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978-1-107-00178-7 - Berkeley's a Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge: An Introduction

P. J. E. Kail

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

I BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

George Berkeley was born in Kilkenny, Ireland, on 12 March 1685. He went up to Trinity College Dublin in 1700, and studied mathematics, classics, logic and philosophy, graduating in 1704. Between graduating and attaining a Fellowship in 1707, he wrote on mathematics and began developing the doctrine for which he is most famous, namely, his doctrine of immaterialism. In 1709, he published *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*. This work develops a novel account of visual perception, which, though independent from Berkeley's immaterialism, nevertheless informs it. The work that is the focus of this book, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, was published in 1710, and a second edition, which differs in a number of ways, was published in 1734. The year 1712 saw the publication of *Passive Obedience*, a work that advocated the Christian doctrine that we must assent to the absolute supremacy of the Crown. In 1713, Berkeley visited London for the first time. He fell in with Swift, Addison, Pope and Gay (among others), and published *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (second edition, 1734) before his first brief tour of Continental Europe. A second continental trip in 1713, when he acted as tutor for St George Ashe, supposedly involved an attempt to meet the elderly Nicolas Malebranche in Paris before a longer stay in Italy. It is not known whether the two actually met. On his return from Europe he published an important essay on the philosophy of science, *De Motu (On Motion)* in 1721.

After a brief sojourn in London, Berkeley returned to Dublin and took the degrees of Bachelor of Divinity and Doctor of Divinity. He

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was appointed Dean of Derry in 1724. Before this he was formulating a scheme to found a missionary and arts college in Bermuda. He crossed the Atlantic with his new bride Anne (née Forster), landing in Virginia, and travelled from there to Rhode Island, where he built a house, Whitehall, which still stands. The name took on an ironic edge, since the money approved by Parliament for the college was subsequently withheld, and Berkeley was forced to leave America and go to London. His time, however, was not completely wasted, for during it he wrote *Alciphron; or the Minute Philosopher*. The work was a critique of non-Christian philosophers, or 'freethinkers', like Mandeville and Shaftesbury, and it also illuminates a number of aspects of Berkeley's thought, especially his views on language.

He was appointed bishop of Cloyne in 1734. In his later years, he became very interested in the health benefits of tar water, a mixture of pine tar and water in which the water was removed once the mixture had settled. His most widely read work, *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries concerning the Virtues of Tar-water, and divers other subjects* (1744), owed its success to his views on public health. Its subjects are diverse: as well as the virtues of tar water – which Berkeley also advocated in a number of magazine articles – the work discusses, among other things, Platonism, immaterialism and the Trinity, and is a philosophically fascinating text. Berkeley spent the last year of his life in Holywell Street, Oxford, while his son George was attending the university. He died on 14 January 1753, and, in a final ironic twist, he is buried under the very solid material substance of the chapel of John Locke's former college, Christ Church.

2 PRELIMINARIES AND OUTLINE

A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, Part 1 (PHK) is a compact and brilliant piece, beautifully written, lucid, and without a single redundant sentence. It comprises 156 numbered sections, an introduction of 25 sections, a dedication, and a preface (which was omitted from the second edition). In this section I shall sketch the main threads of the work. The section also serves as an outline of the present book since it follows, though with some important deviations noted below, the order of the PHK. Before sketching this outline some further remarks are necessary.

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The full title of the PHK is *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, Part 1*. But why 'Part 1'? Or, more pointedly, where is Part II? One of Berkeley's correspondents, Samuel Johnson, wrote to him that he 'shall live with some impatience till I see the second part of your design accomplished'.¹ Berkeley replied that some fourteen years earlier he had lost the manuscript for Part II, upon which he had 'made a considerable progress', but 'never had the leisure since to do so disagreeable a thing as writing twice on the same subject'.² It is tempting to speculate that Berkeley did not really finish Part II and not for the reasons he mentions, not least because he certainly *did* have the leisure and he *does* write upon the same subject twice (the *Three Dialogues* covers much of the same ground as the PHK). Part II was most likely to be his account of spirits, including God, and of human action,³ but, as we shall see in Chapter 8, there are some deep problems in Berkeley's account of spirits. Perhaps Berkeley found no satisfactory solution to those problems and simply abandoned Part II.⁴ Whatever truth there may be in this speculation, the fact remains that there is no Part II.⁵ However, as already indicated, Berkeley wrote more than just the PHK, and some of these other writings, if used carefully, are valuable sources of illumination. Most importantly, we have the aforementioned *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (DHP).⁶ The reception of the PHK was not as Berkeley had hoped, and so, writing on the same subject twice, he presented his immaterialist philosophy in a way he hoped was more digestible. It would, however, be a grave mistake to think that this work is nothing but a more popular repackaging of the PHK. It not only amplifies and clarifies the doctrines of the PHK, but also differs in some of its key claims, reflecting the fact that Berkeley was

¹ Johnson to Berkeley, 10 September 1729, in A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (eds), *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1949), vol. 2, p. 277.

