

BERKELEY KICKING HIS OWN STONES

The title of this paper alludes, of course, to a celebrated refutation of George Berkeley's immaterialism. A decade after Berkeley's death, James Boswell and Samuel Johnson "stood talking for some time together of Bishop Berkeley's ingenious sophistry to prove the non-existence of matter, and that every thing in the universe is merely ideal. "I observed", wrote Boswell, "that though we are satisfied his doctrine is not true, it is impossible to refute it. I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it., -- 'I refute it thus.'"¹

Berkeley unwittingly produced this refutation-by-recalcitrance in his own life efforts. That is the thesis of this paper. But current academic propriety frowns on making this sort of claim. We are admonished, when evaluating a philosopher's doctrine, not to give biographical facts testificatory weight.

What justifies the propriety forbidding our use of biography for philosophical criticism?

The received view is that a philosopher's life story is background material safely ignored or relegated to the introduction. Biography, showing *sources* of a philosopher's theories, may illuminate his motives or meanings, but not the merits of the very theories. To use biography in criticism is to commit the genetic or *ad hominem* fallacies. Aristotle's passion for biology is

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not evidence that the teleology of his physics is misguided, only an impetus toward that teleology. When we note that John Locke trained as a physician, we ease our recognition that he wanted to treat the disorders of the understanding, and that there is an analogy between his analytic-synthetic approach and the medical method taught at the University of Padua; but the biographical fact of his medical training tells us nothing about the *soundness* of his investigative method or his pathology of the understanding. And knowing that Spinoza ground lenses tells us nothing about anything — except that he was up against it in a world that provides free meals at the Prytaneum for its victorious athletes but not its philosophers.

But why the restriction of biography to genetic inquiries? A doctrine proposed by a living person is meant to have a future. What gave rise to the present author's doctrine on the critical use of biography is less important than how he is going to justify it to you, the reader, and apply it to Berkeley.

We think it is enough to note what led up to the classic works of Berkeley's youth, and then to stop. So we settle for a portrait of a stunted human being: "the good bishop." We thereby fail to see the relation Berkeley's philosophical ideas had to his personal growth, and this leaves us with an impoverished notion of philosophy. Is philosophy not supposed to affect our lives? This means more than its being an "influence" on others. Plato's claim in the *Meno* that knowledge and true opinion are equally good guides to correct action is based on the assumption that our ideas do guide our action. This suggests that our lives offer a way of putting our philosophical convictions to the test.

Berkeley invites this approach in two ways. First, whereas Locke examined knowledge primarily in the light of its source ("original"), Berkeley turned to its future applications. He did this through a theory of meaning that Charles Sanders Peirce

revived in 1978 in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear." William James gave a famous lecture twenty years later in which he credited Peirce's essay with inaugurating American pragmatism. It is a fitting coincidence that James delivered his lecture at the University of California in the city named after Berkeley, for Peirce himself claimed only to have formulated a method that Berkeley had already used.

What does it mean, asked Berkeley, to say that the earth moves? It means "that if we were placed in such and such circumstances, and such or such a position and distance, both from the earth and sun, we should perceive the former to move among the choir of planets, and appearing in all respects like one of them..."²

Perhaps likewise Berkeley's declaration that there is no material substance could be paraphrased into conditionals, the antecedents of which Berkeley realized in his life — without their predicted consequents. "If Berkeley were to undertake such and such a project, then he should not have the unmediated perception of material recalcitrance." But (the thesis of this paper) he did have that experience, as did Dr. Johnson when he kicked the stone

A second way that Berkeley invites testificatory use of his biography is in his precociousness. He was in his early twenties when he came to his immaterialism, and we know little about his earlier years. He died at 67. Either we accept the propriety of dismissing the bulk of his life as irrelevant to his philosophy, or, as is here proposed, we find a less fashionable way of using the biography to study the philosophy.

At least three difficulties now arise. For one thing, Peirce had extended his pragmatic method to encompass a theory of *meaning*, but he balked at James' pragmatic theory of *truth*. In

making the true the "expedient," James did not adequately distinguish the logical consequences of a proposition from the psychological results of believing it. The claim that a belief is true because holding it is emotionally satisfying is now generally discredited. This paper seems to be trying to revive just that claim.

Also, it seems to be supposing that a metaphysical theory is subject to the same sort of empirical confirmation—or at least disconfirmation—as a theory in the physical sciences. But long ago Hume and Kant savaged that supposition. The metaphysical doctrine of the non-existence of matter cannot be falsified, in just the same way as the scientific doctrine of the non-existence of the earth's motion.

Moreover, Samuel Johnson's refutation, as an argument of demonstration, is open to more than one interpretation. When he kicked the stone, did Dr. Johnson merely perceive some "tangible ideas", failing thereby to touch Berkeley's theory? Or did he strike deeper? Not everyone will see what Johnson showed as a token of the same type. Modes of perception vary. It seems especially presumptuous to offer an interpretation of meaning of a man's life.

These three concerns do not constitute a fatal objection to the present undertaking, only a risk: the risk of reducing truth to the merely subjective, metaphysical statements to the purely empirical, a life to a single interpretation. For there is a risk on the other side: the risk of not making allowance for the discovery of truths about life from living it, for the relevance of the actual world to our metaphysics, for the need to make sense of a human life as a whole. Sometimes we do learn lessons from life's experiences. Sometimes we do modify our outlook on reality when confronted with actuality. Sometimes we do see a particular

life as noble or wasted, rewarding or futile, tragic or comic — and any life is inevitably paradoxical.

We learn most from our failures. The project of this paper could fail if it were flawed in any or all of three ways. First, the doctrine guiding it might be false, for biography may not have the use here claimed for it. (For the sake of simplicity, assume the project to be guided by only one doctrine.) Secondly, even supposing the doctrine to be correct, it might be applied here in the wrong counterfactual conditional. The claim is that if one were to examine how Berkeley failed in such and such projects of his own, then one should apprehend evidence for refuting his immaterialism; but this paper may be mistaken about the facts or anticipated results. Finally, even granting that both the doctrine and its conceived application are flawless, the present author might be inept in getting the project under way—not the first time that someone has bungled when setting up a project suitable to a worthy doctrine. Yet failure need not depend on doctrinal error or misapplication, or on ineptitude. One can fail through no fault of his own. He may be just up against it.

Some doctrines—including metaphysical doctrines such as immaterialism—guide action only quite generally. Intermediate doctrines must then specify the project. This does not preclude, however, the action being a test of the more general doctrine.

Nor does an ill-conceived or poorly implemented project preclude a successful outcome. Indeed, easy success casts doubt upon the value of the project.

Berkeley's life as a whole was a shining triumph, yet it was nothing if not a series of failures. Consider, for example, his first major public undertaking, which was to convince the world of the truth of immaterialism. Though artfully presented, the doctrine was not generally well received. Alfred

North Whitehead has pointed out that, although it would be absurd to say that Berkeley was uninfluential during the eighteenth century, "all the same he failed to affect the main stream of scientific thought. It flowed on as if he had never written."³

In his private life, Berkeley fared no better when his first love spurned him. She was a younger woman named Anne Donnellan, whose father, Chief Baron of the Exchequer in Ireland, had died when she was a child. Her widowed mother had remarried, taking as her husband the younger brother of Berkeley's friend and patron Sir John Percival. When Berkeley proposed marriage to Anne Donnellan, all the signs were favourable: their equal circumstances, the consent of their friends, and her good opinion of him. We can only conjecture why she proved recalcitrant and turned him down. In any event, Berkeley had to look elsewhere for a wife.

Berkeley's second major public venture was to found a college in Bermuda. The proposal gained royal approval, a number of subscribers, and the promise of 20,000 pounds from the English Parliament. In 1728 Berkeley took his bride to America to await payment of the funds—in vain, thanks to Robert Walpole. Berkeley was indeed prophetic in the heliotropism of his line, "Westward the course of empire takes its way." Before issuing his proposal, however, he had not done all his homework on the material circumstances in America. Moreover, he slipped up in its execution, as when he neglected to require from Parliament a payment deadline. Still, without Berkeley's errors, the prime minister might have found a way to resist.

Berkeley managed not to make any significant mistakes in a third major public venture, a proposal for a national bank of Ireland. He showed remarkable insight in his anti-mercantilist

theory that monetary tokens are essentially counters of credit for promoting industry. He had done his homework as well—both in Rhode Island, where paper currency was used, and in Ireland, where he knew the material conditions of the populace and the repressive policies of the English government.

At this time he had done nearly everything humanly possible to actualize his scheme. He introduced his ideas for the bank in an engaging work called *The Querist*, which he published (in both Ireland and England) in three parts over a period of three years. Berkeley's rhetorical queries offered Ireland a most reasonable way out of its economic woes. Then, in several Dublin newspapers, he published an open "Letter on the Project of a National Bank," which he revised and republished with extracts from *The Querist* of the queries relating to the Bank. Finally in the fall of 1737, he went to Dublin from his diocese of Cloyne to sit in the House of Lords, where he could make his case personally.

Berkeley's sweetness and light notwithstanding, the Irish politicians at the Parliament House remained intractable. Suspecting only the worst, they would have nothing to do with the bank proposal Berkeley was just plain up against it. In rebounding from his stone, he broke a resolve recorded in the notebooks of his early twenties: "N. B. to rein in y^r Satyrical Nature."⁴ He wrote down a bitterly satirical series of queries under the title *The Irish Patriot, or Queries upon Queries*. Fortunately for his reputation, he had the good sense to leave the piece unpublished.

An instructive irony emerges from a chronological listing of the major public projects of this "master of the immaterial"⁵. The interests that began with philosophy became successively more material as he moved to education, then to economics, and finally to medicine. Yet even when recounting the medicinal

benefits of tar water in *Siris* (1744), he stuck to his early lofty thoughts of the spiritual ordering of the universe. The question is whether he had learned by then to temper that original vision with acknowledgement of the powers of material actuality.

Berkeley's genius lay in his ability to isolate — even wallow in — the sheer sensuousness of the world, and then give it semiotic status. He had an architect's eye. In 1713, on his first visit to London, he could gaze upon the just-completed St. Paul's Cathedral with an appreciation of its purely visual majesty. (In a *Guardian* essay written at that time, he compared the freethinker to a fly on a column of St. Paul's, unable to see the beauty of the whole.) This did not diminish his appreciation of the practical lesson experience had taught him: how to interpret the purely visual features of St. Paul's tactually. Though his starting point was perception in what Whitehead called the "mode of presentational immediacy," he could readily shift from an aesthetic to a pragmatic stance by using what was immediately given as a sign of what was not. In Peirce's terminology, he conceived things under the categories of both Firstness (quality, suchness) and Thirdness (mediation, signhood).

How much richer even had been Locke's experience of St. Paul's, which lay in ruins when he moved from Oxford to London just after the Great Fire. Locke beheld the effort that the "underlabourers" and "masterbuilders" were putting into the realization of Christopher Wren's grand design for a new cathedral. Locke's "idea" of solidity (impenetrability), which Locke got by pressing a football or a flint between his hands, is less differentiated than any of Berkeley's "ideas." Berkeley separated out of Locke's "simple ideas of sensation" objects of purely sensuous perception, and then distinguished the immediate from any mediate object of such perception. And, as a modern-day Heraclitus, Berkeley denied "matter" insofar as it was a

product of the abstractionist mentality of the scientist. In this he was indeed on the side of common sense. Where he betrayed common sense was in his reduction of philosophically acceptable matter to the objects of *sensuous* perception. Common sense demands that our unmediated perception sometimes be interactive. When Locke compressed his football, he was perceiving not just sensuously as a spectator but in a viseral way as an agent — in Whitehead's "mode of causal efficacy." In the latter mode, he was apprehending actuality under Peirce's category of Secondness (thisness, upagainstness). So was Dr. Johnson in kicking his stone. And — if we follow Aristotle in extending the notion of of materiality beyond the merely corporeal — so was Berkeley in contending before that gang at the Irish Parliament House. Because the objects of sensuous perception are inert, and because Berkeley restricted unmediated perception to that mode, Berkeley deprived material actuality of the "clout" that common sense has always found in it.

Berkeley liked to use written discourse as a model for the world. God is the Author of the Book of Nature. Locke also had theoretical recourse to the book model. In denying innate knowledge, Locke had noted how the ink had to be brought to the blank page; the world imprints ideas upon the mind by impact. Moreover, the ink is imprinted in the form of characters; ideas are signs, as they were for Berkeley. But Berkeley's interest in the "impressions" did not go beyond their qualitative form and semiotic use. In fastening on the sign types in his model, Berkeley chose to note only the *presence* of the inked sign tokens without concerning himself with what had gone into their actual *production*. Berkeley thought not of the laborious process of handwriting or printing, but of the intended characters and their linguistic meaning.

Ironically, this forerunner of pragmatism and operationalism had overlooked the philosophical significance of sweat—which finds even biblical significance in God's punishment of Adam. The Greek tradition of snootiness toward earned perspiration began with the Pythagorean Story of the Three Lives, or Parable of the Festival. Of the three types attending the Olympic Games—the vendors, the competitors, and the spectators—only the spectators, who are the philosophers in life, lead a life that is not slavish. Or so Pythagoras taught. And Plato concurred, ensconcing the spectator of all time and existence above the mundane. Yet even in Plato's idealism, in which a mythical Demiurge imposes the Forms on the Receptacle, the Receptacle proves recalcitrant. But it is in Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes that we find the most felicitous opposition to the form of a thing: the "lumber" out of which it is made. The formalist tradition needed to grant that we live in a world in which we do not just commune with other minds at the intellectual level, but we also interact with our material surroundings at the gut level. When Berkeley failed to acknowledge this point, common sense lost patience with the whole of his scheme and tagged it as visionary.

Yet the failures cited from Berkeley's life all seem to portray defeat not by material circumstances but by other minds: the readers of his philosophy (or at least those to whom his immaterialism was reported), his first love, the prime minister, and the Dublin politicians. Was it not, then, spiritual forces that he was ultimately up against?

Ultimately, perhaps, but not directly. Berkeley's theory of the knowledge of other minds will not accommodate their power being perceived without mediation. According to Berkeley, one infers by reason—on the basis of analogy with myself—the existence or nature of another mind from its effects, which are all one can perceive directly. Moreover, the objects of sensuous percep-

tion that one does know directly are "ideas" that, being no more than what they are perceived to be, are inert because one perceives no power in them. Therefore, either no power is directly given in perception, or there is non-sensuous perception, brutish as that may be. A claim of this paper is that we do directly feel power—most obviously in conjunction with our tactual experiences, but the world also grates or impinges on us with its blaring stereos and glaring lights, and occasionally it reeks of garlic and gasoline. What gets to us is not the heat, as they say, but the humidity: not stench as a sensory quality, but its potency.

The refutation—by-recalcitrance in this paper is not meant then, to be dismissive—as no doubt Dr. Johnson intended it—but corrective. Berkeley may have been right to maintain that real power is spiritual. But he did not allow that the actual potency of unthinking things as something other is a perceptual given. An example of direct apprehension of material recalcitrance that we might have drawn from Berkeley's life was his awareness, time and again, of being inhibited by his "habitual cholic" or "the gout" or some "disorder in the head". Behind his suffering may have been a spiritual force, perhaps offering him a lesson, just as behind the absence of the promised 20,000 pounds lurked Walpole's scheming. But it was the actual material resources—or lack thereof—that he had to cope with directly. In order to feel the pangs of hunger, we do not have to believe that someone is withholding food from us. Using the natural as a paradigm, we may, however, define what we are up against conventionally, or socially, as when we speak metaphorically of being between a rock and a hard place. In this paper the citations from Berkeley's life have been of the latter sort, but that is compatible with the wish that he had been a lens grinder.

The world is not to be got around. There is no free lunch, and ready success arouses our suspicions. At the same time that

his bank project was going down to humiliating defeat, Berkeley found astonishing ease in persecuting a group of Dublin blasphemers who called themselves Blasters. From our vantage point, it is hardly to Berkeley's credit that he was so ardent a foe of Blasters. Indeed, his experience in the colony of Rhode Island, where blasphemy was not a punishable offence, might have convinced him of the advantages of the separation of church and state. But he was, after all, up against his holding preferment in the established Church of Ireland. In reality, the victory over Blasters was but a sop thrown to the Lords Spiritual, who had recently undergone a defeat regarding payment to the clergy of the tithe of agistment (for pasturage of dry and barren cattle), and who were currently threatened with a mortmain bill (designed to restrain) legacies of lands or money for religious uses). Again, Berkeley achieved temporary celebrity with tar water, but his hopes for its medical potency had slender justification. While we are still living, it is realistic to expect recalcitrance everywhere but in our dreams. And, though it can contribute to our failures; without it we can have no genuine successes. When the degree of difficulty is negligible, we may well heed the concluding remark of Spinoza's *Ethics*, that "all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare."

The question arises whether Berkeley ever learned to temper his original view. Did he finally admit that the natural order that invites spiritual interpretation manifests directly an efficacy of its own? Sometime we might look into his last major work, *Siris*, to see how he used the notion of an "inferior instrumental or physical cause" to reconcile the apparent medicinal efficacy of tar water with an ultimately spiritual reality. He had so scripted his life that at last he had to address such a problem at length. Yet, the notion of Berkeley championing tar water as a possible panacea has brought smiles to many a face, including

that of his old flame, Anne Dennellan. And so much of the science in *Siris* is outdated, and the aura so Neoplatonic and Hermetic, that its quaintness puts us off. Still, Berkeley's discovery of tar water may have been just the breakthrough he needed to link the actual to the real, the recalcitrant to the refulgent.

This paper began by challenging an academic propriety. It concludes by embracing some linguistic proprieties. When we are in the midst of a discourse in the material mode, we should not shift abruptly to the spiritual. In Southern California, where occasional Santa Ana winds make the wooden shake shingles that are popular there an awesome fire hazard, a roofer's conversation with a potential customer came to a sudden standstill when his argument that a good reason for not reroofing with wood is that wood burns was met with the statement that God will provide. Berkeley's youthful immaterialism required us to *think* that a spirit heats, but bowed to the linguistic propriety of *saving* that fire heats — just as we should say that the sun rises even though we Copernicans know better than to think so. Even if spiritual agency is ultimate, a claim of this paper is that fire does heat; and the question is whether Berkeley finally came to see that there is an important truth after all in the received opinion that upholds the propriety of speaking this way. The world and the flesh are not to be repudiated. The realm of matter makes its own demands, whatever its relation to the realm of spirit. But language gives Berkeley more support than he realized. The failures Berkeley endured arose in a material setting from quite natural causes. Yet there is no linguistic impropriety in our using the spiritual mode when speaking of those failures. In choosing to kick the stones he did, the participant—not merely the spectator or even the interpreter — let life offer him a chance to learn of a flaw in his immaterialism, and to grow as a human

being. Someone once wisely observed that we humans do not have the maturity to learn from joy; we must learn from our suffering.

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NOTES

1. James Boswell; *The Life of Samuel, Johnson*, 2 vols. (London : J. M. Dent, 1906), vol. I, p. 292.
2. George Berkeley; *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Kenneth P. Winkler (Indianapolis : Hackett Publishing Company, 1982), sect. 58, p. 47.
3. Alfred North Whitehead; *Science and the Modern World* (New York : The New American Library, 1948), p. 67.
4. George Berkeley; *Philosophical Commentaries*, ed. George H. Thomas (Alliance, Ohio : Mount Union College, 1976), entry 634, p. 82.
5. Frank Muhly, Jr. (writer and producer), dialogue from the public television film *The Dean of Thin Air* (Providence, R. I. : WSBE TV, 1984).