

Remote Learning Module for 13 April 2020

Lecture Notes: Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*

Last time we met the good Bishop, with a quick tour of his life and times. Today we'll examine the Introduction (1-25) to his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, wherein he outlines his project for establishing *immaterialism* as correctly characterizing the real world.

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— Berkeley's Project —

(1) Let's begin with an overview of the argumentative structure Berkeley constructs in defense of his immaterialism and its consequences, bearing in mind his expository method, which he mentions in Principle 51: "We should think with the learned and speak with the vulgar." His strategy is thus to (i) appear to agree with one's target; (ii) use the target's erroneous language; and (iii) correct the erroneous language by degrees, so that the correct belief can "steal unaware on the reader, gliding insensibly into his mind." Caveat Lector.

(2) There are basically five stages to the main project (with the Introduction devoted to the first stage, and the remainder appearing in the Principles proper).

- (i) Nominalism → [Undermines Rationalism]
 ↓ implies:
- (ii) Empiricism → [Undermines Materialism]
 ↓ implies:
- (iii) Immaterialism → [Undermines Substance Semantics]
 ↓ implies:
- (iv) Phenomenalism → [Undermines the Egocentric Predicament]
 ↓ implies:
- (v) Realism → [Ideas are the only real things]

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(3) Next, let's consider the overall critical and speculative strategies of the entire work, recalling that Berkeley's expository method is to begin with a review of his target, next, in small steps to correct various bits of "erroneous language," and finally to terminate with what he takes to be the correct view. We can follow this method as follows.

The Traditional Doctrine

Berkeley's Rival Theory

Introduction 1-25

1. The *Unum Nomen Unum Nominatum* Doctrine

-- The only use of language is descriptive.

2. The Doctrine of Abstract Ideas

-- General terms are proper names of abstract entities in which particulars participate.

1. The *Definiendum-Definiens* Theory

-- There are many uses, including exciting or quieting passions and provoking or inhibiting actions.

2. The Theory of Concrete Ideas

-- General terms have definitions which particulars satisfy.

Principles 1-33

3. Materialism

- Physical objects are substances with primary qualities.
- Physical objects exist independently of being perceived.
- Physical objects are the original causes of our ideas.
- Explanation of phenomena in terms of physical causes.

3. Immaterialism (Subjective Idealism)

- Physical objects are combinations of sensible qualities.
- The *esse* of physical objects is *percipi*.
- The original causes of our ideas are ideas.
- Explanation of phenomena in terms of laws of nature.

Principles 34-84

4. Sixteen Objections to Immaterialism anticipated and answered.

Principles 85-156

5. Metaphysical and Epistemological Consequences

- "Skepticism."
- "Atheism."
- "Irreligion."

5. Metaphysical and Epistemological Consequences

- "The reality and perfection of human knowledge."
- "The incorporeal nature of the human soul."
- "The immediate providence of a deity."

6. Pragmatic Consequences

-- "Error and difficulty in the sciences."

6. Pragmatic Consequences

-- "A method for rendering the sciences more easy, useful, and compendious": Physics (97-117); Mathematics (119-134); Psychology/Morality (135-145); Theology (146-156).

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— The Introduction —

(1) Berkeley traces the root of rationalist thought to be the doctrine of *abstract ideas*. That is, the doctrine that we can form ideas of extension, motion, shape, color, etc. by a rational operation of the mind (*sola mente percipere*, as Descartes put it in the *Meditations*).

(2) Reality thus becomes understood as the set of objects which result from this rational operation (the real is the rational; wax is extended, mutable stuff). On Berkeley's view, Newton's absolute space and Leibniz's monads are on a par: both are said to be fundamental realities; both are results of rational operations—that is, abstracting from the immediacy of perception.

(3) In the Introduction to the *Principles*, Berkeley attacks this root of rationalism: abstraction. He contends that as a matter of fact, *we don't have any abstract ideas at all* (the real is rather that which is perceived). He contends that we can form no idea whatsoever of “just extension,” or “just color,” or “just motion,” etc. by abstracting from the particulars in which these properties or qualities inhere. We can only form ideas of particular extended, colored, moving things, etc. It's easy enough to get his point: close your eyes, and you should be able to bring to mind the image of a red door; you can even paint it black; but if you try to bring to mind just plain color (no door, nor any particular color like red or black), you can't.

(4) So, his argument amounts to rejecting rationalism by favoring a nominalist theory of reference. He's not simply asserting that the test of truth is experience (this, you'll recall, was Locke's view); he's saying that the only *things* to which you can ever successfully refer are *sensible particulars*. Insofar as Locke took there to be things in the world (they're what have primary qualities), he was, according to Berkeley, suffering from a sort rationalist hangover from drinking too much Descartes.

(5) Despite their differences over the orders of discovery vs. the order of justification, Descartes and Locke both accepted that we learn about the nature of things in the world from experience. What's wrong with rationalism, then, isn't a rejection of experience, but attempting to build a system of knowledge and understanding on ideas we don't in fact have. Our “abstract ideas,” on Berkeley's view, are actually *generalizations*: signs which stand for various collections of particular sensations. We should call them *general ideas*, he says.

(6) We have, however, no general ideas of absolute space, bare extension, just motion, etc. We are tricked into supposing we do have such ideas by grammar. To underscore this point, Berkeley notes that names (grammatical subjects) have other *functions* than to refer to (stand for) ideas. Many abstract terms are used to excite or quiet our passions, or to provoke or inhibit action. Suppose I conclude this lecture with the admonition that if you send me your next abstract by the due date, I will surely give you a “good thing.” Now, you might begin to imagine all manner of things coming your way, but on Berkeley's view, your imagination would in this case be misled by grammar, because the expression “good thing,” in this context refers to nothing in particular—not because it refers to an abstract goodness (like Plato's τὸ ἀγαθόν), but because *it doesn't refer at all*. Note well that 224 years after the publication of Berkeley's *Principles*, Wittgenstein will present exactly the same striking assertion in his *Philosophical Investigations*.

(7) So, nominalism undermines rationalism, supplanting it with empiricism. But, as we shall see next time, empiricism, despite Locke's efforts to the contrary, undermines materialism, and replaces it with *immaterialism* (which Kant will later call, "subjective idealism"). The doctrine of empiricism can thus be summed up in Berkeley's concise phrase, *esse est percipi*—to be is to be perceived, to which he later adds, *aut percipere*: to be is to be perceived *or to be perceivable*. It is from the first clause in this formula (*esse est percipi*) that the familiar implication follows: if a tree falls in the woods while we remain in quarantine, it will make no sound. Taking Berkeley at his word, we should further say that there is no tree. Note, then, how the important second clause (*aut percipere*) enables Berkeley to avoid outright absurdity.

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On Wednesday, we'll take up the more salient sections of the *Principles* proper. Be well everyone, and, remember: social distancing, while it may inhibit our perceiving one another directly, does save lives, thereby keeping us firmly in the realm of the perceivable.