

#### IV.—BERKELEY AS A MORAL PHILOSOPHER.

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IN his polemic against Abstract Ideas and Atheism, Bishop Berkeley presents the curious with a critical problem of a certain historical importance. He claims for the doctrines laid down in *The Principles of Human Knowledge*, that they will "abridge the labour of study, and make human sciences far more clear, compendious, and attainable than they were before" (§ 134). This claim he proceeds at some length to substantiate, in the provinces of Natural Philosophy and Mathematics, deferring the consideration of the benefits which would accrue to Moral Philosophy, by the banishment of Abstract Ideas, for a "more particular disquisition" (§ 144). The promise of a directly ethical disquisition he cannot be said to have redeemed; and the clause which admitted its necessity was, in his second edition of *The Principles*, omitted. It has therefore been left for his commentators to elucidate the "hint," which he declares will suffice (§ 100) to let any one see that "the doctrine of abstraction has not a little contributed towards spoiling the most useful parts of knowledge".

Even without his promise, the method by which he proceeds to divide the sciences shows that Moral Philosophy must logically be included among those which are to be aided and abridged; not to mention an explicit declaration, in his *Common Place Book*, that Truth is of three kinds: Natural, Mathematical, and Moral. We know how, in the light of his discovery, he has handled the first two kinds; as regards the last, in the absence of a particular disquisition, this "hint" and his writings as a whole are all the materials we have for a solution of the question of the relation of Berkeley's ethical theories to his *Principles of Human Knowledge*.

This relation has been described by Prof. Fraser as a 'curious and close analogy,' which he thus interprets in a note to the third dialogue of *Alciphron* (vol. ii. p. 107), summing up the fundamental principles of Berkeley's ethical system as follows:—"That the general well-being of all men, "of all nations, of all ages of the world," is what the infinitely good God intends to be promoted "by the concurring actions of each individual"—that this end is to be accomplished by the observance of universal rules which have a corresponding

tendency—and that faith in divine moral government and man's immortality is necessary to make the rules efficacious'.

An attentive criticism may show, more fully, the connexion of these principles with one another; and establish a still closer and more curious resemblance between Berkeley the moralist and Berkeley the metaphysician.

If we are to understand the historical significance of the scattered materials which his writings offer for the construction of a particular disquisition on ethics, it is very necessary to approach them with an idea of what may be appropriately expected from an ethical writer of his day. In every writer, the stress and the emphasis are only to be caught from the contemporary controversies; and in Berkeley, more than in any other, it is impossible, without a perception of the stress, to make anything but a confused and chaotic medley of discords never resolved and suspensions held continually in suspense. A controversial bishop may say much about the pleasantness of the paths of virtue, and yet not be a hedonist. An eager preacher of the eighteenth century may turn a vigorous appeal upon the rewards offered in a future life; and yet it need not follow that he is to be classed as a mercenarian of the nineteenth century. It is necessary to look to what a man is denying, if we would learn the scope and the accent of what he is asserting; and it is equivalent to a transgression of generic differences, or, as Aristotle would term it, *ἀπαίδευσία*, to deduce a nineteenth-century conclusion from a premiss casually given in English eighteenth-century ethics.

The danger of applying the catchwords of the present to the thought of the past, has never been better illustrated than by the inappropriateness of the title 'Theological Utilitarian' to Berkeley as a moralist. It is in this phrase that Prof. Fraser has summed up the 'fundamental principles' which were quoted above.

There is something, it is true, in Berkeley's works which sounds very like 'the greatest good of the greatest number': let us call it Utilitarian. The bishop has also written much about God; let us qualify him, therefore, as 'Theological'. To a writer so flexible, and so copious in the improvisations which controversy demands, it would be equally easy to justify the application, by this method, of almost any other modern philosophical nickname; and equally profitable. There is one sense, and one sense only, in which the phrase 'Theological Utilitarian' has an intelligible meaning; and in that sense it is not applicable to Bishop Berkeley. It is intelligible, if it is to imply a view of the nature of good

as consisting in pleasure : of the test of good as that which brings most pleasure in the end ; of the chief obligation of morality as the pleasure or pain to be meted out for an infinite number of years in a future life, or, as Bentham calls it, the religious sanction. In this sense, it is the 'other-worldliness' of which Coleridge and George Eliot speak ; it is the venal morality which bargains for eternal life, at the cost of unreasoned virtue. The Hindoo who threw himself before the car of Juggernaut, that he might realise the *summum bonum* in a paradise of sensualism, was a Theological Utilitarian. Subtler forms of the creed are represented by Lord Tennyson, in his character of St. Simeon Stylites :—

