George Berkeley [1685-1753]

Born near Kilkenny in Ireland on 12th March 1685 of English descent. His grandfather, who had some connection with Lord Berkeley of Stratton, had gone over to Ireland after the Restoration. His father, who may have been born in England, was a respectable gentleman farmer, of some wealth who was a revenue collector.

Berkeley’s mother seems to have been the daughter of a Dublin brewer and was a great-aunt of General Wolfe of Quebec. The family circumstances were such that George, who was the eldest of six brothers, as well as the others had a University education.

George went from Kilkenny College to Trinity College, Dublin, to study languages, mathematics and philosophy. Graduated in 1704, Fellow of Trinity in 1707 Ordained into the Anglican Church in 1710. His position on politics was broadly Liberal/Conservative. He spent time in London, Continental Europe, Bermuda and America(the New World) before returning to Ireland in 1734 and ended up Bishop of Cloyne (east of Cork). Died in Oxford in 1753 shortly after moving there.

The theory of Immaterialism, for which he is best known, dates from his early years in Dublin (around the time of the Act of Union between Ireland and England)

This talk will focus on Berkeley’s key doctrine of Immaterialism as expressed in his main work [A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge (Dublin, 1710), and consider the questions it raises for our time, of the nature of God, Perception, and Knowledge of other minds.

Prior to this work, and on graduation, Berkeley’s notebooks recorded the ‘amazing truth’ as he saw it, that:

NOTHING BUT…CONSCIOUS THINGS DO EXIST. - Berkeley prepared the way for this truth as he perceived it, THAT THERE IS NO REALITY OTHER THAN MINDS in his ‘Essay towards a New Theory of Vision’(1709), and made explicit in the Principles.

According to the doctrine of Immaterialism, ALL THAT EXISTS ARE FINITE MINDS OR SPIRITS(such as ourselves as individuals), OUR IDEAS OR PERCEPTIONS AND SENSATIONS. (Berkeley is what I call an elusive empiricist) and the conjunction of these three concepts, namely, of ideas, perceptions and sensations seem to be used interchangeably.

His conclusion is that THERE IS NO PURELY MATERIAL, OR MIND-INDEPENDENT REALITY.

Background to his approach:

Berkeley starts by saying that philosophical speculation and reflection seem to lead to ‘a forlorn scepticism’, about questions which to untroubled common sense, seem completely comprehensible, straightforward and unproblematic. There is a recurring concern with SCEPTICISM in the Principles and the Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous(1713). Historically, to this point, sceptical doubts about our ability to come to an understanding of reality, or acquire knowledge of the true nature of things had been a dominant feature of European Philosophy ever since the mid-16th Century. According to the Greeks(Sextus Empiricus, a Hellenic writer of AD200)’our sense faculties and reason restrict us to APPEARANCES, and are not such as to enable us to discover and have true knowledge about realities. To avoid scepticism, philosophers had to accept the arguments and reject all claims to knowledge. (Do Appearances constitute a form of knowledge, which may or may not be a form of reality?)Berkeley therefore attempted to establish the correct principles of knowledge and thus remove doubts about the limitations the sceptics would impose on our faculties.

According to Berkeley, two principles have brought about DOUBT and UNCERTAINTY, namely, (1) The doctrine of ABSTRACTION- ‘the opinion that the mind has a power of framing abstract ideas or notions of things’, and (2) the doctrine of MATERIALISM, according to Berkeley, - which is the belief that ‘SENSIBLE OBJECTS’-the things we perceive by our senses, such as houses, mountains, and rivers, have an existence, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding.

Hence ABSTRACTIONISM and MATERIALISM are connected for Berkeley. Materialism depends on the doctrine of ABSTRACT IDEAS-which are a source of error in knowledge. Berkeley spends most of the Introduction to the Principles, in arguing against the doctrine of Abstraction. The first 84 sections of the Principles and the Dialogues, arguing against Materialism. The remaining sections of the Principles and the closing speeches of the Third Dialogue explain how the rejection of these two false principles leads to freedom from Scepticism and beneficial consequences for knowledge and understanding.

