

# George Berkeley

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- SELECTED BOOKS:** *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* (Dublin: Printed by A. Rhames for J. Pepyat, 1709);
- A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge . . .* (Dublin: Printed by A. Rhames for J. Pepyat, 1710);
- Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous . . .* (London: Printed by G. James for Hy. Clements, 1713);
- De Motu . . .* (London: J. Tonson, 1721);
- An Essay towards Preventing the Ruine of Great Britain* (London: Sold by J. Roberts, 1721);
- A Proposal for the Better Supplying of Churches in our Foreign Plantations, and for Converting the Savage Americans to Christianity* (London: Printed by H. Woodfull, 1724);
- Alciphron; or the Minute Philosopher*, 2 volumes (London: Printed for J. Tonson, 1732); 1 volume (New Haven: Printed by Sydney for Increase Cooke, 1803);
- A Sermon Preached before the Incorporated Society of the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts at their Anniversary Meeting in the Parish Church of St. Mary-le-Bow on Friday, February 18, 1731* (London: Printed by J. Downing, 1732);
- The Theory of Vision, or Visual Language . . .* (London: Printed for J. Tonson, 1733);
- The Analyst; or, a Discourse Addressed to an Infidel Mathematician . . .* (London: Printed for J. Tonson, 1734);
- A Defence of Free-Thinking in Mathematics . . .* (Dublin: Printed by M. Rhames for R. Gunne, 1735; London: Printed for J. Tonson, 1735);
- Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar-Water, and Divers Other Subjects Connected Together and Arising One from Another* (Dublin: Printed by M. Rhames for R. Gunne, 1744; London: Printed for C. Hitch & C. Davis, 1744);
- A Word to the Wise: Or, an Exhortation to the Roman Catholic Clergy of Ireland* (Dublin: Printed by G. Faulkner, 1749; Boston: Printed by S. Kneeland, 1750);
- A Miscellany Containing Several Tracts on Various Subjects* (Dublin: G. Faulkner, 1752; London:

Printed for J. & R. Tonson and S. Draper, 1752).

**Collection:** *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 volumes (London: Nelson, 1948-1957).

Bishop Berkeley is undoubtedly more important to the history of philosophy than to American literary and cultural history. Nevertheless, his interest in America and his influence on American thought are noteworthy. He lived for nearly three years in Newport, Rhode Island, where he wrote his attack on skepticism, *Alciphron* (1732). A benefactor of American education, he made significant contributions to the libraries of Yale and Harvard, and he influenced the founders of the institutions which eventually became Columbia University and the University of Pennsylvania. His popular "Verses by the author on the prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America," which he wrote in 1716 while working on plans for a college in Bermuda and included in *A Miscellany* (1752), provided readers with a vision of the westward movement of civilization in which America supplants a decadent Europe as the seat of culture. Finally, his philosophical system had a modest influence upon eighteenth-century American thinkers.

Born near Kilkenny, Ireland, in 1685, George Berkeley, the son of William Berkeley was sent, eleven years later, to Kilkenny College and, in 1700 at the age of fifteen, to Trinity College, Dublin. In 1707 he received a Master of Arts degree and became a fellow of the college, a position he retained until 1724, when he was appointed dean of Derry. He published his first book, *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, in 1709 and expounded his epistemological theories in his next two works, *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713). It is upon these two works that his modern reputation rests.

In an argument aimed at rationalists and skeptics and designed to strengthen the forces of religion, Berkeley attacked the concepts John Locke had developed in *An Essay Concerning Human Un-*



George Berkeley, portrait by Van der Bank. The scene in the background reproduces the symbolic frontispiece in *Alciphron* (Bibliothèque Nationale)

*derstanding* (1690). Locke had argued that although sense experience provides the basis of all knowledge, one does not gain a direct perception of objects. Rather, the senses transmit to the mind ideas, which are not the physical objects themselves but which represent them. Instead of perceiving objects, the mind perceives ideas of objects, and while some of these representations duplicate the originals exactly, many others do not. Locke explained this assertion by distinguishing between the primary and secondary qualities of objects. The primary qualities are absolute and inherent properties—size, shape, weight, place, and movement. Secondary characteristics, on the other hand, are not innate. Qualities such as color, sound, and heat are effects which an object's primary properties produce in beings possessing sense organs. Ideas of the primary properties thus resemble the objects themselves exactly; ideas of secondary qualities exist only relative to the observer.

Berkeley argued that Locke's theory was, in fact, skeptical; if one does not perceive material substances directly, then one can have no certainty that one's ideas actually resemble these objects. He then proceeded to declare invalid Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities. First, he argued, primary properties cannot be separated from the secondary: "Extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable." Further, primary properties can be shown to be just as dependent upon the observer as secondary ones. When judging motion, one must apply relative terms, such as *fast* or *slow*, to it. *Shape*, another primary quality, depends upon the position of the observer. For these reasons, it becomes impossible, Berkeley argued, to make a distinction between inherent and merely perceived qualities.

He then discussed the reasons that all such qualities can exist only in connection with the mind. The "absolute existence of unthinking things with-

out any relation to their being perceived . . . seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*." In other words, shape can only refer to something which can be touched or seen, sound to something heard, and color to something seen. Such qualities cannot exist apart from a perceiver. Berkeley tried to prove this contention further by asking the reader to think of something which exists completely unperceived. It is impossible to do so, he says, because, Hylas finally concedes, "As I was thinking of a tree in a solitary place, where no one was present to see it, methought that was to conceive a tree as existing unperceived or unthought of, not considering that I myself conceived it all the while."

Berkeley, however, would have resisted being classed as a purely subjective idealist. He had, after all, attacked Locke because he believed that his predecessor's epistemology left man in a state of almost complete uncertainty. Further, he stated repeatedly that the purpose of his own system was to justify the commonsense belief that we can have direct knowledge of the external world. Sensory qualities exist in relation to a perceiver. If they were not perceived at all, then they would have no existence. Fortunately, God's constant observation of the world ensures the existence of such objects. Describing Berkeley's ideas, T. E. Jessop has written, "Sensory fact is only evidenced by our perceiving; it is constituted by God's." The existence of God guarantees the truth of what one sees and ensures that objects will not cease to exist when one stops perceiving them. Berkeley's epistemological system thus ends as a statement of faith in revealed religion.

In 1713 Berkeley visited England for the first time. While in London he became associated with Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, and Alexander Pope, and was presented at court by Jonathan Swift. From October 1713 to August 1714, and then again from 1716 to 1720, he toured the Continent.

In 1721, his *An Essay towards Preventing the Ruine of Great Britain* was published. Here he castigated his contemporaries for relinquishing their religious values and succumbing to the lures of greed and skepticism. "Other nations have been wicked," Berkeley opined. "But we are the first who have been wicked upon principle." The signs of this condition are plentiful: "Vice and villainy have by degrees grown reputable among us; our infidels have passed for fine gentlemen, and our venal traitors for men of sense, who knew the world. We have made a jest of public spirit, and cancelled all respect for whatever our laws and religion repute sacred. The old English modesty is quite worn off, and instead of blushing for our crimes we are

ashamed only of piety and virtue." Because of these failings, Berkeley ominously warned his readers "We have long been preparing for some great catastrophe" which may not lie far in the future, for "the final period of our State approaches."

Yet if Europe has been corrupted, there is hope that America will become the bearer of civilization. He expressed this belief in a poem which he circulated among friends in 1726 but did not publish until 1752, "Verses by the Author on the prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America." The civilization which is dying out in decadent Europe will eventually be reborn in full glory in America:

The Muse, disgusted at an age and clime  
Barren of every glorious theme,  
In distant lands now waits a better time,  
Producing subjects worthy fame:

In happy climes where from the genial sun  
And virgin earth such scenes ensue,  
The force of art by nature seems outdone,  
And fancied beauties by the true:

In happy climes, the seat of innocence,  
Where nature guides and virtue rules,  
Where man shall not impose for truth and sense  
The pedantry of courts and schools:

There shall be sung another golden age,  
The rise of empire and of arts,  
The good and great inspiring epic rage,  
The wisest heads and noblest hearts.

Not such as Europe breeds in her decay;  
Such as she bred when fresh and young,  
When heavenly flame did animate her clay,  
By future poets shall be sung.

This vision of decline and renaissance reaches its highest point in the final stanza, in which Berkeley sees history as a vast drama, the final act of which will be an American golden age:

Westward the course of empire takes its way;  
The four first acts already past,  
A fifth shall close the drama with the day;  
Time's noblest offspring is the last.

Unwilling simply to watch the spectacle take its course, Berkeley desired to help it along. In 1722 he conceived a plan for founding a college in Bermuda in order to further the cause of knowledge in the New World. The college would train "pastors of

good morals and good learning," he declared in a letter to his friend Sir John Percival. Such a college would teach not only English immigrants but also "a number of young American savages," who would then "become the fittest missionaries for spreading religion, morality, and civil life among their countrymen." He expanded upon these ideas in a pamphlet published in 1724, *A Proposal for the Better Supplying of Churches in our Foreign Plantations, and for Converting the Savage Americans to Christianity*. Here he argued that Bermuda was a better location for the college than any spot on the American continent because conditions were, he had been informed, unfavorable on the mainland. The atmosphere on the continent was one of irreligion and moral corruption, he wrote, and Harvard and Yale could make little headway against this spirit. Bermuda, on the other hand, was inhabited by honest and uncorrupted settlers, blessed with the finest climate in the New World, and far safer than the continent from bands of marauding Indians.