' Who may be made a saint, if I fail here ?  
 Show me the man hath suffered more than I.  
 For did not all the martyrs die one death ?  
 For either they were stoned, or crucified,  
 Or burn'd in fire, or boiled in oil, or sawn  
 In twain beneath the ribs ; but I die here  
 To-day, and whole years long, a life of death. . . .  
 Surely the end ! What's here ? a shape, a shade,  
 A flash of light. Is that the angel there  
 That holds a crown ? Come, blessed brother, come.  
 I know thy glittering face. I waited long ;  
 My brows are ready. What ! deny it now ?  
 Nay, draw, draw, draw nigh. So I clutch it. Christ !  
 'Tis gone : 'tis here again ; the crown, the crown !'

It is in this sense, only, that the words have an intelligible meaning, and as a form of Egoistic Hedonism. It has been said that every man has his price : assuredly, the Theological Utilitarian's is Heaven. What is good ? That which will enable me to avoid the pit, and clutch the crown. The sanction is personal pleasure or pain. Benevolence is, indeed, possible, as a useful bid for the prize, but below the skin it must be hedonistic too ; for if I extend it to a willingness to forego the real pleasure which turns the balance, the crown, then the morality is brought to a self-contradiction. That which will take me to Heaven, must always be my definition of good.

This is the familiar and intelligible sense of the phrase which Prof. Fraser has applied to Berkeley ; and it is the name for a creed which has certainly been preached, whether or not it has ever been held. If it is to be made to cover Berkeley, careful distinction must be made between him and all others to whom it has been applied. It must be held to indicate an anticipation by Berkeley of many of the criticisms brought to bear upon Bentham and his followers ; an acceptance of a definition of good, as 'that which tends

to the greatest amount of happiness, for the greatest number of men, and the addition of a sanction, probably inconsistent, to overcome the difficulty of converting Hedonism into desire for others' good; this sanction being conveyed in a theological threat. Instead of being purely dogmatic, it submits the nature of good to arbitration and analysis, but reserves the sanction for revelation. In the one case, 'good' is the condition of entrance into heavenly bliss. In the second case, we are instructed to study the welfare of men in general, in order that we may know our duty: if we ask what claim this duty has on us, argument gives way to dogma; reason is ratified by the theology of threats.

It is, probably, in this latter sense, that the phrase Theological Utilitarian has been used by Prof. Fraser. Some support for such a reading of Berkeley's works may, no doubt, be discovered in the manifold varieties of his utterances; it may, or may not, be a complete account and synthesis of them. But, in that case, what becomes of the 'close and curious analogy' which is said to exist, between his ethical system and his system of human knowledge? How is there a parallel between the grounds of reality and of obligation? or a similarity in the relations of God and the world? What point, what aspect, is there in such a moral creed, which reminds us of anything peculiar to Berkeley in his conception of the material world? How is the God visually apparent in 'this mundane system,' analogous to the Judge who holds aloof from a natural morality, until the dread moment for enforcing it? According to Berkeley's metaphysical writings, God is so far the most clear and primary reality, that we only know ourselves by our knowledge of Him. In this reading of his ethical system, the reality of good depends upon the pleasure-sensations of men; and we can go all the way, without God, in the discovery of the nature of good, by the process which the word Utilitarian suggests. God is only necessary as the original willer that the formulæ of universalistic hedonism should be correct, and the ultimate avenger of their validity. If there be any analogy in these two conceptions of God and of the world, it is rather curious than close.