Berkeley is a bit of a Cartesian and Phenomenologist in that he claimed that TO BE IS TO BE PERCEIVED, and thus that the Universe is essentially mental rather than material. He can also be regarded as a SUBJECTIVE IDEALIST. ’The Universe is physical whether we perceive it or not. Berkeley is careful here to suggest that ‘TO BE IS TO BE PERCEIVED’ does not mean that NOTHING EXISTS BEYOND OUR PERCEPTIONS, FOR GOD PERCEIVES ALL THINGS. GOD THEREBY SUSTAINS EVERYTHING IN EXISTENCE. One would have to engage in a form of speculative materialism to explain how that happens, which is a weakness in Berkeley’s argument against Materialism.

Berkeley’s main motive is to correct the errors and dispel the confusions he had encountered in reading previous philosophers. The errors are faults in their reasoning and the difficulties are of their own making. To quote him-‘We have first raised the dust and then complain we cannot see’. Berkeley’s aim is to make a strict inquiry concerning the first principles of human knowledge in order to establish what is true, and then expose the errors of principles contained in as he sees it the false principles of the doctrine of ABSTRACT IDEAS and the PRINCIPLE OF MATTER.

1. Abstract Ideas. -The mind has a power for forming abstract ideas or notions of things.

2. Principle of Matter. -There is such a thing as MATTER or MATERIAL SUBSTANCE.

1. is linked to the discussion of Universals and Berkeley’s theory is a variant of Locke’s in respect of 1. and 2. above.

According to the doctrine of Abstract Ideas there are two kinds -1. AIs of attributes or qualities or of things or abstract general ideas.

Berkeley embraces the empiricist principle revived by Locke, that THERE IS NOTHING IN THE MIND (Locke’s Tabula Rasa)THAT DOES NOT FIRST COME TO IT THROUGH THE SENSES. Berkeley and Locke believed that our concepts are like copies of sense experience and it is these copies that allow us to think about what is not currently. in our experience. eg, I can think about dogs because I have first experienced a dog and my mind has retained the concept of it . The use of memory comes into play here for Berkeley. . Conversely, we cannot form a concept of something if we have not had first hand some sense experience of it. eg I can have no idea of the colour RED unless I have first hand experience of RED. The argument runs as follows:-The abstract ideas doctrine argues that the ideas of these qualities (red or redness) are taken singly, and the idea of colour is abstracted from extension or mode(chain of being). 1. The notion of extended coloured objects either moving or at rest. The qualities of colour and extended are always connected with one another in a chain of being.

It is also held that having observed that individual men or women, or dogs, resemble other men, women or dogs in CERTAIN RESPECTS.

Conclusion. -We are therefore able to form ABSTRACT IDEAS of men, women or dogs which includes what they all have in common but omits differences. Thus our abstract idea of colour includes colour but omits all particular colours, because there is no one colour which all men have. This is what is meant by ABSTRACT GENERAL IDEAS, of Man, woman, dog, colour. -Berkeley denies the possibility of forming abstract ideas of attributes or Abstract General Ideas.

I turn now to the Principle of Matter and contrast Berkeley’s view with that of Locke.

Locke was a Representative Realist in the sense that for him, MATTER IS THE STUFF THAT UNDERLIES OUR PERCEPTION, causing us to have sensations but which we cannot directly apprehend. It is as if a veil lies between us and the world, so that we are never able to perceive what reality is like in itself. This leads to a contradiction according to Berkeley. For him, ALL CONCEPTS COME FROM EXPERIENCE. WE CANNOT POSSIBLY HAVE A COHERENT CONCEPT OF SOMETHING WE CANNOT EXPERIENCE. THEREFORE, LOCKE’S IDEA OF MATTER IS A PHILOSOPHICAL CONFUSION.

Berkeley concludes from this that MATTER DOES NOT EXIST AND THAT ALL WE CAN KNOW IS THE CONTENTS OF OUR OWN CONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE. According to him, Locke broke the fundamental tenet of Empiricism, THAT HUMAN KNOWLEDGE IS LIMITED TO WHAT WE CAN EXPERIENCE.