In the next year, 1725, the British government granted Berkeley a charter to establish St. Paul's College on Bermuda and to serve as its president during the first eighteen months of its existence. He then began the job of raising the money required for his venture, a task which became increasingly difficult as evidence that he had overrated the advantages of Bermuda mounted. By 1728 the venture had made so little progress that Berkeley attempted to push his project forward by traveling to America himself. In September 1728, several weeks after his marriage to Anne Forster of Dublin, he sailed not to Bermuda but to Newport, Rhode Island, where he spent the next thirty-three months of his life.

While he was in Newport, his plan fell through, but he became, in numerous instances, a benefactor to budding American institutions. He donated to Trinity Church in Newport the first organ to reach New England. This gift, however, pales when compared with his extensive gifts to Yale and Harvard. He donated 880 volumes—on subjects as varied as agriculture, history, philosophy, and religion—to Yale's library. In 1742, ten years after this gift, the collection was estimated to account for one-third of all books at Yale. To the more-established Harvard, Berkeley sent about 125 volumes, most of which consisted of Latin classics. Berkeley's beneficence to these institutions did not stop with the donation of books. When he had become certain that he would be unable to establish St. Paul's College, he gave to Yale, for the token sum of five shillings, his home in Newport and the ninety-

six acres of farmland, woodland, meadow, and orchard which surrounded it. The income derived from this land was to be used to support outstanding students.

His sojourn in America also gave him the opportunity to make, in the person of Samuel Johnson, an Anglican tutor at Yale, one of the few contemporary converts to his philosophical system. Johnson, at the time, was searching for a philosophical system to take the place of the Puritan theories in which he had ceased to believe; therefore, he began an extensive correspondence with the older man in which he tested Berkeley's thought against other systems then prominent. In one series of letters, for example, they discussed the relative merits of immaterialism and deism. Referring to Berkeley's argument that God must exist in order to guarantee the continued presence of objects, Johnson wondered what this conception implied about God's nature. God must constantly act to keep the world in existence, "to stand by it and influence and direct all its motions." The God of the deists, on the other hand, is like a watchmaker who, in creating the world, endows it with the ability to run, from then on, of its own accord, without his constant intervention. Does not, Johnson wondered, the God of the deists seem more powerful than Berkeley's supreme being? Berkeley answered this query first by exposing the faulty metaphor upon which deism operated. When a watchmaker completes one of his clocks, he relies upon forces over which he has no control, such as gravity, to enable the machine to continue working. The "artificer is not the adequate cause of the clock; so that the analogy would not be just to suppose a clock is in respect to its artist what the world is in respect of its creator." Berkeley concluded his reply by asserting that the notion that God acts upon the world should in no way impoverish our view of the deity. "For aught I can see, it is no disparagement to the perfection of God to say that all things necessarily depend on Him . . . and that all nature would shrink to nothing, if not upheld and preserved in being by the same force that first created it." Such exchanges would eventually contribute much to Johnson's formulations in *Elementa Philosophica* (1752).

While living in Newport, Berkeley attacked the forces of skepticism not only in his letters but also in a series of philosophical dialogues, *Alciphron; or the Minute Philosopher*. His targets here are Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftsbury, who, in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) had laughed at religious orthodoxy and exalted the powers of nature, and Bernard Man-

deville, whose *Fable of the Bees* (1714) had argued that people are egoistic rather than altruistic, and that vices should be indulged because they lead to a nation's economic prosperity. These opinions are represented in Berkeley's dialogue by two free-thinkers, Lysicles and Alciphron, and refuted by Euphranor, a farmer, and Crito, a village parson. In the face of Alciphron's glorification of nature as against "artificial" religion and government, Euphranor is able to show that these two are universal, and therefore "natural to man, notwithstanding they admit of sundry forms and different degrees of perfection." Then, arguing against Mandeville, Euphranor and Crito demonstrate that vice and freethinking, rather than contributing to the public good, do in fact destroy a society; "a corruption of principles works its ruin more slowly" than open rebellion, "perhaps, but more surely." In the final dialogue, Alciphron argues that grace is "but an empty name," and Crito breaks through a series of abstractions which have shrouded the concept by arguing that grace is God's active demonstration of his love for man. Grace, like faith, is "not an indolent perception, but an operative persuasion of mind" which one can easily grasp when one ceases to look at it as a dead abstraction. When *Alciphron* was published, it immediately drew fire from Mandeville, who complained that in Lysicles and Alciphron, such "Undauntedness in assaulting, and Alacrity in yielding . . . never met in the same Individuals before." On the other hand, the book found a place on the shelves of many, including Jonathan Edwards, who valued defenses of religion.

By March 1731 Berkeley had realized that he would never receive the money to establish the college in Bermuda and, in September of that year, he and his wife left Newport and sailed for Britain. He was appointed bishop of Cloyne in 1734 and fulfilled his duties there for the next eighteen years. In 1744, he published what was, for contemporary readers, his most popular book, *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar-Water, and Divers Other Subjects Connected Together and Arising One from Another*, in which he extolls tar water as a cure for virtually all illnesses. This subject was to obsess him for the rest of his life.

In 1749, Berkeley briefly put aside this new preoccupation in order to advise Johnson about the project of founding King's College (later Columbia University), an institution designed to serve as a focal point for Anglicans in America. Having taken to heart the failure of his design for Bermuda, he suggested that, rather than "applying to England

for Charters or Statutes (which might cause great trouble expense and delay)," Johnson and his colleagues should simply go ahead with their plans and "do the business quietly." The faculties should be made up of people from New England for "I am very apprehensive none can be got in Old England (who are willing to go) worth sending." Berkeley suggested further that available funds should be spent not upon buildings but upon faculty, for the "chief concern must be to set out in good method, and introduce from the very first, a good taste into Society." The curriculum should concentrate upon the classics and upon inculcating a concern for morality. Prizes "may prove useful encouragement to the students" and degree requirements should be based upon the systems of Oxford and Cambridge in order to "pave the way for admitting their graduates *ad eundem* in the British universities." When Johnson answered Berkeley's letter, he indicated that these suggestions had been forwarded to Philadelphia, where Benjamin Franklin and others were also planning to establish a college. This correspondence constituted Berkeley's final attempt to further the cause of education in the colonies. He died four years later, in Oxford.

Berkeley's works were read and debated in America through much of the remainder of the century. "Verses by the Author on the prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America" became popular during the 1750s and 1760s, a time in which concern about America's cultural role was growing. His poem served as a definitive expression of ideas about the westward movement of culture, a concept which had become widespread. Traveling through the mid-Atlantic colonies in 1759, Andrew Burnaby, for example, noted that "an idea strange as it is visionary, has entered into the minds of the generality of mankind, that empire is travelling westward; and everyone is looking forward with eager and impatient expectation to that destined moment. . . ."

Berkeley's philosophical ideas did not fare as well, however; after a brief period in which they found a champion in Samuel Johnson, they quickly fell into disrepute. Johnson's textbook *Elementa Philosophica*, which Benjamin Franklin published in 1752, was dedicated "To the Right Reverend Father in God, George, Lord Bishop of Cloyne, in Ireland," and bore the following acknowledgment of its relation to the Irish philosopher: "Tho' I would not be too much attached to any one author or system; yet whoever is versed in the writings of Bishop Berkeley, will be sensible that I am in a particular manner beholden to that excellent

philosophy for several thoughts that occur in the following tract. And I cannot but recommend it to any one that would think with exactness on these subjects, to peruse all the works of that great and good gentleman. . . ." Like Berkeley and Locke, Johnson used the term ideas to refer to the "immediate objects of sense." Ideas "must derive to us from an Almighty, intelligent active cause, exhibiting them to us, impressing our minds with them, or producing them in us"; thus everything which man perceived had "an immediate dependence upon the Deity." As in Berkeley's system, only God's perception of all objects guarantees that they will not, when not observed by other beings, drop out of existence. One "must infer the necessary existence of an eternal mind" in order to understand why unseen objects continue to exist. Indeed, God is "the continual Preserver of all His creatures and consequently . . . the moment he should cease to will the continuance of their existence, they must unavoidably cease and drop into nothing."

Other colonial thinkers of the mid-eighteenth century rejected Berkeley's system unambiguously. After Cadwallader Colden read *De Motu* at the suggestion of Samuel Johnson, he wrote Johnson that "I think that the Doctor has made the greatest collection in this and his other performances, of indistinct and indigested conceptions from the writings of both the ancients and the moderns that I ever met with in any man's performances."

The commonsense philosophy of Thomas Reid eventually displaced Berkeley's immaterialism in most colleges. Disciples of the Scottish philosopher portrayed Berkeley as a fool who, in attempting to deliver Christianity from the assault of the skeptics, had actually paved the way for David Hume's much more thoroughgoing skepticism. John Witherspoon, a Scottish minister who became president of the College of New Jersey in 1768,

strove mightily, and in the end, successfully, to extirpate what was left of Berkeley's influence. He succeeded eventually in demonstrating to the disciples of immaterialism that, as he put it in one of the lectures collected in his posthumous *Works* (1800), Berkeley's system was simply "a wild and ridiculous attempt to unsettle the common sense of metaphysical reasoning." By the end of the eighteenth century, serious defenders of Berkeleyan epistemology had virtually disappeared from the American intellectual scene.

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