The clue to a different interpretation of this analogy is found in that part of *Alciphron* in which the moral doctrines of Shaftesbury are criticised. According to Green, in morals Berkeley 'ought to have regarded Shaftesbury as his yoke-fellow'; and indeed, if Berkeley's system were based on nothing but the fleeting ideas of the pleasure and pain of individuals, then his antagonism to Shaftesbury's recognition

of principles of beauty and proportion among these ideas, would be hard to understand. And yet there is no part of *Alciphron*, in which the spirit of opposition runs higher, than in the criticisms, personal and literary, which are levelled against the "crazy nobleman," Cratylus, and his reduction of virtue to a relish, or a certain *je ne sais quoi* of appreciative contemplation. The antagonism is not more determined, even when the theory of abstraction, or of the existence of matter, is the subject of dispute.

If we carefully inspect the arguments which Berkeley brings to bear upon the doctrine that 'virtue is beauty,' we may discover the line which his particular disquisition would have taken, upon the leading moral controversies of the day.

One of the foremost issues was the debate, as to the faculty which apprehends moral truth. Even at the present day, we occasionally come across lingering traces of the belief, that to explain the origin of a sentiment is to deny its validity: and at the time when Locke's dictum was universally accepted, that truth consists in the perception of the agreement or disagreement between ideas, it was natural, that those to whom the universal certainty of moral truth seemed vitally important, should endeavour to argue down the dangerous supposition, that we apprehend moral truth by any other faculty than that by which we see that two and two make four. It seemed that, unless the claim of virtue could be put as high as the claim of the multiplication-table, universal obligation must give way to individual caprice; and in no other way could scepticism more grieve the enthusiasm of the orthodox, than by urging the claims of the faculty which feels to influence the man who is about to act. An eternal and immutable morality rests upon an intellectual system of the universe; and though, in later days, a skilful handling of the other subject of dispute, the relation of God to morality, could reconstruct a binding and yet intelligible ethics, upon a partly sentient faculty of conscience, yet in Berkeley's day the time had not come for these damaging admissions to 'the enemy'. Moral views prevailed, as to the moral faculty. So when Hume mischievously remarks, that 'belief is rather a state of the sentiment, than of the cogitative part of man,' he is aiming the deadliest of all blows at the truth of the matter of such belief. And when he says, as he does distinctly say, that it is a moral sense, and not the faculty of reason, which distinguishes right and wrong, he is speaking in direct allusion to a critical ethical topic of his day.

Hume's denials are a guide to Berkeley's assertions. By

what faculty is moral truth apprehended? Very distinctly Euphranor implies, that the "notion" is "an object of the discursive faculty". And if moral truth is also moral beauty, the very fact of its being beautiful, proves, all the more, that, as beauty, it is an object of the understanding. That is the line of the argument which, at first sight, seems disposed to take the turn of denying Shaftesbury's position, that virtue is beauty. Berkeley does not deny it: he accepts, and asserts it. Virtue is beautiful, and is, therefore, not the object of a moral sense, but apprehended by the discursive faculty. Virtue is beauty, and must, therefore, rest, as beauty does, upon a mind. "We do not see beauty, strictly speaking," says Euphranor; "we infer it." "We see it by reason, through the means of sight; consequently, beauty, in this sense, is an object, not of the eye, but of the mind" (*Alciphron*, iii., § 8). The long digression upon architecture, which follows, is summed up to precisely the same effect. "I should now, methinks, be glad to see a little more distinctly the use and tendency of this digression upon architecture." "Was not beauty the very thing we inquired after?" "It was." The necessity of some real principle of beauty is then demonstrated; beauty implies an end; an end, "forasmuch as without thought there can be no end or design," implies a mind, which rules over the universe and the moral actions of men. Thus the outward show and appearance of virtue is made to yield by analysis a metaphysical proof of the "spirit which governs and actuates this mundane system"; and it is with the moral world, exactly as it is with the material, that its *esse* is *percipi*. The parallel is complete, as to the faculty called into play. We have here a "new theory" of ethical vision. The eye does not "see"; it furnishes to the mind, materials for seeing, "the canopy of heaven, and the choir and furniture of earth"; so, in the moral world, "the comparing parts one with another, the considering them as belonging to one whole, and referring this whole to its use, or end, should seem the work of reason: should it not?"

