

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

Berkeley.

BY THE REV. E. G. PACE, M.A., B.D.,
Fellow of the University of Durham and Lecturer in Theology.

I.

“WHAT shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” The question was asked by our Lord from the religious and moral point of view, but it may be asked again to-day with a different, but not less pertinent, meaning from the point of view of philosophy. Each year sees rapid advance in our knowledge of the universe and the marvellous system of its workings. The telescope extends its bounds till our very imagination fails us, and we shrink in fear from the prospect of whirling suns in unfathomable space; the microscope brings into our vision organisms inconceivably small; and the several sciences teach us that all this world of matter changes and develops according to laws which are fixed and irrevocable. Man, too, is part of this material world; he has his place, and it is no large one, in this system; he lives and dies, and in his life and death are seen those same processes which are at work around him. The material world looms very large before our eyes, if we have followed, however far off, the march of science. And even if we have not been touched by the influence of scientific thought, still the town-dweller of to-day, in constant contact with the mechanical wonders of this inventive age, surrounded by telegraphs, telephones, motors, and the like, by machines which seem to do everything that man can do, and do it better, may easily come to feel himself but an insignificant being in contrast with the things about him. In the country we may be awestruck in the presence of mighty forces, but in the town and amid the whirring wheels of factories we seem to lose ourself and become a mere fraction of a mechanical world. All without us has become more complex, more imposing, and our comforts and

pleasures have increased beyond the dreams of our forefathers. We have in truth gained a new world, and it is to be feared that many of us are in danger of losing our own soul. It is so fatally easy to become engrossed in the material world, whether through the eager pursuit of scientific knowledge, or through the enjoyment of the luxuries that civilization affords, or, it may be, through daily occupation in commercial and industrial enterprise ; and then that inner world of our own soul loses interest in our eyes. Our vision is always straining outwards, and we forget what lies within. Now, it is part of the task of philosophy to question in its own way, as religion does in its way, this attitude towards the material world, and to ask whether what is of supreme importance for mankind is to be found in the world without or in the soul—to ask whether in fact the soul is a mere by-product of physical forces, or that for which, and by means of which, the experience of a material universe exists. The answer of philosophy is becoming ever clearer. Not matter, nor force, nor physical law, but mind is the supreme reality. Such is the answer, not only of the majority of English philosophers, but also of such masters of thought as Bergson in France and Eucken in Germany, yet perhaps the general reader who would know how philosophy estimates the value of man's soul in the universe would do well to turn first to our great English philosopher, Bishop Berkeley. True, he flourished two centuries ago, but he grasped the essence of the problem, he gave a direction to all subsequent thought, and he is readable. We need not fear that in opening his works we shall be met with the technical language of the schools, or be carried away from this world of our daily life and labour into some abstract and distant region. We shall find that to be profound it is not necessary to be obscure, and that subtle thought may be expressed in ordinary language, and beautiful language, too. Berkeley's main position, if not unassailed nor unassailable, remains uncaptured by the assaults of the materialists, and still forms part of the line of defence which in these days protects the soul from subjection. Those who seek an introduction to

philosophy can find none more delightful than the works of Berkeley. A shilling will buy his "Theory of Vision," the "Principles of Human Knowledge," and the "Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous," all of which are contained in one volume of the Everyman Library.

II.

Like some other great Englishmen, George Berkeley was an Irishman, born in 1685 in the county of Kilkenny. At fifteen he went to Trinity College, Dublin, where he graduated in 1704. Three years afterwards he was admitted to a fellowship, and later took Orders in the Irish Church. There still remains an invaluable record of the working of his mind from his twentieth to his twenty-fifth year in his Commonplace Book. From it we learn that the germ of the great thought which his later treatises expound—that reality is to be sought in mind and not in dead matter—had already taken root in him. His life in Dublin, as tutor, Greek lecturer, and Junior Dean of his college was a busy one, but he found time for philosophical pursuits, and in 1709 appeared the first of the volumes which have made him famous, "The Essay towards a New Theory of Vision." "The Principles of Human Knowledge," appeared in the following year, and the "Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous" in 1713. Here ends the first period of Berkeley's literary activity.