² Berkeley to Johnson, 25 November 1729, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 282.

³ 'The 2 great Principles of Morality. The Being of a God & the Freedom of Man: these to be handled in the beginning of the Second Book', *Philosophical Commentaries* (PC), 508.

⁴ For something like this suggestion, see Charles McCracken, 'Berkeley's Notion of Spirit', in M. Atherton (ed.), *The Empiricists: Critical Essays on Locke, Berkeley and Hume* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), pp. 145–52.

⁵ In entry 585 Berkeley mentions a '3d book'.

⁶ The character's names are revealing – they are derived from ancient Greek and Hylas is roughly translatable as 'matter'; Philonous, 'lover of spirit' or 'lover of mind'.

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continuing to think about his philosophy. Indeed, Berkeley continued to think about the contents of both works, making some alterations when both went into second editions; we shall note some of these alterations during the course of this book. I shall make use of the *Dialogues* in many places, and quite extensively in Chapters 6 and 8.

As well as the *Dialogues*, we have what have become known as his *Philosophical Commentaries* (PC), two notebooks that record Berkeley's thoughts when he was working on *An Essay towards New Theory of Vision* and the PHK.⁷ These must be used with care. The obvious reason to be careful when using them is that while writings that are published bear the imprimatur of the author's approval,⁸ notebooks, never intended for publication, do not. Notebooks can contain many things, including records of thoughts subsequently abandoned – either because the author could not refine certain thoughts enough to let them see the light of day or because he or she came to believe the opposite. As we shall briefly see in Chapter 8, Berkeley changes his mind in the course of the notebooks themselves. So, when I use the notebooks I shall generally give priority to the published works and use material from them only when they illuminate the published claims. The same applies to the long draft introduction to the *Principles* that we have and to which I shall refer in Chapter 3. I shall also make some small use of *Alciphron* and *De Motu*, as well as both *An Essay toward a New Theory of Vision* and *The Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained*.

Having spoken briefly about some of Berkeley's other works, it should be emphasised that this book is about Berkeley's *Principles* and *not* about his philosophy as a whole. I do not discuss many other aspects of Berkeley's thought, including his moral philosophy, his philosophy of money or his later Platonism in *Siris*. And although I shall briefly discuss aspects of his philosophy of science and his philosophy of mathematics in Chapter 7, these discussions are not intended to count as complete accounts of either topic. His views on both developed significantly from the early claims of the *Principles*,

⁷ For a discussion of the notebooks, see Robert McKim, 'Berkeley's Notebooks', in K. Winkler (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 63–93.

⁸ Of course, an author can always come to regret and even disown something published under her or his own name.

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and I have given the reader some references should they wish to follow the development of his thought. I shall also inform the reader when a particular claim is controversial, exegetically speaking. The interpretation of any philosophical text is a difficult matter and students are often surprised to learn just how divided scholars are, even on issues that might seem fairly fundamental. No doubt Berkeley scholars will find some of the claims in this book controversial, though it should be added that none of the controversial claims is peculiar to me. Needless to say, scholars will find these claims defended with insufficient scholarly rigour. The intention, however, is to convey to the reader some of the complexity involved in understanding Berkeley, rather than resolve these claims within the confines of an introductory book.

A final point before we turn to give an overview of the work. Student readers sometimes come to Berkeley with one or both of the following prejudices. Berkeley was a bishop and God plays a substantial role in his philosophy. If one is unsympathetic to such things one might write the system off as mere Christian apologetics. There is no doubt that Berkeley's philosophy is congenial to religion, and he writes that the *Principles* would be 'ineffectual, if by what I have said I cannot inspire my readers with a pious sense of the presence of God' (PHK §156). But Berkeley provides arguments for his position and the reader should engage with those arguments on their own terms.

The second prejudice, or perhaps preconception, concerns the central idea of Berkeley's philosophy. After five sections of the main text of the PHK Berkeley writes:

all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind . . . [and] consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by me . . . they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some eternal spirit. (PHK §6)

Physical things exist only when perceived either by some human person or by God.⁹ This is the central thesis of his *immaterialism*.

⁹ This disjunctive formulation (either things exist when perceived by some human or by God) is intended to reflect some deep complications in Berkeley's thought. For more on this, see Chapter 6.

