

## Remote Learning Module for 10 April 2020

Lecture Notes: George Berkeley, His Life & Times

Last time we examined Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, which is often considered to mark the birth of modern empiricism. However, we also took note of Locke's residual rationalist inclinations as they appear in his distinction between the real and objective existence of primary qualities and the subjective secondary qualities we must attribute to the modification of our sensory apparatus upon interaction with corporeal objects. Today we'll turn our attention to George Berkeley, whose critique of both Cartesian rationalism and Locke's empiricism led him down an argumentative path to a species of metaphysical phenomenalism which he called *immaterialism* (and which Kant will later identify as *subjective idealism*).

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### — Biographical Notes —

(1) George Berkeley was born in Kilkenny, Ireland to Ascendancy parents in 1685. The term, "Ascendancy" here (short for Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, or Protestant Ascendancy) was most likely only coined three years prior to Berkeley's birth, but its origins lie farther back in British history with the confiscations of Catholic lands in Ulster during the reign of James I. In 1608, James transferred these properties to a band of English investors and settlers who established plantations in the region. During the Cromwell's reign of terror throughout Ireland in the 1650s, the vast majority of the land previously held by Catholic lords and wealthy farmers was transferred into Protestant hands. After the Glorious Revolution of 1688, William of Orange, now King of England, further extended the confiscations until nearly the entire island was dominated by Protestant economic and political interests.

(2) Berkeley received his early education at Kilkenny College; thereupon he began his university studies at Trinity College, Dublin at the tender age of 15. Three years after graduating from Trinity, he was made a Fellow of the College, and was ordained into the Anglican Church shortly thereafter, in 1707.

(3) Two years later, Berkeley commenced the production of a veritable torrent of philosophical works. Between 1709 and 1713, this outpouring included:

— *The New Theory of Vision* [in which he proposed that three-dimensional perception depends on kinesthetic sensibility as much as visual sensibility], in 1709;

— *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* [in which he first formulate his immaterialist metaphysics], in 1710;

— *The Discourse on Passive Obedience* [in which he advocates the Christian duty either to obey the dictates political sovereignty, or patiently to suffer the consequences of resistance], in 1711; and

— *Three Dialogues between Hylas & Philonous* [a defense of his immaterialism in the form of a Platonic dialogue], in 1713.

(3) In 1724, Berkeley became Dean of Derry, whereupon he began pursuing a missionary plan for establishing a college in Bermuda (in the Caribbean). In 1728, newly married to Anne Forster, he travelled with her to Rhode Island, waiting to receive funds to establish plantations to support his missionary ambitions. The funds never arrived. After exhausting their own resources, the couple returned to Britain in 1731. While at Newport, however, he met one Samuel Johnson (not of *Dictionary* fame back in England), who, though at first a severe critic of Berkeley, became converted to the immaterialist philosophy. Johnson would go on to serve as the first President of Columbia University; he penned the first American philosophy textbook, *Elementa Philosophica*, which was published in 1752 by Benjamin Franklin, and dedicated to none other than George Berkeley.

(4) Even among the literati, Berkeley's philosophical works largely met with puzzlement and consternation, if not outright hostility. Undaunted, in 1733 he published a rejoinder to his many critiques with *The New Theory of Vision, Vindicated and Explained*. Also in this year he published the *Alciphron*, (or *Minute Philosopher*), which he'd composed whilst in America. This work was a straightforward exercise in Christian apologetics directed against the "free-thinkers." You may recall that the term "free-thinking" was applied contemptuously against both Descartes and Spinoza in the previous century.

(5) In 1734, Berkeley was appointed the Bishop of Cloyne, and so returned to his native Ireland. Also in this year, he published *The Analyst*—a sustained and masterful critique of Newton's mathematical calculus and physical system. He served as Bishop of Cloyne for 18 years. In Ireland, Berkeley produced his last works. In *The Querist* (1737) he advocated public works and education to remediate poverty; we find here as well the remarkable assertion (for the times) "as words can have meaning without referents, so money can have value without gold." Berkeley's last work was the *Siris* of 1744; it was by far his most popular work (a best-seller in his own lifetime, in fact). The *Siris* is, nevertheless, an exceedingly strange treatise. Its primary purport is to advocate the consumption of tar-water (a distillation of pine tar in water) as a universal panacea for all manner of physical ailments. In support of this advocacy, Berkeley offers an array of scientific claims in its favor; stranger yet, he further enjoins his readers to follow the scientific evidence gradually until eventually they will come to the contemplation of God.

(6) George Berkeley died suddenly on January 14<sup>th</sup> in 1753, apparently of a stroke, after having recently moved to Oxford to attend to the education of his son, George Junior.

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On Monday, we'll examine the Introduction (1-25) to Berkeley's *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, wherein he outlines his project for establishing *immaterialism* as correctly characterizing the real world. Here too we'll encounter his critique of both Descartes and Locke in one fell swoop, by anticipating Wittgenstein by a good 200 years. Be well everyone, and, although you have probably tired by now of my saying so, let's remember: social distancing saves lives, which is presumably why we are still not in JUB 202 presently.