If we cannot penetrate the veil of PERCEPTION, we cannot suppose that anything exists beyond it (as individuals). For Berkeley, we cannot make sense of the idea that our experiences are resemblances of a reality we cannot access.

We can understand how one sense experience can be like another, in the sense that we can empathize with other minds/selves since both are mental phenomena.

A key point is that we cannot claim to know that an experience can resemble something wholly non-sensory and non-mental(objective knowledge out there outside our experience or a material world of knowledge, external bodies, science)In short, If there were external bodies, it is impossible that we should ever come to know it, and if there were not, we might have the very same reasons to think there were that we have now. (Principlesl, 58). There is an element of circularity about this argument.

In sum, Berkeley believed that our perceptions were coherent and predictable. It has been suggested that Berkeley’s reasoning here is analogous to Descartes’ Basic proposition, Cogito ergo sum ‘I think therefore I am’-The individual starts with Perception. Berkeley argued for God’s existence on the basis that the coherence and predictability of our perceptions meant that they must have been put there (by God). This line of reasoning is analogous with Hume’s Argument from Design.

Berkeley and the PRINCIPLE OF MATTER

This principle asserts that in the case of anything, eg, a tree, a table, apart from the various quality relations of the tree for example, there is something which has these qualities and supports them. This is a MATERIAL SUBSTANCE (MS).

The MS is UNTHINKING AND INACTIVE and it exists UNPERCEIVED.

MS causes our SENSATIONS. What really happens is that I have CERTAIN SENSATIONS BEING CAUSED IN ME BY THE MATERIAL SUBSTANCE which is the TREE. .

When I perceive a tree, the MS not only causes me to have certain sensations but also, itself RESEMBLES these sensations, or at any rate, some of them though it itself is not directly perceived.

Berkeley’s view can be summed up as follows:- MS (the tree) causes sensations in me.

I perceive the tree. The perceiver has certain sensations caused by the MS which is the tree.

I myself do not directly perceive the tree, only the sensations caused in me by the tree, and further for some, the sensations I have, in some way RESEMBLE the MS.

Berkeley rejects in all its forms, the doctrine that there are Material Substances or Matter.

I now move on to consider Berkeley’s position on Materialism.

His use of the term is in a sense different from any senses used today. The basic sense of it today is that a Materialist is a person who believes that everything is matter and that there is no non-material substance (which we can have objective knowledge of, and makes science possible; but for Berkeley, a Materialist was a person who believed that some things were matter, but not everything. Therefore to deny materialism as Berkeley does, is to do something more extreme than its present day sense. Two propositions can be invoked here.

Pr. 1 In Berkeley’s sense, to deny that there are material things at all.

Pr. 2 In the modern sense to ‘deny that everything is material’ implies that some things are not material, is not so extreme as Berkeley’s denial.

In the Principles (sections 85 and following) 1. Berkeley attached great importance to the consequences of the rejection of two false doctrines, namely on Abstract Ideas and Materialism.

2. Berkeley’s refutation of the doctrine of Matter is given in the Principles and Three Dialogues, in the course of what he conceives to be an exposition of what he takes to be the TRUE Principles of Human Knowledge: containing as it does some highly original ideas and is the central part of his Philosophy for which he is known. The central part is given in Sections 1-33 and in the Three Dialogues. In the Three Dialogues, I take Berkeley to be acting the role of Philonous.

In the positive account of his Principles, the main thesis he asserts and defends(15 Theses) 4-7 are the most significant perhaps. He asserts that there are two kinds of things in the Universe:-1. THINKING THINGS which are minds or spirits (or to give a modern definition, Persons.

UNTHINKING THINGS, which are either SENSIBLE QUALITIES or COLLECTIONS OF SENSIBLE QUALITIES.

The use of the word ‘sensible’ in 17th Century Philosophy is used as the same meaning as the term ‘Sense’ and ‘Sense Organ’, which is connected with sensation; hence the term’ SENSIBLE QUALITIES’(SQ’s), which includes colour, figure, motion, smell, taste, hardness, heat and cold. etc. , -A question arises at this point:- Are Sensible Qualities essentially the same phenomenon as Material Substances? Materialists and Non-Materialists have different ways of using language to describe the same things (in essence).

