurd.} Therefore, all that exists is not only imaginable, but actually imagined.

Let us assume that this argument is valid, and that nothing is real unless imagined. But I cannot think of the imaginations of another without imagining them myself. If I try to conceive of the thoughts of somebody else, I must to some extent reproduce them in my own mind. Hence, if Berkeley's argument is

⁹ibid., p. 46 53.

valid, I am conscious only of my own thoughts. Solipsism is the logical conclusion and the reductio ad absurdum of this argument.

Berkeley proves too much, - he sets out to show that we can conceive nothing but what is in ~~our own~~ mind, but he really shows that if his argument ^{holds good} ~~is valid~~, we can conceive nothing but what is in our own mind.

But it is not enough for us to establish a dilemma between the falsity of Berkeley's argument and solipsism; - we must show wherein the falsity of Berkeley's argument lies. It is certainly true that we can never know the unconceived, but we have a right to ask whether the unconceived cannot exist. Now, it is evident that ~~our~~ ^{the cause of} inability to conceive a thing may lie either in the thing or in ourselves. A blind man cannot conceive light; but it is not because light is inconceivable in nature, but rather

to his lack of means whereby to perceive it. Now, ~~the~~ we are all as blind men in regard to part of our reality. There is a limit to the experience of everyone of us. The unconceived must, by definition, be unknown, but the question remains ~~what~~ 'does this unconceivedness of the unconceived prove its unreality?'

Let us look into this question. It is clear that the inconceivability of a thing may argue against its existence. The inconceivability of an object the sum of whose parts is greater than its whole certainly argues against the existence of the object. However, I not only cannot conceive it at the present moment, but I am convinced that I never can ^{conceive} ~~perceive~~ it, no matter how hard I try, and this is what ~~assures~~ ^{assures} me of its unreality. The inconceivability of such an ^{thing} ~~object~~ is independent of my will, is objective, whether the object of my consciousness be internal to the mind or external to it.

Let us look, then, into the argument of Berkeley

that the existence of reality unknown to the mind is inconceivable. It is true that the unconceived never occurs and can never occur in my thought. However, whenever I learn a new thing, whenever I have a new sensation, an object unconceived before is known to the mind. It is clear that any unconceived objects can become conceived by the act of the mind. Therefore, the inconceivability of ~~some~~ things unthought of by the mind is not necessarily inherent in the things, ~~and~~ and so is no argument against their reality. The real reason why such things are unconceived is that we are in what Professor Perry calls the egocentric predicament.⁵ We are forced to be solipsists to a certain extent, in that we must regard the universe from our own individual standpoint. There is an essential primacy of ~~the~~ ~~our~~ my own ego in all my thoughts in that they are my thoughts. The fallacy of solipsism consists in regarding this primacy as an objective fact instead of a necessary subjective way of looking at things.

The difficulty with which an idealistic theory must always contend is the explanation of the fact that reality is independent of our will. Our sensations obtrude themselves on us, whether we will or no. When I walk from the library over to Emerson Hall, I see first the inside of Gore Hall, then the college yard, then the interior of Emerson Hall, and without changing my direction of walking, I cannot make them appear in the reverse order. I cannot make a red object appear black by wishing it to do so. The chief characteristic of real sensations, as distinguished from imaginations, is their independence of my will.

Of course, the idealists must admit this independence of sensations from the ~~the~~ subject who perceives them. But, since the sole reality of ~~sensations~~ ^{objects} is for them the fact that they are known, they cannot consider this independence as a property of the object apart from its being

thought. Since no human thought can account for this independence, they must attribute it to the fact that they are ideas of the divine being. This is Berkeley's solution of the problem. He argues as follows: "To me it is evident, for the reasons you allow of, that sensible things cannot exist ~~as~~ otherwise than in a mind or spirit. Whence I conclude, not that they have no real existence, but that, seeing they depend not on my thought, and have an existence distinct from being perceived by me, there must be some other mind wherein they exist. As sure, therefore, as the sensible world really exists, so sure is there an infinite omnipresent spirit, who contains and supports it."