The winter of 1713-14 was spent by Berkeley in France and Italy as chaplain to Lord Peterborough. Then for two years he was in London, where his eloquence and gracious manners won him many friends, though few became converts to his philosophy. From 1716 to 1720 he was again abroad, and did not return to London till the end of the latter year. It was then that the world first heard of the great project which filled Berkeley's heart and mind for the next ten years or more. He had conceived the idea of founding a university in the Bermudas, "with the object of reforming the manners of the English in the American plantations, and of endowing the American savages with the light of religion and learning." He was made Dean of

Derry in 1724, and devoted the influence of his new position, as well as his private fortune, to the furtherance of his scheme. At last his energy and patience were rewarded, and in 1728, soon after his marriage, he set sail for the West. He landed at Newport in Rhode Island towards the end of January, 1729, but nearer than this he never came to the islands of his dream. For nearly three years he waited, expecting the money the English Government had promised, but he waited in vain. In the autumn of 1731 he returned to England, disappointed. Yet it was a noble project of an unworldly spirit, and, as Professor Campbell Frazer finely says: "The country in which and for which he lived now acknowledges that in his visit it was touched by the halo of an illustrious reputation." During this period of leisure in America, Berkeley composed one of his most popular and delightful works, "Alciphron." It is written in dialogue form, and makes a brilliant assault on the Freethinkers of the coffee-houses and the clubs.

For two years Berkeley remained in London, and then returned to Ireland as Bishop of Cloyne. Here, twenty miles from Cork, he spent the next eighteen years of his life in almost unbroken retirement, continuing his studies with unremitting attention. Some years after his settlement at Cloyne the district was ravaged by famine and fever. This proved a fresh stimulus to Berkeley's warm-hearted philanthropy, and was the occasion which called forth one of the most profound and interesting of his treatises. He had learned from the American Indians of the medicinal properties of tar-water, and in this drug he believed he had found a panacea. With a missionary fervour worthy of the earlier days of his Bermuda project, he flung himself into the proclamation of the virtues of his new medicine. In 1744, in the midst of this tar-water enthusiasm, appeared "Siris." From a consideration of the universal properties of his remedy, Berkeley is drawn on to a chain of philosophical meditation upon the Power at work in the material world and the unity of the Universe in God. "Siris" became the most popular of Berkeley's works, not

because of its metaphysical theories, but because of its announcement of a profitable physical fact. Not the real power of the spirit, human and Divine, but the unreal powers of matter took hold of the imagination of men!

Berkeley, now broken in health, left Ireland in August, 1752, and settled in Oxford. The change at first seemed to revive him, but on January 14, 1753, he passed away.

III.

In seeking to understand the principles of Berkeley's philosophy, we must remember that most of his writings have a controversial aim. His was the age of the Deists—men who, in the eighteenth century, anticipated many of the movements of modern thought. They demanded a religion without miracle or mystery, a morality which ultimately was reducible to the pursuit of pleasure, and a philosophy which took as its base solid matter and did not concern itself greatly about intangible and invisible souls or spirits. Without being Atheists (as Berkeley at times somewhat unfairly called them) they were anxious, as far as possible, to do without God in the world. Berkeley held that the source of their doctrines, as also of most of the unprofitable disputes of philosophy, lay in the attribution of power to inert matter. His own philosophy, cutting at the root of the error, is an exposition of a startling and far-reaching thought which had entered his mind (whence we know not) as early as his twentieth year. This is it in his own eloquent words: "Some truths there are so near and obvious to the mind, that a man need only open his eyes to see them. Such I take this important one to be, to wit, that all the choir of heaven and furniture of earth, in a word, all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind, that their being is to be perceived or known; that consequently, as long as they are not actually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind, or in that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some eternal spirit: it being

perfectly unintelligible, and involving all the absurdity of abstraction, to attribute to any single part of them an existence independent of a spirit. To be convinced of which, the reader need only reflect and try to separate in his thoughts the being of a sensible thing from its being perceived."

