

ON BERKELEY'S EMPIRICISM AND ANTI-SCEPTICISM

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Abstract

In the first section of this paper, Berkeley's empiricism has been introduced by underlining his stance against scepticism and atheism. In this connection, Bayle's argument has been discussed to indicate that Berkeley hardly gave up the sceptical way of thinking at least with respect to the reality over and above the appearances. In his refutation of Locke's two qualities, he has accepted scepticism against primary qualities although it is quite clear that he recognizes the distinction as the source of scepticism. In section two a discussion on Berkeley's refutation of the distinction of primary and secondary qualities has been carried out. Here it has been highlighted that (one) Berkeley's idealism does not reduce objects to ideas, on the contrary it elevates ideas to objects (of knowledge), and (two) the significance of God in Berkeley's framework helps us to avoid the criticism that Berkeley's idealism promotes private and subjective knowledge. In the final section, an attempt is made to explain Berkeley's anti-materialism which has led him to advance spiritualism by accepting the existence of God, myself, and other spirits. It is concluded that Berkeley's 'esse est percipi' does contribute to his spiritualism and anti-scepticism.

Keywords: Scepticism, Knowledge, Primary qualities, Secondary qualities, Ideas, Objects, Spirits

I

According to Woolhouse, "Berkeley, the first great British philosopher after Locke, reacted against what he saw as the sceptical and atheistical consequences of Locke's philosophy."¹ Berkeley

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seems to be free from the influence of scepticism. As Grayling, an interpreter of Berkeley writes “Berkeley had two related aims, which were to defend ‘common sense’ by refuting scepticism and to defend religion by refuting atheism.”² The defense of common sense does not mean that one must refute scepticism. There is no inconsistency involved in being both a sceptic and a holder of the common sense view. Ryle once suggested to Bertrand Russell that Locke invented common sense. Russell’s immediate reaction was “By God, Ryle, I believe you are right. No one ever had common sense before John Locke and no one but Englishmen have even had it since.”³ Berkeley was simply working on Locke’s invention of common sense and in spite of this invention, Locke retained scepticism. Though Berkeley professes that he is anti-sceptic, he uses scepticism to develop his own philosophy. Berkeley was certainly influenced by the “revival of interest in epistemological scepticism generated by the *Meditations* and reported, with some relish, in Bayle’s *Dictionary*.”⁴ Bayle’s *Dictionary* depicts the arguments of the Pyrrhonian. According to Grayling, “Bayle sets out arguments for scepticism which are echoed, even in phraseology, by Berkeley.”⁵ Bayle has argued against the distinction between secondary and primary qualities. If secondary qualities were mind-dependent, so would be the primary qualities.

Some details of Bayle’s arguments have been brought out by Popkin in his article on “Berkeley and Pyrrhonism.”⁶ In the remark B in the article on Pyrrho Bayle writes “if the objects of our senses appear to us coloured, hot, cold, smelling, tho’ they are not so, why should they not appear extended and figured, at rest, and in motion, though they had no such thing.”⁷ Bayle is trying to show that all qualities of physical objects, whether primary or secondary, are mere appearances.

In his remark G on Zeno, Bayle argued against the non-mental existence of extension. Extension for Descartes was the essence of a material body. Once it is shown that extension is not unlike other secondary qualities it would be shown that there are no real material bodies having extension. According to Bayle, modern philosophers have recommended the suspension of judgement “with relation to sounds, odours, heat, and cold, hardness, and softness, ponderosity, and lightness, savours and colors, etc., that they teach that all these qualities are perceptions of our mind, and do not exist in the objects of our senses. Why should we not say the same thing of extension?”⁸ Bayle cited passages from Malebranche and Fardella in support of this thesis. Bayle even discusses Arnauld’s charge against Malebranche for holding “some extravagant propositions, which strictly taken, tend

to the establishment of a very dangerous Pyrrhonism.”⁹ These three sets of arguments were meant for showing that Bayle succeeded in making a rigid distinction between the world of appearances that is known to us and the world of real objects which is not known to us. Bayle's attempt was similar to the attempt made by Sextus Empiricus in his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Sextus attempted to show that we are acquainted only with appearances. We are completely ignorant of the nature of reality.

II

Berkeley not only understood scepticism but also tried to solve the sceptical difficulties. Whatever aspect of scepticism was desirable; Berkeley assimilated it into his philosophical thought. The remaining part of it he rejected. Abolition of the distinction between primary and secondary qualities by sceptics was accepted by Berkeley. But he rejected the view that the *ideas* of these qualities have no reality. Berkeley discovered the source of scepticism in the rigid distinction between appearances and the real objects, between what is perceived and what exists beyond perception. Popkin quotes the crucial remark of Berkeley concerning the source of scepticism. Berkeley remarks,

“All this scepticism follows, from our supposing a difference between *things* and *ideas*, and that the former have subsistence without the mind, or unperceived. It were easy to dilate on the subject; and show how the arguments urged by sceptics in all ages, depend on the supposition of external objects.”¹⁰

The distinction between *things* and *ideas* has been crucial to sceptics. From the time of Pyrrho to the time of Sextus, and again from the time of Montaigne to the time of Bayle, the sceptics were fond of talking about the distinction between things as they appear to us and the things as they really are. We are restricted to the realm of appearances, and this realm too is full of inconsistency and contradictions, for the reason that the realm of appearances is a mind-dependent realm.

Berkeley thought that once *things* are reduced to *ideas*, the unknown and unknowable reality is reduced to known and knowable reality, that is, the reality is reduced to appearances, and there will be no scope for scepticism to intervene. Therefore, in his writings Berkeley started reducing the existence of things to the existence of *ideas*. He came to accept the view that objects do not exist independently of, or apart from, the ideas. The reason is very

simple : they are numerically identical with *ideas*. As Grayling points out referring to Berkeley's reductionism, "In essentials, Berkeley's manoeuvre is to deny the appearance – reality gap by saying that appearance is reality; there is no divide between ideas and things because things are ideas, not independently existing items in some way lying inaccessibly behind or beyond experience."¹¹ This is an interesting maneuver by Berkeley; he is not reducing things to ideas but converting *ideas* into *things*. As Philonous says to Hylas "I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things; since those immediate objects of perception, which according to you, are only the appearances of things, I take to be real things themselves."¹² The real things are given more serious thought because they are supposed to be permanent and enduring whereas things that appear are only transitory and non-enduring. This image has to be wiped out; appearances have to be converted into real things. There should be no reality over and above appearances. This is Berkeley's move and not the opposite one.

In order to convert *things* into *ideas*, two steps have to be taken. In the first step, *things* are reduced to their sensible properties; in the second step, sensible properties are reduced to *ideas* in the mind of a person. A *thing* is characterized by something red, hot, and round, but these sensible properties are nothing but *ideas* in the mind of a person. But no such steps are taken if *ideas* are considered as *things*. *Ideas* are supposed to be subjective and *things* objective and public. One and the same *thing* can be perceived by different people but one and the same *idea* cannot occur in the minds of different people. So Berkeley's problem is how to convert an *idea*, which is subjective and restricted to a given mind, into something that is public and shared by different minds. Berkeley converts *ideas* into *things* by making God play a role. The *ideas* in the mind of men have not been generated by those men; they have been generated by God. God has put the same *idea* into the minds of different people. Berkeley has succeeded in removing subjective elements from human *ideas* and converting them into some kind of common *ideas*, shared and sharable by different people. One may not be very happy with the introduction of God for the conversion of *ideas* into *things*. Besides, no type of conversion or reduction, or translation is free from difficulties and objections. Consider the reduction of physical objects to sense-data by the modern phenomenologists like Russell and Ayer. They are supposed to be the academic descendants of Berkeley. The phenomenology of Russell and Ayer is considered as phenomenology of Berkeley without the involvement of God.

Sense-datum by definition is something that is private and subjective. No numerically same sense-datum can occur in the minds of two different people. Even the same sense-datum cannot occur in the mind of the same person at two different times. A sense-datum is a highly subjective and private entity. In contrast, an object is a public entity shared and sharable by different people. When Russell and Ayer reduce objects to sense data they are reducing a public object to a set of private objects. There is no objection if the same set of private objects occurs in the sense-field of different people. In such a situation perception of numerically the same object is possible. But this is self-contradictory and nonsense to say that the same set of the same bundle of sense-data occurs in the sense fields of different people. Sense-datum is as a convenient entity for an explanation as is Berkeley's God. They have been introduced for the convenience of explanation, and both of them become inconvenient on some occasions of explanation. A sense-datum explanation involves its own difficulties, in the same way in which explanation in terms of God involves its own difficulties. Berkeley is convinced of the fact that without God the ideas are likely to be subjective and private. Hence subjective idealism can't be proved if God's presence is allowed.

III

The major difficulty with Berkeley's reduction of *things* to *ideas* is that there is no guarantee that it would stop scepticism. He proposes this reduction for condemning and rejecting scepticism. He had a historical glance over scepticism and discovered that it is being consists of the distinction between *things* and *ideas*. So he thought that the removal of this distinction would take away the base of scepticism. However, Hume is known more than Berkeley for the reduction proposed by the latter. But Hume was a well-known sceptic. In spite of successfully demolishing the distinction between *things* and *ideas*, Hume was a Pyrrhonist. As Popkin points out, "Hume maintained in far clearer and more significant fashion than Pyrrhonists or quasi-Pyrrhonists like Montaigne, LeVayer, Glanvill, Huett or Bayle, that we can never have grounds for beliefs, whether factual, moral, or demonstrable."¹³ There are hundreds of ways in which a sceptic would knock out a system of philosophy. If you stop one way he will find the other way. The issue of justifying a belief is no less important than the reduction of one belief to another belief. In spite of his opposition to Pyrrhonian thinking, Berkeley has been charged with Pyrrhonian prejudices. As Popkin writes,

“Berkeley refused to give up the Pyrrhonian thesis that all we can ever know is appearance, and in offering a foundation for appearance, offers one that makes appearance real, not unreal.... The uniqueness of Berkeley’s immaterialism is that it provides a basis for the Pyrrhonian world of appearances in the mind.”¹⁴

In his attempt to meet sceptics Berkeley has imbibed in him the spirit of a sceptic. Referring to three major influences on Berkeley’s thought, Luce comments, “Locke taught him, but Malebranche inspired him... Bayle alarmed and altered him.”¹⁵ So Berkeley owed to the sceptic Bayle as much as he owed to Locke and Malebranche. He rejected the views of Bayle on several issues, so also he rejected the views of Locke and Malebranche. Berkeley totally rejected Locke’s material substances. This rejection followed the rejection of primary qualities. Once the primary qualities were abolished, there was no need for a place to house them. A material substance was nothing but a house to accommodate them. Berkeley wished to prove the non-existence of matter in order to prove that he was an immaterialist. Locke’s material substance was nothing but a piece of matter. By abolishing the matter and the modifications of matter, Berkeley has reduced the whole reality to the reality of mental substances (spirits) and their ideas. Some ideas of a finite spirit depend on him but other ideas are provided to him by God. So there is a direct transaction of ideas, not only between two finite spirits but also between finite spirits and God. Luce gives a pictorial account of Berkeley’s ideas and the spirits which hold them. As he remarks, “There is something entirely distinct from ideas. There is what perceives ideas, wills, imagines, and remembers them. There is what I call mind, spirit, soul, or myself. This rather ego-centric account passes soon into the account of spirit as “one simple undivided active being’ whose two main operations are understanding and willing. Spirit, by denotation, divides into the infinite spirit and finite spirits, and in the later sections, more precisely, into God, myself, and other spirits.”¹⁶ So Berkeley’s spiritual realm is complete. Commenting on this realm Russell writes that Berkeley “undertook to prove that there is no such thing as matter at all, and that the world consists of nothing but minds and their ideas.”¹⁷ Is this the common-sense view of the world? Does the sense of the common man accept a world in which only the spirits and their ideas exist? Not only is Berkeley’s view theologically oriented, but it is also highly sophisticated, and a common man would hardly make any sense of it. But then according to Pitcher, Berkeley perhaps had “a low opinion of the general spiritual condition of most people: he saw them as the victims of

error and selfishness. And so he naturally had no great respect for the deliverances of ordinary common sense, although he paid lip service to it."¹⁸ It is better to pay lip service than to pay no service to common sense. The Lockean tradition of common sense had to be retained.

Consider now Berkeley's treatment of 'existence'. *Existence* is no less important than an *idea* in Berkeley's philosophy. Berkeley converted *Idea* into a *thing*. Similarly, he converted existence into 'to be perceived or to perceive'. Berkeley's dictum 'esse est percipi' means that existence lies in perception, that is, in being perceived by spirits. Existence, according to him, is mind-dependent. This is Berkeley's idealism about the external world.

One gets some new information about a billiard ball when it is said that it is red, round and hard, but there is no new information obtained when it is added that the billiard ball exists. Berkeley is quite aware of the situation. He knows very well that existence is not an extra property of objects. Berkeley comes to conclude that saying that a billiard ball exists simply means to say that it has been perceived. And this is true about the existence of all kinds of objects except the human souls or spirits. In the case of spirits, to say that they exist means to say that they perceive. The conclusion is obvious: 'Existence' means 'to be perceived or to perceive'. So the analysis of existence justifies Berkeley's ontology of spirits and their ideas.

Berkeley's epistemology, as already discussed, follows his ontology of spirits. His empiricist model of knowledge is considered naturally as an extension of his theory of perception by spirits. The spirits, including the infinite spirit, that is, God, are capable of seeing and having ideas. Thus knowledge is based on ideas or perceptions. So far as his meeting the sceptic's challenge is concerned, it is evident that he rejects scepticism and atheism of the philosophically unenlightened. Knowledge, according to him, is fully secured in the human capacity to perceive. The real world is commensurate with our perceptions. So there is no possibility of our being misled in our beliefs and perceptions. Our perceptions are true more often than not. It may be concluded, therefore, that Berkeley's 'esse est percipi' does contribute to his anti scepticism as much as it contributes to his spiritualism.

Notes

1. R.S. Woolhouse, *Locke*, The Harvester Press, Great Britain, 1983, p. 184.
2. A.C. Grayling, *Berkeley The Central Arguments*, Duck Worth, London, 1986, p. 1.
3. R.S. Woolhouse, *Locke* 185.

4. A.C. Grayling, *Berkeley the Central Arguments*, p. 2.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
6. Popkin, "Berkeley and Pyrrhonism", *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. V, No. 2, December, 1952, pp. 223-246.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 228.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 229.
10. Quoted by Popkin, "Berkeley and Pyrrhonism", p. 233. From Berkeley's *Principles*, Para. 92-3, pp. 81-2.
11. Grayling, *Berkeley The Central Arguments*, p. 16.
12. Quoted by Grayling, *Ibid.*, p. 17.
13. Richard H. Popkin, "David Hume and The Pyrrhonian Controversy", *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. VI, No. *Ibid.*, p., September 1952, p. 76.
14. Richard H. Popkin, "Berkeley and Pyrrhonism", pp. 240-241.
15. Luce. A.A, *The Dialectic of Immaterialism*, London, 1963, p. 59.
16. Luce. A.A, *Berkeley and Malebranche*, Oxford University Press, London, 1967, pp. 92-93.
17. Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, London, 1976, p. 4
18. George Pitcher, *Berkeley*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1977, p. 254.