The difficulty immediately presents itself, "How does the fact that God has an idea help me to know it? Is it not just as ^{impossible for me} difficult to ~~set~~ conceive a reality unconceived by me but known by God as it is for me to conceive"

^{Dialogue, p. 74}

it as absolutely unknown? Does He implant these ideas, whose sole reality lies in being thought, into my mind, at His own will? If so, we have the difficulty of the Deus ex machina; we are simply the puppets of God, and truth is what He wills it to be; if not, God's knowledge of a thing cannot help us to know it.

Besides, the question of knowledge comes up with regard to the mind of God. How does God know his ideas? Does He create them? Is ^{this} world even His own construction? If it is, then even His own ideas of right and wrong ~~and~~ ~~are~~ are made by him. God's will becomes prior to God's reason. But will without reason and knowledge is no will at all, for it has no goal to aim at. Berkeley rejects this view, and states that ^{all} ~~the~~ ideas have existed since eternity in the mind of God." If so, since they cannot be created or destroyed by him, it is clear that they are independent of him.

¹Dialogues, l. 123. 148.

Since God has not created his ideas, there is an ultimate cosmological dualism between God and his ideas. God is, according to Berkeley, an ultimate, primary reality; his ideas are equally ultimate and equally primary, for without them he would be nothing but blind, unreasoning, futile will. This dualism is, in a way, a ~~correct~~ corollary of the epistemological dualism between the subject and his thoughts (called by Prof. Perry psychological realism) which pervades Berkeley's system, which I will discuss in detail further on.

Besides these difficulties and dilemmas, which appear to me inherent in any God-centered idealism, Berkeley's conception of the Divine being contains others that seem, at least at first sight, to be peculiar to his own system. God, he says, is a purely active being,¹ while the ideas are purely passive states.² But how can a purely active being have states? How can he be anything but mere unreasoning will? I see it

1) Dialogues, p. 92 110.
 2) Dialogues, p. 92 110.

not folly to regard the Supreme Architect, the
 Designer of the world as a mere headstrong, ~~but~~
 stubborn Being, who never stops to consider
 his acts? Yet this is what a purely active being
 must be, for thought and reason are to a certain
 extent passive. How could such a God help man
 to know and impart to him ~~his~~ ideas? On the
 other hand, are ~~we~~ ^{the ideas} purely passive? mere states of
 the mind of the perceiver? Is not knowledge essentially
 a process ^{involving} of interpretation, which, limit as we
 will, we cannot wholly avoid? It is clear that
 this distinction between the active ~~state~~ of God
 and His passive ideas is entirely artificial
 and untenable; it brings up in another form
 that dualism between the knower and the thing
 known, which Berkeley has already disproved
 in the case of the idea and the reality it represents.

Again, how is it that the eternal ideas
 in the mind of God become realized in a definite
 temporal order in the thoughts of men?

Are we ~~the~~ ^{mere things} mere puppets of the Almighty, into
 whom he instills whatever ideas he wills in whatever
 connection with the idea of time that he pleases
 are ideas then merely subjective, dependant on
 the will of God? Could He repeal the law of
 gravitation; could He stop the planets in their
 courses and bid them reverse their paths? It
 is plain that to give God the control of the
 ideas in the minds of men from eternity,
 independent of any laws but those that He
 chooses, ^{freely} is to make science a farce and
 knowledge a mockery. If the ideas in the minds
 of men are to depend on the ideas in the mind
 of God, the latter must not be mere reservoirs
 of thought for Him to draw from at his own
 free will, but must be determined by some
 law, unalterable even by God Himself. To assert
 the ^{absolute} primacy of any will, be it that of God
 or our own, ~~at~~ over knowledge, is practically
 to refute the latter.

Most of the difficulties with which we have so far met in our discussion are rather difficulties of idealism in general than of subjective idealism in particular. This latter theory maintains that, while the object has no reality apart from the act of thought, the subject has. Of the three terms which popular realism recognizes in the act of thought: - ~~the~~ subject, idea, and object, it strikes out the last, but asserts the independent reality of the first two. The independent existence of the subject may take any form whatsoever; in Berkeley it takes that of substance. It will be well, therefore, to examine the justification of this particular type of subjective idealism before we criticize that phase of Berkeley's subjectivism which is due purely and simply ~~to~~ to the fact that it is a subjectivism, so that we may be better able to isolate the latter factors, and study them apart from disturbing influences.