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The thesis is also commonly known as 'idealism', since physical objects are composed of 'ideas'. The lexicographer Samuel Johnson is famously reported to have kicked a large stone and at the same time declaimed 'I refute it thus!', and this reaction instances the second prejudice I have in mind, namely, that Berkeley's philosophy is just too bizarre to be taken seriously at all. However, it takes a good deal of care and thought to understand what is meant by claims such as the 'being' of tables and chairs 'is to be perceived or known' (PHK §6), and so any initial reaction is most likely to be extremely superficial. The reader should put any such superficial reaction to one side. Berkeley himself is clearly aware of the danger of a superficial reaction to his philosophy. He does not mention the central immaterialist claim of the mind-dependency of the world in the work's title, Introduction or its subtitle. The omission of any reference to immaterialism is deliberate. Berkeley tells a friend in a letter that he intends that 'the notion might steal unawares on the reader, who possibly would never have meddled with a book that he had known contained such paradoxes'.¹⁰ The preface to the first edition of the PHK implores the reader to 'suspend his judgement' until 'he has once, *at least*, read the whole through with that degree of attention and thought which the subject matter shall seem to deserve'. He is well aware that there are passages that, when taken in isolation, are 'very liable to gross misinterpretation, and to be charged with most absurd consequences'. Without careful consideration, the 'reader will be among those who are too apt to condemn an opinion before they right comprehend it'. Berkeley's advice to his readers is sound, and, indeed, applies to any philosophical position. It is always a mistake simply to react merely to the *conclusion* of any philosophical position, independently of the arguments advanced in favour of it. For although Berkeley tells us that the 'being' of an object like a chair is to be 'perceived or known', quite what that *means* is not something that can be properly understood without first understanding the arguments that support it. Indeed, Berkeley's *Dialogues* enacts this very point. Berkeley has Hylas remark early on that he had heard that Philonous, Berkeley's spokesman, is someone 'who maintained the most extravagant opinion that ever entered into the mind of man'

¹⁰ Berkeley to Percival, 6 September 1710, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 36.

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(DHP₁ 172).¹¹ This, Hylas has heard, 'in last night's conversation'. The remainder of the work sees Philonous engage Hylas in such a way that he comes to understand the central claim of immaterialism through an appreciation of the reasons behind it, rather than having it presented as a bald statement made for an evening's entertainment. So while at the beginning of the conversation Hylas' partial grasp of immaterialism led him to condemn it as a 'manifest piece of scepticism' (DHP₁ 172), he later recognises that although Philonous 'set out upon the same principles [of the sceptical] Academics,¹² Cartesians, and the like sects', his 'conclusions are directly opposite to theirs' (DHP₃ 262).

Fully grasping what the claim that the physical world depends on being perceived by spirits for its existence means, what its ramifications are, and how it fits into Berkeley's wider system, requires, then, careful study and thought. But we can begin to approach the meaning of immaterialism by simultaneously sketching the outline of the *Principles* and the present volume. According to its subtitle, the PHK examines 'the Chief Causes of Error and Difficulty in the *Sciences*, with the grounds of Scepticism, Atheism, and Irreligion, are inquired into'. This claim is not mere subterfuge, a thin cover for Berkeley's immaterialism. Berkeley is genuinely concerned with these issues and thinks that a key source of error, difficulty, scepticism, atheism and irreligion is the philosophical doctrine of *material substance*. Put crudely, materialism is the general thesis that the non-mental world is composed of extended unthinking material substance or substances whose existence does not depend on our perceiving it.¹³ This thesis can be understood in different ways, and has different ramifications according to the varying stances of the particular philosophies that articulate it. Indeed, there was some profound disagreement about material substance, its powers and nature, and how and whether we can know its nature. Despite these differences, Berkeley saw the doctrine of material substance as the source of serious confusion,

¹¹ Page references are to Luce and Jessop, *Works*, but most modern editions have these page numbers in the margin for standard reference.

¹² 'Academics' here refers to a certain ancient school of scepticism.

¹³ The word 'materialism' is often associated with the claim that the mind is material, but this is not what is meant in this context. Rather, a 'materialist' here simply means anyone who believes in the existence of material substance.

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scepticism, danger to irreligion and an impediment to science. To understand Berkeley's immaterialism, then, we need to situate him in this context and that is the aim of Chapter 2, which provides a sketch of the key claims of two thinkers who both articulate versions of materialism and with whom Berkeley was deeply engaged, namely, Locke (1632–1704) and Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715). I give a sketch of various themes that emerge from their respective philosophies and how, in outline, Berkeley's philosophy is a reaction to them.

Immaterialism involves at least a rejection of *materialism*. Given this, one might think that Berkeley would open the *Principles* with an assault on materialism. But he does not. The *Principles* actually opens with a relatively lengthy introduction, and this is the subject of Chapter 3. The Introduction is puzzling in a number of different ways. First, in its twenty-five carefully worked and numbered sections there is not a single hint of immaterialism. It is oddly an introduction that makes no mention of the key claim of the work it introduces. Its contents include the nature and sources of scepticism, a criticism of the doctrine of 'abstract ideas' and a discussion of the different functions of language. The discussion of abstract ideas is targeted against Locke's account of how human beings acquire the capacity to think in general terms (for example, think of human beings in general) given that we perceive only particulars (this human or that one). This discussion is interesting but has a puzzling aspect. At PHK §4, Berkeley states that the opinion that physical things exist independently of the mind 'at bottom' depends on the doctrine of abstract ideas. But how could this be so? How could the view that objects exist independently of the mind depend on a philosophical theory of general thought? What is the dependence supposed to be? This question cannot be answered properly until Chapter 5, when we consider Berkeley's attacks on materialism.

We noted that Berkeley's *Principles* does not begin with an assault on materialism. One might find that puzzling if one thought that his case for immaterialism simply consists in a rejection of materialism. But this is a mistake. Berkeley has a positive argument *for* the claim that the world is mind-dependent, one that does not trade on showing that there is something faulty with materialism. His case for the central thesis of immaterialism in the PHK is exceedingly swift,

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comprising only six or so sections of the main text. This argument is the topic of Chapter 4. At a first approximation, the argument is as follows. Tables, chairs and all other physical objects are sensible objects. A sensible object is any object that is immediately perceived by sense. But what we perceive immediately by sense are mind-dependent *ideas*. So physical objects are mind-dependent. Crucial to understanding all this are the notions of *sensible object*, *immediate perception*, *idea* and *mind-dependence*. Chapter 4 discusses these key notions and identifies two interpretations of mind-dependence. One interpretation has Berkeley reducing the world to a collection of sensations akin to pain, private to each individual mind. The other interpretation views objects as exhausted by forms of *appearance*, and mind-dependent in the sense they exist only when there is some mind to which they appear. But they are not 'private' objects existing in particular minds. It is this that Berkeley means by his famous claim that the 'being' of a sensible object is 'to be perceived'. Any sensible object cannot be conceived as existing except in terms of its appearing to some mind, and it is this that makes for the mind-dependence of the physical world. These two interpretations are rather different, require some teasing out, and they condition how we understand the rest of the *Principles*. It is the second of these interpretations which is favoured in this work.

As I said above, Berkeley's case for immaterialism is not simply a matter of rejecting materialism, but it is certainly true that he wheels out a battery of arguments against various versions of it. These arguments are the subject of Chapter 5. Once materialism is despatched, we seem to be left only with ideas and minds, a position that seems far from our ordinary sense of the world and our place within it. The *Principles* now takes a constructive turn, rebuilding the world from these minimal materials. This rebuilding is the topic of Chapter 6. Central to Berkeley's reconstruction is God, who sustains the world in which we live. In the *Principles* the argument for the existence of God and Berkeley's God-based account of reality takes up only a small number of passages (PHK §§25–33), but there are many complexities lying behind this brisk progression. In order to illuminate Berkeley's account of reality, therefore, I shall bring in some quite substantial material from the *Three Dialogues*. This material helps with a number of issues. One such issue is that of understanding the

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character of Berkeley's argument for the existence of God. A second is whether Berkeley holds that sensible objects *continue* to exist when unperceived by any particular human being. This issue emerges from one of many objections Berkeley considers to his system in §§34–84 of the *Principles*. How can an object continue to exist when I do not perceive it if its existence is perception-dependent? In the *Principles*, Berkeley allows that it is possible that sensible objects continue to exist unperceived by me and you, whereas in the *Dialogues* not only does he grant it possible, but he commits himself to the claim that they *do* so exist. Understanding Berkeley's thought here reveals a great deal about how we are to understand some central notions in his philosophy, including mind-dependence, the nature of reality and the role of God.

In Chapter 7 we consider some more of the objections to his system that Berkeley mentions, this time those concerning the compatibility, or otherwise, of immaterialism with the practice of science. When rebuilding the world from minds and ideas, Berkeley exploits the claim that all ideas are completely inert and are brought into existence or changed by spirits. Real things are ideas caused by the spirit that is God, imaginary things are ideas caused by finite spirits, namely, us. This implies that the things composing reality are entirely passive. This offends both common sense and science. It offends common sense because we think that things in the world are related by cause and effect. We think fire burns and diamonds scratch glass. It offends science, since science appears to be in the business of explaining natural events by locating fundamental relations of cause and effect. Berkeley's answer to these objections ultimately rests on a very distinctive claim. The relations between worldly things we take to be relations of cause and effect are relations of *sign* and *signified*. The world we mistakenly take to be causally structured is semantically structured. It is a language through which God communicates to us, and which science and, ultimately, philosophy seek to interpret. Understanding the world is not explanation but interpretation. Berkeley not only takes his philosophy to meet the objections, but also to be positively advantageous to science, a claim he expounds at PHK §§101–17. He thinks, furthermore, that his philosophy is equally advantageous to arithmetic and geometry (PHK §§118–34). Chapter 7, therefore, also charts the main contours of these sections.