The analogy between Berkeley's ethical system, and his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, is this:—The material world consists only of ideas; the *esse* of matter is *percipi*; the only true substance, spirit. But, inasmuch as we find, that the ideas of different spirits vary, that ideas are void of force, and that each spirit has not control over its own ideas; since, in short, these ideas demand a metaphysical ground of unity, source of energy, and basis of reality—we infer God, as the universal spirit percipient of consistent truth, the permanent reality, and the source of energy. All that is not

spirit, is idea ; and the difference between true and false ideas, between life and illusion, is, that the true ideas are also God's ideas, and He is the one Spirit who sustains, consistently, and for ever, the many ideas which come and go in the minds of men. To know the truth, is to have the same ideas as God. "Laws of nature" are observations, for practical purposes correct, of the order in which he is pleased to manifest this succession of ideas.

So, in the moral world, we have "laws of nature," which are approximately demonstrated ; we can learn them by certain signs, and recognise the voice of God in the orderly proportion of moral phenomena (*Passive Obedience*, § 8). To do the good, is to have the same ideas as God. This world only shows a multiplicity of moral perceptions, pleasures and pains, which cannot explain themselves ; the human spirits who perceive them, perceive also the limits of their power over them, and require some independent ground of their validity ; they perceive their own differences of moral ideas, and require some criterion of good and bad ; they find it in the Spirit who holds all truth and reality together. Of moral, as of other ideas, some are permanent ; some are individual fancies and aberrations. Good is true, and real, and life : evil is false, and illusory, and death.

"A spirit is one simple, active, undivided being : as it produces ideas it is called the will ; as it thinks, or otherwise operates upon them, it is called the understanding." In each of these aspects, God is related to the human spirit. Good is predicated of will ; truth is predicated of the understanding. Ideas are true, or good, when the human spirit is at one with the divine.

By such an analogy Berkeley might well have claimed for his "particular disquisition," that all the complications of human conduct are solved by the same metaphysical *Deus ex machina* who had solved all the problems of knowledge. First, the question, as to the faculty which apprehends right and wrong, is set at rest : moral laws are laws of nature ; but there is no value or force in them as laws, save in so far as they are the orderly expression of God's ideas. Both in natural, and in moral philosophy, these generalisations are to be attained by means of the use of reason. In the *Discourse on Passive Obedience*, a single moral "law of Nature," "Thou shalt not resist the supreme power," is submitted, as an instance, to this process ; and is identified by means of the marks which are proper to such a law—importance, universality, niceness, or difficulty. To reason and to argumentation are left—first, the very being of laws of nature ; secondly, the criterion, whereby to know them ; and, thirdly, the

agreement of any particular precept with that criterion (§ 29). And so far are these laws from being the *a posteriori* conclusions of Utilitarian calculation, that "these propositions are called *laws of nature*, because they are universal, and do not derive their obligation from any civil sanction, but immediately from the Author of nature Himself. They are said to be *stamped on the mind*, to be *engraved on the tables of the heart*, because they are well known to mankind, and suggested and inculcated by conscience. Lastly, they are termed *eternal rules of reason*, because they necessarily result from the nature of things, and may be demonstrated by the infallible deductions of reason" (§ 12).

But there was another question at issue for a moral philosopher of Berkeley's day; and the manner in which he gathers up his solution of this ethical question, in his own peculiar metaphysical theory, would have been one of not the least attractive parts of the "particular disquisition". Ever since the day of Descartes, and, possibly, long before, the relation of God to morality had been a difficulty for the dogmatic. Could God, if He had chosen, have appointed a different moral order? Is good in its nature independent, or is it merely good because God wills it? Descartes had said, that if He so chose, God could will that good should be evil, and evil good. The anxiety of the thinkers of those days, not to place anything on a footing of independence towards God, often becomes even grotesque; as in the case of the argument as to the nature of space—that it could not be infinite, or else there would be two infinite beings, and space would be a rival to God's omnipotence. But, still, the view, that morality was not absolute, but, so to speak, a divine derivative—the bare possibility that God might revoke the delegated validity of virtue—was to many moralists the more disagreeable alternative; and amongst those who endeavoured to explain, that without any limit to God's omnipotence, it was, at the same time, impossible for Him to put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter, to call good evil and evil good—was Cudworth, author of the *Eternal and Immutable Morality*. In this book, posthumously published just when *Alciphron* was ready for the press, the nature of fate is discussed with great erudition, and the relation of God to morality settled by means of a subtle distinction between God's reason and God's wisdom.