A collection of SQs are exemplified by an ordinary object, such as an apple, which has a collection of qualities, such as a certain colour(s), a certain taste, smell, shape and so on.

Theses 4-7. T4 SQs are ideas of sense(sensations), which is an idea or mental image(s). For Berkeley, seeing an object, I have certain sensations or ideas of sense.

T5. For a sensation to exist, is to be perceived by the mind of some person or spirit.

Its existence consists in being perceived.

There cannot be a sensation of which no-one is aware.

A sensation’s existence is existence in the mind of a perceiver. .

T6. It follows that, since a sensible quality, e. g. , a colour, is a sensation, its existence consists in being perceived; that is, it can only exist in the mind of a perceiver. .

T7. An unthinking thing, being either a sensible quality, or a collection of sensible qualities, is either a sensation or a collection of sensations; hence the existence of an unthinking thing, whether a Sensible Quality or a collection of Sensible Qualities, consists in being PERCEIVED. Berkeley’s great principle here can be stated as follows:-

FOR AN UNTHINKING THING EXISTENCE IS BEING PERCEIVED or ESSE IS PERCIPI as he sometimes put it.

T8. THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A MATERIAL SUBSTANCE, in the sense of an unthinking thing which has an independent existence. This thesis raises the question of whether as the Materialists would claim, that we can have objective knowledge independent of our existence(ourselves). In T8 the only substance (that is the only things which have independent existence are SPIRITS or THINKING THINGS- UNTHINKING THINGS exist only in independence of spirits or minds(terms used interchangeably by Berkeley. ).

T9. I perceive a continual succession of ideas, both ideas of sense or sensations and ideas of another kind (imagination). This succession must have some cause(like Hume here).

T10. Ideas cannot themselves cause anything. The cause of the succession of my ideas must be a substance (matter), but there are no Material Substances(Matter), therefore the cause must be a spirit that is a WILL, which is what a mind or spirit is called in respect of its producing ideas.

T11. I have direct knowledge of one spirit, that is, of myself.

T12. Some of my ideas are in fact caused by myself, by my own will. These are ideas of IMAGINATION, but over other ideas I have no control. For Berkeley, it would seem that the Materialists would impose ideas upon us deriving from substance or matter, if their arguments were to prevail. There is a sense here that any ideology or belief system containing as it does ideas can be imposed on any person in the Materialist world, under Berkeley’s worldview?

These are my ideas of sense or sensations according to Berkeley, and they are livelier and more distinct than the ideas of the imagination. What we call REAL THINGS are constituted of ideas of sense. (Sensations are at variance from Imagination in terms of ideas for Berkeley).

T13. Since we have no control over ideas generated by sense or sensations, we arrive at God for Berkeley. In T13, Since ideas of sense are not produced by myself, there must be some other will or spirit which produces them. This must be God. -God is a continuous perceiver.

T14. God causes ideas to occur in us in accordance with set rules. These we call LAWS OF NATURE. -That God acts in this way, instead of exciting ideas in us at random, is for our benefit because it enables us to make predictions. This testifies to his wisdom and benevolence.

T15. Conclusion. -If any unthinking thing exists and is not perceived by the mind of some finite spirit, then it is perceived by and exists in the mind of God.

Of these 15 Theses, the most fundamental are numbers 4-7 which lead up to the conclusion that THE EXISTENCE OF ANY UNTHINKING . eg, a colour, table or mountain, CONSISTS ONLY IN BEING PERCEIVED(THAT SUCH THINGS EXIST ONLY IN MIND. Berkeley’s position is an extreme Subjectivist view of the individual in relation to knowledge in contrast with Objective Knowledge which we cannot. know. There is a sense in which Berkeley is correct or stating a truth that what we can know has to enter our senses. Otherwise how can we have any belief as individuals that we can come to know anything.

Let me conclude by referring to Thomas Reid’s (1710-96) view of Berkeley compared with Hume.

Berkeley rejected everything but minds and ideas.

Hume rejected everything but ideas.

For Reid, Berkeley’s Principles start with Descartes and ended with the Scepticism of David Hume. He was a sceptic inspite of himself.