~~It is a subjectivism, and it is a subjectivism.~~

One of the most notable of the premises accepted by the school of philosophy which Locke founded, Berkeley developed, and Hume carried to its logical conclusion, is that all reality is substantial. Locke naively regarded mind and matter as two independent substances; Berkeley showed the fallacy of regarding matter as a substance, and therefore turned idealist; Hume in turn subjected mind to the same analysis, found no substance there, and became a phenomenalist. The cogency of the argument of the last two depends to a large extent on the belief that all reality is ^{substance} substantial. Hume's argument, however, may be regarded in another ~~light~~ light, as a reductio ad absurdum of substantialism. Therefore, his refutation of Berkeley's subjectivism, ^{as he gives it} need only prove that a substantial subjectivism is untenable.

Hume argues against spiritual substance¹
 much as Berkeley argues against material¹

substance. When I look into my mind, he ^{would} say, I find sensations of color, form, sound, taste, smell, warmth, cold, pain, pleasure (which he regards as a sensation) and so forth, and imaginations of various sorts, but nowhere do I find myself as a separate factor among these phenomena. I find no substance underlying experience by introspection, & merely find a certain collection of mental states. When I think of a black object, I cannot separate in my introspection ^{idea of the} the black object and the I that thinks of the black object. I find no more trace of substance in myself than I find of it in external reality.

Berkeley, as it were, anticipates and tries to refute this argument, but in his refutation he begs the question. He says in the third Dialogue between Hylas and Philonous (where Hylas is Berkeley's hypothetical opponent, and Philonous is

Berkeley's "Hylas": Explain to me now, Philonous!
 '8. 141

how is it possible that there should be room for all those trees and houses to exist in your mind. Can extended things be contained in that which is unextended? Or, are we to imagine impressions made on a thing void of solidity? You cannot say objects are in your mind, as books in your study: or that things are imprinted on it, as the figure of a seal upon wax. In what sense, therefore, are we to understand those expressions? Explain me this if you can: and I shall then be able to answer all those queries you formerly put to me about my substratum'.

"Philonous: 'Look you, Hylas, when I speak of objects as existing in the mind, or imprinted on the senses, I would not be understood in the gross literal sense — as when bodies are said to exist in a place, or a seal to make an impression upon wax. My meaning is only that the mind comprehends or perceives them, and that it is affected from without, or by some being distinct from itself.

This is my explication of your difficulty; and how it can serve to make your tenet of an unperceiving material substratum intelligible, I would fain know."

This argument is vitiated by the fact that both Hylas and Philonous regard the mind as a real existence, independent of the act of thought, ~~is~~ separate from the impressions of sense, and indubitably real. Berkeley tries to prove that ~~the mind~~ ^{spiritual substance} is not subject to the same destructive criticism as material substance by assuming, as it were, that it has been subjected to that criticism and was not destroyed by it. As a matter of fact, the disproof of spiritual substance may be made to parallel stage by stage that of material substance.

The ^{metaphysical} conception of substance, be it mental or physical, is an empty one. It seems a foolish way to unite the various qualities of ~~our~~ our sensations by postulating an unknown somewhat

in which they inhere, like pins in a pin-cushion, whether that somewhat ~~to~~ be the subject that thinks them or an object in which they are thought. How can that unknown somewhat help us to know reality? It is a well established maxim of Science and Philosophy that the worse known should be explained by the better-known; is it not the height of folly to reverse the order, and explain our concrete experience by a reality which is unknowable? I can have a fair comprehension of the relations between my various experiences, and it does not aid me in the least to refer these to some occult, hidden relations of realities.

We must grant, then, that substantialistic subjectivism is untenable. We must now try see if Berkeley gives any arguments for subjectivism that are independent of substantialism, and try to criticize those theories. Berkeley argues, ^{as we have} seen, that, since no one of my sensations can perceive

another, there must be a self to perceive the various

~~of the~~

"In the passage quoted as showing the standpoint of subjectivism

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Articles

List of Books Read for Paper in Prof. Perry's Seminar.

1. Berkeley, Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous.
2. " , Principles of Human Knowledge.
3. Perry. The Cardinal Principle of Idealism, Mind, n.s., Vol 19, p 322
4. G. F. Stout, Are Presentations Mental or Physical? (Proc. of Arist. Soc.)
5. Helen Wodehouse. Knowledge as Presentation, Mind, n.s., Vol 14, 391
6. ~~Perry,~~