To reach Berkeley's point of view we must try to imagine a universe from which all intelligence, human or Divine, is excluded. Can we conceive of such a universe? Must not a dead material world (if it existed) be destitute of all qualities? What meaning can we give to an unheard sound, or an unseen colour, or an untouched hardness? Does sound exist in the vibrating string or in the hearer? Is the colour of the rose in its petals or in him who looks upon it? Can there be any flower "born to blush unseen," not only by our eyes but by any eye whatsoever? "Must not" (in Berkeley's language) "the *percipi* be the *esse* of the things of sense?"

Suppose, for example, you perceive, as you say, an apple. What is it you really perceive? You *see* a round shape, and a colour—red, or yellow, or green; you *smell* a certain odour; you *feel* a certain hardness, and smoothness or roughness, according to the kind of fruit; you *hear* a certain sound, if you tap it; and *taste* a peculiar flavour, if you eat it. Here, then, you have a group of experiences. What is there in the apple besides these experiences of yours? What more is the apple than this bundle of qualities presented to our senses, this collection of "ideas of sense"—an "idea" for Berkeley being anything presented to the mind? "There is something more," said Berkeley's opponents, and we at first might agree with them. "There is the matter to which these qualities belong, the stuff of which the apple is made." "Very well," Berkeley would say, "what can you tell me of this matter? Can you say anything of it save that it exists? You cannot attribute any qualities to it, for qualities must be perceived, and all perceptions are in some mind and not in any unthinking substance. Your matter is invisible, intangible, unperceived and unperceivable. It explains nothing and does nothing.

You can say nothing intelligible about it. It is a word without a meaning. Continue, if you will, to talk about matter, so long as you are content to mean by *matter* what the plain man means by *nothing*."

IV.

Berkeley's contention, therefore, is that in the universe there exist only minds and their contents or perceptions; that there are no material things, but only ideas presented to the mind. Then, do objects come and go as I perceive them, or not? Do these pages, reader, cease to be, when you, perchance, fall asleep over this article? Is a universe created afresh when each individual soul comes into being, and does the universe grow as that soul grows in experience? This is unthinkable. What I do not perceive at this moment may be perceived by others, and exist in their minds. Still, there are many things which we firmly believe to exist, which no human being, nor even any lower animal, perceives. Where are such things, how do they exist?

Berkeley's answer is: "The things—*i.e.*, the ideas which we perceive—are not created by us, still less do they exist in unthinking matter (which, after all, is mere nothing). They exist in the omnipresent and omniscient mind—*i.e.*, in God, in Whom we live and move and have our being. It is He Who presents to our mind the series of ideas which makes our world."

Thus God is not reached at the end of a long chain of reasoning. God is involved in the very existence of a world without us, and all we touch or hear or see is but the language in which God Himself continually, unceasingly speaks to us. Berkeley finds two realities—the soul and God. The material world is but a system of signs revealing God. This doctrine is vastly different from that sometimes put forward in the name of science, according to which the world is a product of matter and motion, consciousness a "function" of the grey matter of the brain, and God is the unknown and unknowable. Against such a doctrine Berkeley's arguments are conclusive still, for

the primary fact from which all philosophy must start is the fact of our own consciousness; nothing else can be known save as it enters into consciousness, and matter is the unknown and unknowable.

V.

