Points arising from Berkeley’s Philosophy

1.The Common Sense view of the World-the view that sensible qualities are real properties(Materialism for Berkeley).

The questions are:- What are particular propositions of common sense?

What are general propositions of common sense? Is a general proposition an ABSTRACTION of a particular :(a large number of particular statements)

What is the common sense view in terms of METAPHYSICS?

For Berkeley, particular propositions of common sense are collections of factual statements, such as :-

Water is cold. This stick(A) is larger than that stick(B).This stick appears bent.,

and consists of all factual statements resulting from everyday observation. Factual statements refer to objective empirical facts out there in the world to be observed.

2.GENERAL PROPOSITIONS:- Three-Dimensional objects exist and have qualities or properties:-referred to as COMMON SENSE OBJECTS.-These objects have shape ,size, colour, weight, taste, smell, a degree of solidity, heat, cold, a degree of hardness or softness, examples of such objects are tables, mountains, houses, human bodies.

3.Perceiving a common sense object involves having a certain sort of experience which will be a PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE(PE) which is a CONSCIOUS EXPERIENCE .This experience can be, feeling, pain, trying to solve a problem, worrying.

4.PERCEIVING and PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE are NOT IDENTICAL. This point can be illustrated as follows:-Perceiving a common sense object such as seeing a table, involves having a Perceptual Experience which is a visual experience; but the converse of the proposition or argument ,namely, that having a perceptual experience, involves perceiving a common sense object is not necessarily true. For example, Hallucination may be a perceptual experience but is not seen as a common sense object.

5.The existence and character of common sense objects(a table) are INDEPENDENT of PERCEPTION.-A table exists independently of whether it is perceived or not-This is a MATERIAL SUBSTANCE. It is a sensible thing which is the object of direct awareness. In terms of objective knowledge of reality, the table does exist, which on Berkeley’s view is not true.

Questions can be raised about Berkeley arising from the following points but not exclusively so.

1.The arguments Berkeley puts forward in support of the existence of other spirits(other human beings who perceive),but particularly God. All attributes he ascribes to God.

2.The way in which Berkeley distinguishes between REAL THINGS and IMAGINARY THINGS(T12).Any Philosophy of Perception has to give an account of this. He tackles this question and has an answer.

3.Berkeley’s account of our knowledge of other minds(or spirits) which raise other questions for Berkeley.

I have set out the basic core ideas of Berkeley’s Philosophy, and there are further questions which can be pursued to give a more complete picture of what Berkeley had to say.

Let me conclude by referring to a contemporary of Hume, namely, Thomas Reid(1710-96) and what he suggested about Berkeley. Reid liked his Theory of Vision but thought less well of his Immaterialism. He gave an 18th Century view of Berkeley’s Scepticism. For Reid, Berkeley rejected everything but minds and ideas Hume rejected everything but ideas. Berkeley’s Principles start with Descartes and ended with the scepticism of David Hume.

Reid admitted that Berkeley made moves to distinguish between REALITY and ILLUSION, by explaining that sometimes, our mind-dependent ideas constitute reality, but Berkeley was a sceptic in spite of himself. Hume regarded the senses as our key source of knowledge, as did Berkeley. For Hume ,the contents of the mind divided into two categories, IMPRESSIONS which are the perceptions we enjoy when the world impacts on the senses and IDEAS which are less vivid copies or resemblances of impressions. Ideas for Hume on this basis ideas are no longer experienced directly in the way they are for Berkeley based on sense experience.

I have chosen a selection of quotations from the Principles of Human Knowledge and the Three Dialogues to illustrate Berkeley’s thinking.

1.It is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind, or lastly, ideas formed by help of memory and imagination, either compounding .dividing, or basically representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways:

2.A spirit is one simple, undivided, active being: as it perceives ideas, it is called the understanding, and as it produces or otherwise operates about them, it is called the Will.(27).

3.(30).The ideas of sense are more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the imagination.(Lines 1 &2).

Line6.Now the set rules of established methods, wherein the mind we depend on excites in us the ideas of sense which are called the LAWS OF NATURE; and these we learn by experiences which teaches us that such and such ideas are attended with such and such other ideas in the ordinary course of things. Berkeley’s empiricism is deeply embedded in this point and is similar to Hume’s notion of Association of Ideas.

(33)The ideas imprinted on the sense by the Author of nature(God)are called REAL Things: and these excited in the imagination being less regular vivid and constant, are more properly called ideas, or images of things which they copy and represent.

(39Use of the word IDEA as distinct from THINGS and the grounds for doing so(P66 of the Penguin Edition)

(118)Errors of mathematicians arise from the doctrine of Abstract General Ideas and the existence of objects without the mind.

(119)Arithmetic has been thought to have for its object, abstract ideas of number.(122)In arithmetic therefore ,we regard not the things but the signs, which nevertheless are not regarded for their own sake(abstract),but because they direct us how to act with(in)relation to things, and dispose rightly of them(i.e.,)Number is Signification.

(147)Line 3.We may even assert that the existence of God is far more evidently perceived than the existence of men, because the effects of Nature are infinitely more numerous and considerable, than those ascribed to human agents. There are modern implications for scientists ,man trying to cope with Nature/Climate change and global warming, Darwin’s Theory of Natural Selection. New man-made impact on the environment and its implications.-Man is not able to get on top of the problem, or in Berkeley’s terms it is less evident that this is the case. Man’s capacity to act in these areas is less evident than the impact of Nature and /or God.-Questions for discussion.

(149)It is therefore plain that nothing can be more evident to anyone that is capable of the least reflection than the existence of God, or a spirit who is intimately present to our minds, producing in them all that variety of ideas or sensations, which continually affect us, on whom we have an absolute and entire dependence, in short, in whom we live, and move, and have our being.

(156)…embrace the salutary truths of the Gospel, which to know and to practice(ethical imperative here),is the highest perfection of human nature. Nature is inextricable bound up with God’s essence)(My emphasis).Men who deny this or do not develop this pious sense of the presence of God, are in error in understanding Nature and Knowledge.(Ref.p150)

Quotations from ‘Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous (Who I take to be Berkeley).

D1.Hylas takes up Philonous’s point that ‘there is no such thing as material substance in the world’, and that ‘there is no such thing as matter’.

Hylas pronounces Philonous as a Sceptic because Philonous denies the existence of matter..Philonous responds by saying , that ‘Sensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense.

Hylas states that no idea can exist without the mind. Philonous replies, that,You(Hylas) are therefore by your principle, forced to deny the reality of sensible things, since you made it consist in(of)an absolute existence exterior to the mind. You are a downright sceptic .

D2.Hylas has an obscure, indefinite sense of the word Matter. He admits after arguments through the dialogue that ‘I acknowledge that you(P) have proved that matter is impossible.

D3.Hylas.I know not the real nature of anything in the Universe. It cannot be denied that we perceive such certain appearances or ideas, but it cannot be concluded from thence that bodies really exist.

P.More Scepticism on his part. For Hylas, Material Substance is a groundless hypothesis .P.’I believe my senses and leave things as I find them. ’The real things are those very things I see and feel and perceive by my senses’.

H to P Admit Matter or reject Spirit. P’s reply(p180)To know spirit by reflection not an idea.

Philonous on Materialism(p182) ’The question between the Materialists and me is not whether things have a real existence out of the Mind of this or that person, but whether they have an absolute existence, distinct from being perceived by God, and exterior to all minds.

Philonous’s Conclusion.

* ‘I do not pretend to be a setter[[1]](#endnote-1)-up of new notions. My endeavours tend only to unite and place in a clear light that truth, which was before shared between the vulgar and the philosophers; the former(vulgar) being of opinion, that the those things they immediately perceive are the real things, and the latter(philosophers),that the things immediately perceived, are ideas which exist only in the mind..
* Which two notions put together, do in effect constitute the substance of what I advance?’
* ‘The same principles which at first view lead to skepticism, pursued to a certain point, bring men back to common sense.’ Concluding statement by Philonous..
* My concluding comment is that through Berkeley’s Philosophy we have come full circle between God /Nature and Empirical Common Sense Our starting point is Perception.
* Jeremy Comerford.
1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)