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Thomistic Studies

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Atheism, the Offspring of Deism in Berkeley

George Berkeley, an eighteenth century philosopher and Protestant bishop, built his philosophical system in order to prevent the advancements of Atheism and undercut Materialism. This determination to uphold Theism against the onslaught of Deists and freethinkers lead him to extreme conclusions, such as the denial of the existence of matter and the consideration of “nature as a process of the mind”¹. As Father Cornelio Fabro notes, this reduction of nature renders Berkeley’s philosophy immanent and thus ultimately atheistic in its worldview, a view which he fought against so forcibly.

George Berkeley was born on March 12, 1685 in Kilcrene, Ireland to a family of English descent. In 1700 he entered Trinity College in Dublin and became a Fellow; and as Copleston relates, even at this early time he had already begun to doubt the existence of matter. “In fulfillment of statutory requirements” he was ordained a deacon in 1709 and a priest in 1710 in the Protestant Church². He published various works from 1707-1752; the clearest expression of his philosophical and theological theories of knowledge and immateriality is found in *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Part I, (there never was a second Part) published in 1710. Berkeley continued writing and teaching until 1728 when he set sail for America to attempt to form a missionary college in Bermuda with the hopes of educating the sons of English planters and Indians. Landing in Rhode Island, Berkeley changed his plans desiring to form a college there in New England, and so returned to England to gain permission.

¹ Pintado, Patricia. *God in Exile: An Introduction to Cornelio Fabro’s Appraisal of Modern Thought*, pg. 143

² Cf. Copleston, Frederick. *A History of Philosophy, Volume V*, pg. 202.

However, upon his return in 1734, Berkeley was made Bishop of Cloyne. While in America, Berkeley wrote his longest work, *Alciphron or the Minute Philosopher*, presented as “An Apology for the Christian Religion Against Those Who are Called Free-Thinkers”; he continued writing responses to Deists and “Freethinkers” of his time, seemingly considering it his duty to do so. In 1752, Berkeley settled at Oxford with his wife and family and died shortly thereafter on January 14, 1753.

Berkeley’s Criticism of Deism

Berkeley closely analyzes the trains of modern thought especially in his time; the main topics of interest being Deists, Materialists, Skeptics, and Atheists. Berkeley’s thorough assessment is praised by Fabro as “highly indicative for our research on the relations between modern thought and Atheism”³. In *Alciphron*, his main work on Atheism, Berkeley “traces the inevitable process of logic followed by freethought in his day, beginning with its attack on the mysteries of Christianity and ending with the undermining of all faith in, or persuasion of, the existence of a God”⁴. Berkeley’s portrayal of a philosopher named Alciphron is a combined representation of a Deist, a Materialist, and Freethinker, who in his logical process of viewing the Christian faith, esteems all belief in the existence of God as a cherished memory unproven by the senses and therefore invalid. Berkeley’s aim in his portrayal of Alciphron is to show that Atheism is the only destination of freethinking, especially that of his contemporaries.

Berkeley displays the flow of modern thought from freethinking about Christianity into its final degradation in explicit Atheism in a lengthy and ironic soliloquy found in *Alciphron*. Alciphron “observe[s] several sects and subdivisions of sects [of Christianity] espousing very

³ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in Exile*, pg. 293.

⁴ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in Exile*, pg. 292.

different and contrary opinions”⁵ from which he concludes that which contains all similarities (and therefore must hold truth, which is “of a stable, permanent, and uniform nature”⁶) is latitudinarianism. Yet Alciphron continues his freethinking, and begins to consider all the major world religions. Seeing the only common element is a belief in one God, he becomes a Deist. Despite its belief in a divine power, Deism, for Berkeley, is simply a step on the path to Atheism, and he thus emphatically criticized his contemporary, John Locke, who maintained the compatibility of Christianity with his Deist philosophy. “Atheism is, for Berkeley, the direct offspring of Deism.”⁷ This direct link between Deism and Atheism is described in the last stage of Alciphron’s intellectual journey. Once a Deist, he compares every belief or philosophy of all times throughout the world. Alciphron concludes, “finding they agreed in no one point of faith, but differed one from another ... even in the notion of a God ... I thereupon became an Atheist.”⁸ This pretend soliloquy was a pointed jab at Berkeley’s contemporaries who wished to retain their name as Christian yet espoused philosophical beliefs which must ultimately end in Atheism. Thus, Berkeley makes his point clear: the very mood of freethinking is inherently atheistic, and Freethinkers must openly and honestly admit the ultimate consequences of their philosophies.

Another insight of Berkeley is his recognition of the importance of the modern errors regarding freedom to the question of Atheism. He exposes the fact that many modern philosophers consider atheistic thought as “the only guarantee of human freedom”⁹. Berkeley correctly analyzes these trains of modern thought; for, to the Atheist, the admittance of dependence on anything is to reject man’s freedom: “Atheism therefore... is the grand *arcanum*

⁵ Berkeley, George. *Alciphron*, I, 8.

⁶ Berkeley, George. *Alciphron*, I, 8.

⁷ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in Exile*, pg. 294.

⁸ Berkeley, George. *Alciphron*, I, 8.

⁹ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in Exile*, pg. 293

to which a true genius naturally riseth, by a certain climax or gradation of thought, and without which he can never possess his soul in absolute liberty and repose,”¹⁰ says Alciphron. According to the Atheist, denying the existence of God gives true freedom to man, instead of weighing man down with the scruples of religion which are simply societal structures kept in order to preserve cherished memories from one generation to the next. However, they argue, once thoroughly analyzed, man realizes that the notion of God’s existence was not received by the senses, which is “the only reality that man can comprehend”¹¹, and therefore has no validity. The one who “breaks through those airy spinges [of whimsical notions of conscience, duty, principle and the like], and asserts his original independency...is truly free”¹². These assertions of Alciphron unify many streams of modern thought within the decadent processes of Deism, Materialism, and Atheism in the ideas of truth, freedom, and the nature of man.

Materialism as the Root of Atheism

Berkeley finds the greatest root of Atheism to be Materialism. This is a direct response to the philosophies of his contemporaries. For example, John Locke, whose Skepticism about the distinction of matter and thought opened the door to the idea of the absolute materiality of man, and John Toland, who carried Locke’s proposals to their consequent ends considering matter as “the constitutive basis of reality”¹³ and thus concluded “life to be immanent in matter.”¹⁴ Both of these philosophies removed the need of a spiritual principle in man. Berkeley’s response, radical

¹⁰ Berkeley, George. *Alciphron*, I, 9.

¹¹ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in Exile*, pg. 277.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in Exile*, pg. 285.

¹⁴ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in Exile*, pg. 286.

and sweeping as well, is that “the main pillar and support of Skepticism... so likewise...all the impious schemes of Atheism and Irreligion”¹⁵ is the admission of Matter or Corporeal Substance.

Berkeley’s entire philosophical system is set up to refute and eradicate any need for the admission of a material substance. Fabro explains, “Berkeley develops against the atheists the thesis that the *objects* of vision are *signs* in which is virtually contained a language which is admitted to be of a superior kind, i.e., a ‘divine language’, so that the whole universe of phenomena presented to the senses is in reality a revelation of the Supreme Power as active Mind (§§ 9-18).”¹⁶ All sensations, for Berkeley, are ideas impressed upon the senses by God, who is actively involved in our knowing process, each time presenting to the senses what it perceived, thus there is no need to admit of matter, and God is a necessary element in the reality of sensation. “Berkeley’s fundamental aim is ... to show that sensible things have no absolute existence independent of mind, and thus to cut the ground from under the feet of the materialist and atheists.”¹⁷

Berkeley disregards the need for corporeal substance with his main metaphysical proposition: *Esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived). In Berkeley’s system, nothing exists without a mind perceiving it. He gives this example to explain his position: “The table that I write on I say exists, that is, I see and feel it; meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. There was an odor, that is, it was smelt; there was a sound, that is, it was heard; a color or figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch. This is all that I can understand by these and the like expressions. – For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that

¹⁵ Berkeley, George. *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, 92.

¹⁶ Berkeley, George. *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, 92.

¹⁷ Copleston, pg. 245.

is to me perfectly unintelligible. There *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.”¹⁸ All sensible objects, for Berkeley, are ideas and in his system the primacy of the thing is its existence to the mind, which is given directly by enlightenment from God.

A seeming absurdity arises within this explanation. For if an object is not perceived, then it must go out of existence and re-enter existence when a mind perceives it again. However, Berkeley responds, “...consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some Eternal Spirit.”¹⁹ In Berkeley’s system, the stability of the reality we perceive is guaranteed by the perceiving mind of God, for when one walks into a room in which there is no one else, God immediately impresses those objects maintained in His Mind to the person’s senses, thus the person begins to perceive them. Berkeley falls into a unique mixture of Empiricism and Rationalism because knowledge comes from our experience of sensation, yet he rejects that matter could cause anything in the spirit. Therefore, all of sensation must be spiritual: a Divine Spirit affecting the real things (the ideas imprinted on the senses) within the spirit of man. In his system, all things necessarily depend upon God actively, thus it is built purposefully to refute Deists and Materialists and therefore Atheists.

The Implicit Atheism of *Esse est Percipi*

It may seem strange to say that a philosopher who builds his entire system in order to refute Materialism, Deism, and Atheism is inherently atheistic himself. While Fabro finds Berkeley’s assessment of Atheism useful, he concludes that Berkeley’s system is ultimately

¹⁸ Berkeley, George. *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 6.

atheistic because it is monistic. “Monism first abolishes the duality between a transcendent creator and the created world. Second, it denies the union and difference in man’s bodily and spiritual nature in one of two ways: by making man into a ‘thinking matter’ according to some Enlightenment thinkers, or by reducing all of nature to a process of the mind, as instituted by Berkeley and completed by Hegel”.²⁰ Berkeley cuts off man’s materiality and renders reality dependent on the mind, the perceiving subject. Despite Berkeley’s attempts to make God a necessary part of his philosophical system, Berkeley opens the door to Atheism because he reduces reality to the mind. For Berkeley, the existence of all things lies in a mind perceiving it, nothing is independent of a mind. Although the mind of man is illumined by God in Berkeley’s philosophy, in later Idealism the foundation of reality will become absolute self-positing consciousness.

Although, Berkeley’s philosophical system is not fully developed into its consequent conclusions because he maintains God’s role in impressing ideas on the sense, it becomes clear that Berkeley’s system is immanent once God is removed from it, or is expressed as part of the framework of man. Fabro cites M. Gueroult on this point: “... By the affirmation and not by the exclusion of the sensible world, everything is eventually reduced to a world of spirits receiving from the divine Spirit the universe of things which is but a universe of ideas.”²¹ Within Berkeley’s lifetime, some of his theories were taken up and imposed into the skeptic philosophy of David Hume, “and Hume will be the chief thinker to appeal to Berkeley’s critique of abstract idea and assert the principle of the correspondence between impression and idea, eliminating from the mind all possibility to metaphysical reality.”²²

²⁰ Pintado, Patricia. *God in Exile: An Introduction to Cornelio Fabro’s Appraisal of Modern Thought*, pg. 143

²¹ Fabro, Cornelio. *God in Exile*, pg. 298. Citing M. Gueroult, *Berkeley, Quatre études sur la perception et sur Dieu* (Paris, 1956) pp. 119f.

²² Fabro, *God in Exile*, pg. 298.

In conclusion, George Berkeley attempted with his philosophical system to set up a bulwark between Deists and Skeptics in order to prevent a tendency toward Atheism by denying the material substance and placing being in the perception of ideas through the active imprinting on the senses by the Eternal Spirit. Berkeley found solutions to the problem of Atheism by giving God an active role in sensual knowledge and by rejecting matter as anything that could subsist apart from a mind perceiving it. However, Berkeley's isolation of the mind is quickly taken up and used to make metaphysical reality dependent of a positing consciousness. George Berkeley's immanent philosophy is atheistic, which is why Berkeley failed to be a bulwark to prevent the decadence of philosophy toward further extremes of Atheism.

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