A PELICAN BOOK

G. J. WARNOCK

Berkeley

An introduction to the writings of this eighteenth-century Irish philosopher whose critical and constructive work has a continued influence on modern philosophy

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CONTENTS

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Editorial Foreword

Mr G. J. Warnock's book on the philosophy of Bishop Berkeley is one of a series of philosophical works which are appearing in a similar form. The series consists mainly in original studies of the work of a number of outstanding philosophers, but besides these contributions to the history of philosophy, it also includes books on more general topics, such as logic, the theory of knowledge, political philosophy, ethics, and the philosophy of science.

The series is not designed to reflect the standpoint or to advance the views of any one philosophical school. Since it is addressed to an audience of non-specialists, as well as professional philosophers, the contributors to it have been asked to write in as untechnical a manner as their subjects allow, but they have not been expected to achieve simplicity at the cost of accuracy or completeness.

Berkeley is himself so good and clear a writer that the fulfilment of these aims might seem, in his case, relatively easy; but the problems with which he deals are among the hardest as well as the most important of those that occupy philosophers, and his own solutions of them by no means so simple as he contrives to make them appear. As Mr Warnock shows, Berkeley's subjective idealism is something very much more than a perverse affront to common sense. He was a highly penetrating as well as original thinker, and the interest of his philosophy is perennial.

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THE first full edition of Berkeley's writings, *The Works of George Berkeley*, edited by A. C. Fraser, was published by the Clarendon Press in 1871. This edition has been often reissued and is still readily available. A new edition with the same title is now being produced by Nelson, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop. This series of admirably exhaustive and scholarly volumes is not yet complete, but volumes I to VI have been issued and contain all Berkeley's major philosophical works. His *Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, and *Three Dialogues of Hylas and Philonous* are also published in an Everyman's Library volume entitled *The Theory of Vision and Other Writings*. The *Principles*, the first *Dialogue*, and some parts of the second and third, are included in the collection *British Empirical Philosophers*, edited by Professor A. J. Ayer and Mr Raymond Winch (Routledge and Kegan Paul).

Berkeley almost invariably followed the practice of numbering his paragraphs, so that in references to his texts it is not necessary to mention the pages on which quoted passages occur in the various editions. I have given almost all references in the form of a capital letter, or letters, followed by a number – the letters indicating the work, and the number being that assigned by Berkeley to the paragraph, from which quotation is made. I refer to the *Principles* by the letter P; to the *Essay* by E; to *Siris* by S; to the Introduction to the *Principles* (the paragraphs of which are separately numbered) by I; and to the *Philosophical Commentaries* by P.C. The latter work, which consists of two notebooks kept by Berkeley for his private use in early youth, was first published by Fraser and called by him *The Commonplace Book*. I have adopted the title recently proposed

by Professor Luce, which though not entirely appropriate is less completely wide of the mark than Fraser's. The paragraphs of the *Three Dialogues* were not numbered by Berkeley; but as each dialogue is fairly short, I have taken it to be sufficient simply to indicate from which of them my few quotations are taken. I have used the texts printed by Luce and Jessop so far as they are at present available, which occasionally differ from Fraser's in minor points.

An excellent and authoritative biography of Berkeley, by Professor Luce, is published by Nelson uniformly with the new edition of his works.

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INTRODUCTION

THAT philosophers are often misunderstood is a well-established though regrettable fact, in many cases not hard to explain. They often seem to assert, or to deny, what they do not really intend to assert or deny, and thus appear to be allies, or even leaders, of schools of thought which they would not in fact approve. Sometimes they themselves do not notice the natural outcome of their own arguments; and it is of course a familiar fact that later generations, or writers with quite other interests, are apt to seek comfort in isolating and misapplying fragments of ancient and respected philosophical doctrine. Berkeley has had his fair share in all of this; he has been constantly praised or blamed, condemned or supported, for the wrong reasons. But his case is more than usually curious and interesting. For, from the first moment of publication, he was taken to be propounding opinions the very reverse of those that he wished to convey; and his most convinced opponents were exactly those people from whom he might have expected, and at first did expect, unhesitating support. He soon came to see that this was so, and did his best to clear up the tangled issues. But in spite of his efforts, those that he thought should agree with him persisted in believing that he was so obviously wrong as scarcely to deserve their serious attention.

'Mem: to be eternally banishing Metaphisics etc. and recalling Men to Common Sense' (P.C. 751). This early note gives vigorous expression to his predominant aim. He and his contemporaries were the immediate heirs to the remarkable achievements of the seventeenth century. In 1700 Isaac Newton was nearly sixty. Galileo, Harvey, and Boyle

were not long dead. In philosophy Hobbes, Descartes, and Spinoza had breathed new life into argument and speculation; and Locke, Leibnitz, and Malebranche were still alive. Nevertheless, in spite of all this activity and achievement, it seemed to Berkeley that men's minds had become clogged and burdened with new and old errors; that in every enquiry and all branches of science, progress was obstructed by a mass of mistakes and complications. Accordingly he set before himself as his primary concern the task of simplification, of clearing the air.

For this work he was indeed admirably equipped. He was the most acute of critics, a writer of perfect grace and lucidity, and by temperament an enemy to all dullness, pedantry, and needless sophistication. He was, at least in his youth, deeply convinced that most branches of learning were in reality far simpler than their professors made them appear, and that the appearance of difficulty was due, if not to deliberate obscurantism, mainly to confusion of mind and to muddled exposition. The philosophers of the Scholastic tradition were, he thought, most seriously to blame for stirring up the 'learned dust', but the mathematicians seemed to him hardly less culpable. Newton alone he regarded with wary respect, and for Locke he felt admiration mingled with pity. 'Wonderful in Locke', he wrote, 'that he could when advanced in years see at all thro a mist that had been so long a-gathering and was consequently thick. This more to be admired than that he didn't see farther' (P.C. 567). (Locke was, in fact, less than sixty years old when his most important work was published; but Berkeley, when he wrote this note, was not much more than twenty.) However, in spite of this certainly sincere tribute, it is Locke who is most openly and frequently attacked in Berkeley's writings; for by his very success he had given new currency to some of the doctrines which Berkeley proposed to annihilate. Lesser antagonists are for the most part ignored or refuted anonymously.

Nor did it seem to Berkeley that his task of clarification was an affair of merely academic importance. For the whole of learning, including mathematics, he took to be of value only so far as it was of use, so that blunders in theory were also practical misfortunes. Atheism and vice, moreover, he thought could flourish only if supported by intellectual mistakes. And so, if once the encumbrance of metaphysics could be thrown off, the sciences could be expected to bring innumerable benefits to a universally devout and virtuous public. In the pursuit of this goal Berkeley emphatically claims the alliance of Common Sense; he is on the side of 'the vulgar' against the professors. The opinions, or rather the unformulated assumptions, of plain men are to be vindicated in his philosophy, and defended against the confusing attacks and questionings of open or covert scepticism.

The response of the public was, however, unsympathetic. On the publication in 1710 of his most important book, the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, a doctor diagnosed insanity in the author; a bishop deplored his vain passion for novelty; some said his fantastic paradoxes were at any rate amusing, and were inclined to excuse him on the ground that he was an Irishman. Even his friends, though respectful of his talents, were quite unconvinced. Dean Swift is reported (perhaps apocryphally) to have left him standing on the door-step when he came to call, saying that if his philosophical views were correct he should be able to come in through a closed door as easily as through an open one. This tale is indeed typical of the common view of Berkeley's doctrines; it was said that he represented the whole of our experience as a dream, and the material world as a collection of 'ideas' in the mind, dependent for its very existence on being observed. After all, he explicitly denied the existence of Matter; he asserted that we perceive only 'our own ideas'; and what is this but to say that we are all in a dream? Why open the door if there is really no solid, impenetrable door to be opened? So far from being acclaimed

as the rescuer and defender of Common Sense, Berkeley was charged with an absurd and almost frivolous indifference to the plain and fundamental convictions of all sensible men.

So extreme a divergence as this between Berkeley and his readers cannot wholly be explained away. Certainly he was, as he has often been since, misunderstood; but more is involved than mere misunderstanding. The fact is that Berkeley was himself, in his own way, a metaphysician. He employed without question the same technical vocabulary as that used by his predecessors; whatever his loyalty to Common Sense, he had no great respect for common language. He even had, as they had, a general answer to the most typical of all metaphysical questions – the question what there really *is*. Locke had listed the contents of the Universe as being minds, or 'immaterial substances'; 'ideas'; and material substances, 'external bodies'. Berkeley does not question the value or propriety of such a queer and general catalogue, but boldly offers a rival list of his own. There are, he says, *only* 'spirits' and their 'ideas'. This persistent tendency to oppose strange metaphysical claims with a no less metaphysical counter-assertion naturally puts some strain on his fidelity to Common Sense. He claims, indeed, only to formulate clearly opinions already latent in the untutored mind; and there is no doubt that, in protesting that his views are not so strange as they may seem, he was sincere and to a great extent justified. He did not intend to subvert the accepted opinions of unphilosophical men, and he really believed that he had not done so. But his purpose of vindicating Common Sense was in fact only half fulfilled. Plain men might follow with respect and agreement the work of criticism, of demolition; but the reconstruction would leave them justly uneasy.

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Berkeley was born in Ireland, in the neighbourhood of Kilkenny, in 1685. His grandfather was English, but both

he and Berkeley's father had lived in Ireland. Berkeley himself was brought up and educated there, never visiting England till 1713; and he seems always to have been regarded, and to have regarded himself, as an Irishman. His family was comfortably off, and his education was well provided for. At Kilkenny College, a school with many distinguished names on its roll, he was shortly preceded by Swift and was contemporary with Congreve; and in 1700, at the early age of fifteen, he was sent to Trinity College, Dublin. He would probably have fared worse at that time in England. Many years of war and disturbance in Ireland had only recently ended with the battle of the Boyne and the surrender of Limerick, but Trinity College was full of life. He studied Latin and Greek, French and Hebrew; he was by no means ignorant of mathematics and the works of Newton; and Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, published ten years before, was already established as a work of great importance. There were societies for discussion among students which Berkeley joined, and the Provost himself was modernist enough to encourage the study of Locke.

He took the degree of B.A. in 1704, and being already marked out for academic distinction, he decided to stay on in the college as a graduate in the hope that a fellowship might before long fall vacant. The opportunity came in 1706; he was admitted as a fellow on June 9th in the following year, and shortly afterwards ordained as the statutes required. It is clear that in these three years of waiting he was far from idle, but it is impossible to say how far he had travelled towards his later opinions. Of three short works which can with plausibility be assigned to this period, all are more or less directly concerned with mathematics; and he evidently gave much attention to this subject, even though he deeply disapproved of most of its exponents, was at times inclined to question its value, and himself held very extraordinary views particularly about

geometry. But in 1707 he began to fill a note-book with reflections on a wide field of philosophical topics, and it is from internal evidence clear enough that he was not approaching these problems for the first time. There are two of these note-books, with nearly nine hundred entries – a rare, unusually detailed specimen of the informal comments and remarks of a great philosopher, intended for his own use and not for publication. One or two of the more elaborate entries are evidently designed for incorporation in a book, but they are for the most part brief and colloquial, often dogmatic, and some are almost rude. 'I'll not admire the mathematicians,' he writes, 'I see no wit in any of them but Newton'; and elsewhere he finds even 'Newton in sad plight'. The words 'absurd', 'ridiculous', and 'impossible' occur many times; iconoclasm and defiance are on every page.

It would, of course, be a mistake to look in these *Philosophical Commentaries* (as the notes have recently been called) for any connected, coherent argument. The note-books were filled in a little over a year, but Berkeley at the time was not much more than twenty years old and his opinions were not yet firmly settled. Some of the entries clearly conflict with others; they are not set down in any order of logical sequence; and most of them are of interest mainly as the seeds from which his later publications developed, and so do not need or deserve separate consideration. He has already framed what he calls 'ye immaterial hypothesis', the view that 'matter does not exist'; and he already believes and repeatedly affirms that this is in no way in conflict with common sense. But at first he seems to have embraced an 'ontology' even more strange than anything he advocated later: 'Nothing properly but persons i.e. conscious things do exist, all other things are not so much existences as manners of ye existence of persons' (P.C. 24). This would indeed have scandalized his readers; however, he soon reminds himself (P.C. 79) not to 'fall in