

A PIECE OF SENSIBLE BREAD

Berkely insisted that his philosophy was nothing more than a return to commonsense. But so did his Scottish critics when they argued, as Thomas Reid did, that we know realism to be true simply by appealing to it. In opposition to Berkeley, Reid argues that a sense percept is directly connected with the belief that its object is present in the external world and is independent of our perception of it. James Beattie, James Oswald, and Dugald Stewart followed Reid in urging the same position. But can it be that commonsense really requires an elaborate defense? Reid's purpose was to defend commonsense against apparent philosophical paradoxes like those found, he thought, in Berkeley. His usual approach was to remind us of the command that commonsense had over us.

If something is truly commonsensical then it should obviously be something which any ordinary person who has not engaged in complicated reflection can understand. Reid spoke of principles of commonsense and affirmed that there are contingent truths and necessary truths, the latter including axioms of grammar, mathematics, logic and even ethics and aesthetics. They are intuitively self-evident. But if he were correct, why would they have to be so carefully formulated by a philosopher? The same, of course may be asked of Berkeley who truly thought he was bringing man back to commonsense after he had wandered in the mazes of Scholastic metaphysics and Locke's doctrine of unknown substances. Even some contemporary appeals, like G. E. Moore's famous 1925 article "A Defence of Commonsense", are aimed at bringing people back to the views of the ordinary man and his ordinary language.

The desire to return men to commonsense implies that they have somehow been lured away from it by abstract theorizing; that they have been diverted from what is obviously and commonsensically true by the machinations of philosophers who deliberately take people away from commonsense for reasons known only to themselves. Interestingly enough the celebration of commonsense for its own sake is not found among scientists. Nor do scientists have any wish whatever to bring people back to

it. Indeed, it is commonsense with its naivete and superstitions about molecular biology or nuclear physics. Nor is technology an ally of commonsense. For the sake of mankind, it goes against it.

Why then have philosophers felt compelled to claim that they were bringing people back to commonsense? Does any ordinary untutored person really care about the abstruse reflections of epistemologists and metaphysicians? Have philosophical principles in the realm of ontology ever made any difference to any ordinary person so that he would somehow be elated to find out that what he had been believing all along was now found out to be true by those who had spent years in complicated reflections? S. A. Grave acutely observes: "It may be asked whether commonsense had beliefs until philosophers engaged in its defence ascribed to them."¹ When American Pragmatism was originally formulated, some thinkers were overjoyed to realize that they had at last been able to state something which the man in the street could understand. But is this a boon to philosophical activity? Is the criterion of philosophical wisdom to be found in some putative commonsense view which any ordinary person can readily understand without special effort?

It seems apparent that the constant appeal to commonsense or even ordinary language is wrongheaded. Commonsense is ambiguous, a position with strange provenance. It does, however have a journalistic appeal. Newspaper men are pleased when they can find a view which somehow speaks to the "average reader". Thus even scientific findings, for the journalist, have to be made translatable into commonsense language and palatable to ordinary language before they can be reported. The unlearned, average person is catered to. He does not have to put out any special effort to intellect to understand anything because great truths are presented to him in a commonsense way. But this appeal is misguided. If anything, commonsense must be judged and corrected and brought into line with what is factually correct and logically coherent. Indeed, the reason philosophy and its offspring, science, arose in the first place was because of the problems raised by commonsense. The fictional "man in the street" is no expert in thinking or in anything. It is his views which need to be evaluated and criticized. Commonsense can never be a test. It me-

rely provides data for study. G.R.G. Mure once said: "In a philosophical court the place for commonsense is in the dock, or on occasion the witness box, never the bench."²

There must then be some other reason why philosophers, especially since the eighteenth century, have thought the appeal to commonsense was necessary. We can take a statement from the early part of Berkley's *Third Dialogue Between Hylas and Philonous* as an opener. In responding to attacks from the materialist Hylas, Berkley in the person of Philonous at one point replies, "A piece of sensible bread, for instance, would stay my stomach better than ten thousand times as much of that insensible, unintelligible, real bread you speak of."³ And just before this he says :

I am of a vulgar cast, simple enough to believe my senses and leave things as I find them. To be plain, it is my opinion, that the real things are those very things I see and feel and perceive by my senses. These I know, and finding they answer all the necessities and purposes of life, have no reason to be solicitous about any other unknown beings.

Now, as is well known, Berkeley was an opponent of the Aristotelians and their successors the Scholastics, whom he called Schoolmen. The view that the world of physical objects consisted in substances which had qualities attached to them was repugnant to him because he could neither define nor experience any substance. He similarly opposed Locke's view. Substance for him was a word that did not solve any problems but created them, for it was an unknown somewhat presumably operating behind the scenes of daily experience making the world of sights, smells and sound evident to our senses but never itself coming into a perceptual focus. Accordingly, Berkeley's philosophy of Immaterialism is primarily directed against any metaphysic which posits material substance but has no empirical evidence for said substance. He honestly thought that such systems raised so much dust that trained philosophers as well as ordinary persons could not see elementary truths. And the result was confusion and even disruption in ordinary daily affairs. Furthermore, practical religion suffered, for people did not know what to believe. In addition to

what he regarded as faulty metaphysics, the activities of those he called "free-thinkers" in his *Alciphron* had abetted the disruption of the social order and common morality. In their clever and publicized talk they had made their positions so attractive that bright young minds searching for truth were made to feel ridiculous if they actually trusted in moral ideals or believed in any form of traditional religion. It is difficult for an earnest mind to feel any confidence in his views if those who dominate the sophisticated world and inhabit elite intellectual circles promote skepticism of traditional values and ridicule even sincerity. Of course, ordinary persons without any intellectual interest at all, pay no attention to dilettantes and sophisticates anyway and probably don't even know that they exist. But Berkeley was interested in the thoughtful, inquiring persons who were seeking solutions to what were taken to be the basic issues of life and death, God and freedom and the soul. That is one reason he admittedly wrote his *Principles of Human Knowledge* and the *Three Dialogues*, to say nothing of the *Alciphron*.

Accordingly, in Berkeley's case, "commonsense" means a good bit more than a mere return to the views of the unthinking, unlearned country bumpkin who really cares not a whit for philosophy, science or truth, and is content to follow conventional ways of doing things with all the accompanying follies and superstitions. Berkeley's motive was to bring earnest inquirers to a philosophical position which was not only based on evidence and reason but which was understandable, persuasive, and which lent support to the best the human mind could think.

When he argues that a piece of sensible bread is better than a piece of ontological bread, he is doing just that. He is appealing to thoughtful reasoning minds not to mere commonsensical ones. He is challenging them to recognize that the world of sense is more real than any postulated ontological world. It is indeed reasonable to believe that one can trust his senses when it comes to the question of what to eat. The "sensible bread" is the only *real* bread for Berkeley; there is no other kind. It is not a finite mode of the attribute Substance, as Spinoza would say. Nor is it the product of aimless atoms that have somehow come together to cause the qualities we see, touch and taste, as Lucretius would have to say.

Neither is it a real "substance" which mysteriously exists even though it cannot be perceived or experienced in any way. The bread is to be taken as real in itself. In calling people back to the world of sense instead of fostering a belief in mysterious "matter", Berkeley thought he was calling them back to a commonsensical philosophy which not only had the support of reason but which gave meaning and value to the practical life. F. W. McConnell comments :

As to the plain man finding Berkeley's mentalism objectionable, is not Berkeley's metaphysics the logical conclusion of commonsense? When digging around the roots of the 'common' man's thinking do we not perceive that the real object is regarded as that which is socially verified and consistently and coherently thought about? Neither of these involve an extra-men al existence.⁴

But Berkeley is no mere phenomenalist. He did not say that all that existed in the world was sensible things. He is often interpreted as one who really denied the existence of physical things. But this single quotation about "sensible bread" given the lie to that facile and glib misrepresentation Berkeley does not deny the world of things, the world of bread and cheese and trees; he defines it. It exists as sensed. He charges the materialist with not trusting his senses. "In short, you do not trust your senses, I do."⁵ Then he adds that these sense objects have their rootage and basis in a God who presents them to us in a regular and coherent way, in such a way that they testify to his goodness. He does not "drag in" the idea of God, as is sometimes wrongly said, but rather from the orderly and dependable phenomena of the sense world, one infers the presence of a Mind as their source. Thus matter or unknown substances are not logically required to account for a piece of bread. God is the ultimate sponsor and source of the "sensible bread". All that exists in the sense world can be viewed as "manifest tokens of divinity."⁶

This is really not a commonsense view at all. But what is? Is there *any* view which can rightly claim to be commonsensical? It would be better for philosophers to stop the quest for that

which caters to and satisfies the ordinary man and to seek first for that which is true according to reason and evidence. There are no "canons" of commonsense. When philosophers appeal to it, they most often seem to mean the "commo. sense" which prevails in their own circle of sophisticated acquaintances. They cannot and do not mean the common sense of a Mongolian or an Amazonian or an American. They have a special but unstated idea in mind. I think we have shown what Berkeley meant by it.

But there is a point we can make in favour of a general commonsense. There are some metaphysicians, many in India, who are wont to say that the world of sense is an unreal world, possibly *maya*, a product of cosmic ignorance, or may be an illusion, a shadow of what is truly real. In the West there is a particular religious view, Christian Science, which announces that the world of matter and sensible things, as well as all illness, is quite unreal and is the result of our ignorance and our failure to comprehend fully the mind of God. I am not here denying the possible validity of such alternative immaterialistic views. But we must affirm again that Berkeley's piece of sensible bread will satisfy the hunger pangs of one's "unreal" stomach more than a metaphysical theory will. No matter how the world of sense is "explained" metaphysically, one behaves in that world in the way described by Berkeley. If a piece of bread is unreal, so is the butter and knife which spreads it and the hand which grasps it and the teeth which chew it and the saliva which helps digest it. To say this is really not to tell us anything that makes any difference to the daily life, and that is the appeal of Berkeley. It may be that a cut across my wrist is unreal ontologically, and the blood which spurts out from it equally unreal, but I had better tie an unreal bandage on it, and perhaps an unreal tourniquet and apply some unreal antiseptic if I am ever again to spend time thinking about the nature of the real. A piece of sensible unreal bandage will do more for my unreal bleeding wrist than any unknown substance or the illusory being of some metaphysical doctrine.

To deny the world of sense may be a possible metaphysical conclusion but one cannot long live without using that world and

without eating "sensible bread". No matter how we interpret it, the world of sense is with us and places its demands upon us. Happily, the sensible world satisfies our "unreal" thirst too. It cannot be denied without being assumed and used. Berkeley reminds us that we must begin our philosophizing by acknowledging it before we theorize it out of existence. It is difficult to see where he is wrong in this.

(Home University :
State University of N. Y.,
College at Oswego)

Warren E. Steinkraus
Visiting Prof. of Philosophy
Banaras Hindu University

NOTES

1. S. A. Grave, "Commonsense" in P. Edwards (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. II, p. 156
2. G. R. G. Mure, *Retreat from Truth*, p. 153.
3. *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, Vol. II of *Works* (Luce and Jessop, eds.) p. 229.
4. F. W. McConnell, " *Berkeley and Skepticism* " in my *New Studies in Berkeley's Philosophy*, p. 49.
5. *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*.
6. *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Section 148.

OUR OUTSTANDING PUBLICATIONS

S. S. Barlingay

A Modern Introduction to Indian Logic 45-00

Shashi Bharadwaja

Common Sense Philosophy.

(A study of G. E. Moore's Metaphysics and
Epistemology) 14-00

Monier Williams

Indian Wisdom.

(Religious, Philosophical and Ethical
Doctrines of the Hindus) 100-00

Narendranath Law

Studies in Ancient Hindu Polity 50-00

John Campbell Omen

The Great Indian Epics

(The Stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata) 50-00

A. S. Thakur

The Philosophical Foundation of Education 35-00

Releasing in December

S. S. Barlingay (ed.)

Development of Philosophical Concepts in
Ancient and Medieval India.

M. B. Prasad

Reactions to Threat : A Study of Personality
Patterns of Repressors and Sensitizers.

NATIONAL PUBLISHING HOUSE

23, Darya Ganj, New Delhi - 110 002.