Berkeley thus got rid of matter by showing it to be a mere abstraction to which no conceivable meaning could correspond. But David Hume a few years later carried this reasoning a stage further by urging that the same arguments by which Berkeley had banished matter were equally potent to banish soul or spirit from all intelligible discourse. Hume said: "I can never find this idea of myself; I only observe myself wishing, or acting, or feeling something." He found himself to be but a series of conscious states with nothing to support those states, just as a thing was a bundle of qualities with no material substratum. But Berkeley had anticipated this criticism. He admitted that we have no *idea*—*i.e.*, no sense perception—of the soul, as we have of a colour or a sound, a table or a chair. We cannot directly perceive the soul, any more than the eye, which sees, can directly perceive itself. But the soul is no unmeaning substratum of ideas, such as we have seen matter to be. "True, in the whole world of sense-presented appearances, I find nothing corresponding to the self that I am obliged to presuppose in all perceptions, but it is in a manner revealed in memory, when I recall the past, and recognize that I am a person who is still the same person as I was years before." Berkeley explains that though we have no *idea* of the self, we have a *notion*, which is intelligible and necessary as a basis of all thinking.

VI.

Thus philosophy secures for us by reasoned argument the two great realities which religion postulates—God and the human soul. But, in gaining the soul, has it lost the world? What becomes of science, it may be asked, with all its ordered system of laws of Nature, its forces, causes, and interactions?

If the universe in which we are living consists of bundles of sense-presented appearances, or ideas, all dependent on spirit or mind, what room is there for physics and chemistry, for botany and zoology, or even for mathematics? Do not all the sciences, upon which men have spent so much labour, achieving such imposing success, assume the independent existence of matter? Berkeley answers that those united qualities perceived by us, which we call substances or things, undergo transformations in an order which we commonly call the order of Nature. The steadiness of that order enables us, after sufficient experience, to foresee coming changes, so that present phenomena become signs of absent phenomena. As *substances* in the material world are only bundles of qualities, so *causes* in the material world are only *signs* of coming changes. My experience of apples enables me to foresee the taste of an apple before I eat it. Experience of the motions of the heavenly bodies enables the astronomer to predict their risings and settings and eclipses. Science loses nothing of its interest and validity, if we substitute for the abstract ideas of force, cause, and uniformity of Nature, the orderly, calculable presentation of facts to our perception by the omnipresent and omniscient Mind of God.

But how do we know that there must be a steady, calculable order pervading what often appears on the surface to be chaotic? Berkeley refers the universal belief in this order, this uniformity of Nature, to observation. "Having always observed that our perception of a certain round luminous figure which we call the sun is accompanied by a sensation which we call heat, we conclude that the sun and heat are constantly connected, so that the appearance of the one is a sign of the appearance of the other, and so the one is called the cause of the other."

We must recognize, however, that observation can acquaint us only with the present and the past. How can we be assured that the order observed in the past will be maintained in the future? How can science frame universal laws? Only by our having a reasonable faith that we are living in an orderly and trustworthy universe. Such a faith is as necessary to the

materialist as it is to Berkeley and his followers. The scientist has no other source than observation from which to obtain his natural laws. If they are to be for him anything more than a statement of what has happened in the past, he, too, must make the venture of faith ; but he, if a materialist, must put his trust in dead, unconscious matter, while Berkeley teaches us to trust, as our guarantee for an orderly universe, a living Person, to whom we can attribute moral qualities.

VII.

The plain man might view with equanimity the threatened overthrow of the edifice of science, but he is likely to be exasperated when first asked to accept for himself this doctrine of the non-existence of matter. It will be remembered how Dr. Johnson to his own satisfaction demolished Berkeley's theory. When asked his opinion of it, he vigorously kicked a post, saying the while, " Thus I refute it." But he did not, in fact, refute it, for Berkeley was far from denying the reality of Dr. Johnson's visual perception of the post, or of his tactual perception, or of the pain in the learned doctor's toe, if he kicked hard enough, but only the reality of a material substance inferred from these perceptions.

Paradoxical no doubt this great thought of Berkeley's must always seem to most of us, accustomed as we have been all our life to assume for our practical convenience the independent existence of the things around us, but what is useful in practice is not necessarily true upon reflection, and thoroughly to think oneself into Berkeley's position, if not to remain in it, is essential for all advance in philosophy, and may prove salutary to many who are not likely to become students of philosophy, but need to be reminded of the unique and infinite value of the soul, at a time when

" The world is too much with us ; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers ;
Little we see in Nature that is ours ;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon."