Synopsis of Berkeley’s Philosophy.-Jeremy Comerford (Talk to be given on 4/12/18)

Born near Kilkenny in Ireland on 12th March 1685 of English descent. English father. Irish mother. Died in Oxford 1753. Berkeley went from Kilkenny College to Trinity College, Dublin to study languages, mathematics and philosophy. Graduated in 1704, Fellow of Trinity,1707. Ordained into the Anglican Church in 1710. Berkeley’s key doctrine of Immaterialism as expressed in his main work, namely:- A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge, completed in 1710, was concerned with questions regarding the Nature of God, Perception and Knowledge.

Berkeley arrived at the conclusion that nothing but conscious things exist, and 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. His conclusion is that there is no purely material, or mind-independent reality.

Berkeley starts by saying that philosophical speculation and reflection lead to scepticism, and he attempts to establish the correct principles of knowledge based on a common sense view of the world. For him, two principles have brought about doubt and uncertainty; firstly, the doctrine of Abstraction, which is the opinion that the mind has a power of framing abstract ideas or notions of things, and, secondly, the doctrine of Materialism, which is the belief that the things we perceive by our senses, such as houses, mountains, and rivers, have an existence distinct from their being perceived by the understanding.

Berkeley argues against the doctrine of Abstraction and Materialism in the Principles, and also in the ‘Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous in Opposition to Sceptics and Atheists.’

Berkeley claims that: To be is to be perceived. The Universe is physical whether we perceive it or not. This does not mean that nothing exists beyond our perceptions, for God perceives all things, and thereby sustains everything in existence.

For Berkeley, there are two kinds of Abstract Ideas, namely, those of attributes or qualities, and those of things or abstract general ideas. He embraces the empiricist principle, revived by Locke, that there is nothing in the Mind that does not first come to it through the senses.

Berkeley argues against the Principle of Matter, the idea that there is such a thing as Matter or Material Substance. For him, all concepts come from experience; we cannot possibly have a coherent concept of something we cannot experience. Therefore, Matter does not exist, and that all we can know is the contents of our own conscious experience. For Locke, by contrast, Matter is the stuff that underlies our Perception.

The Principle of Matter asserts that in the case of e.g., a tree, a table, apart from the various qualities relating to the tree, there is something which has these qualities and supports them. This is the Material Substance. It is unthinking, inactive, and it exists unperceived. MS causes our sensations, so that when I perceive a tree, the MS causes me to have certain sensations.

Berkeley’s position on Materialism

The basic sense of it today is that 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, is a Materialist. However, for Berkeley, a Materialist was a person who believed that some things were matter, but not everything.

In the positive account of his Principles, the main thesis he asserts and defends, is that there are two kinds of things in the Universe: 1.Thinking Things, which are minds or spirits, or in today’s language, persons; and, 2.Unthinking Things, which are either Sensible Qualities, or, Collections of Sensible Qualities.

Sensible qualities include colour, figure, motion, smell, taste, hardness, heat, cold, etc.

A Collection of Sensible Qualities is exemplified by an ordinary object, such as an apple, which has a collection of qualities, such as certain colour(s), a certain taste, smell, shape, etc.

For an Unthinking Thing, Existence is being Perceived, or Esse Is Percipi, as Berkeley sometimes put it. This is the conclusion of theses 4-7.

Berkeley goes on to say that there is no such thing as a Material Substance in the sense of an unthinking thing which has an independent existence (T8). The only substance (things that have independent existence) are Spirits, or Thinking Things.

Berkeley perceives a continual succession of ideas, both ideas of sense or sensations, and ideas of another kind (imagination). The latter are caused by my own will, which is what mind or spirit is called in respect of its producing ideas. T11. I have direct knowledge of one spirit, that is, of myself.

Concluding Thought on Berkeley:-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.

Suggested Reading:- George Berkeley: Principles of Human Knowledge/Three Dialogues(Penguin Classics).