Now it is obvious that the difficulty here again arises from a supposed dualism of good objective and good subjective; and it is easy to guess how Berkeley would have handled any such distinction. When he "hints," that the doctrine of ab-

straction has contributed not a little towards "spoiling the more useful parts of knowledge" (*Principles*, § 100), we are but dull learners, and suffer in vain from his reiteration, if we do not understand, that to Berkeley "abstract ideas" mean a reference to some objective reality "apart from the mind," and that with such dualisms he has a short way. He defines existence as perception, and the distinction of internal and external disappears. There can be no good independent of a mind, and, therefore, no rival to God's omnipotence. As for the supposition that God might have willed good to be something different from what it is, such an hypothesis merely amounts to the absurdity of imagining, or trying to imagine, a negation of the law of identity. Good is that which is present in the mind of God; it is impossible to imagine that evil, or that which is absent from His mind, should be present in it as well; and in *Siris* (§ 320), he thus plainly states this corollary, 'Evil, defect, negation, is not the object of God's creative power'.

We have seen that, in *The Principles*, Berkeley makes the distinct statement, that his metaphysical theories will have a direct bearing upon moral philosophy; that such a connexion is strictly in keeping with other passages in which he speaks of the nature of moral truth; that he foreshadows a particular disquisition upon the subject, but, meanwhile, leaves his readers with a "hint" which he hopes will suffice to let any one see, that the abolition of abstract ideas will mean a reform in ethics. We have seen that Prof. Fraser has drawn attention to a 'curious analogy,' existing between Berkeley's ethical and metaphysical theories, although, in the short summary in which he has intended to express the analogy, he has rather obscured it by the use of a phrase which either denies, or else inconsistently asserts, a connexion between ethics and metaphysics. We have recognised that in moral, as in natural philosophy, Berkeley must intend his abolition of abstract ideas as the prelude to an idealism in which God is both the ultimate and the immediate reality; a system of which it is the "main drift and design" "to inspire his readers with a pious sense of the presence of God" (*Princ.* § 156). We have seen, furthermore, that this hint of a connexion between ethics and metaphysics, as an alliance to the great advantage of the former, is not a mere idle boast on the part of Berkeley; but that, in the *Discourse on Passive Obedience*, he addresses himself to a demonstration, in a single instance, of the identity between a moral law and a law of nature. We have amplified this demonstration by once more stating the peculiar meaning attached, in his system, to the words "law of nature"; and

we have been warranted in so doing by the result which is given by a close and exact attention to the criticism, in *Alciphron*, of the saying of Shaftesbury, that virtue is beauty.

Those parts of Berkeley's writings, from which the present argument is mainly supported, are justly said by Prof. Fraser to be the most important statements of Berkeley's moral philosophy. But of the many services which this commentator has rendered to the readers of his author, not the least valuable is his observation of the development and progress of Berkeley's idealist principles. And it is, similarly, not the least curious part of the close analogy that exists between Berkeley's ethical and his metaphysical principles, that precisely the same advance which is found in his conception of nature may be traced, also, in his conception of morality.

The 33rd section of the *Discourse on Passive Obedience*, which was only added in the third edition, might be quoted in illustration of this development in reference either to ethics or to mathematics :—

"In morality the eternal rules of action have the same immutable universal truth with propositions in geometry. Neither of them depends on circumstances or accidents, being at all times and in all places, without limitation or exception, true. 'Thou shalt not resist the supreme power' is no less constant or unalterable a rule, for modelling the behaviour of a subject towards the Government, than 'Multiply the height by half the base' is for measuring a triangle. And, as it would not be thought to detract from the universality of this mathematical rule, that it did not exactly measure a field which was not an exact triangle, so ought it not to be thought an argument against the universality of the rule prescribing passive obedience that it does not reach a man's practice in all cases where a Government is unhinged or the supreme power disputed."

The mystic pantheism of *Siris*, is the most remarkable instance of the development of Berkeley's principles, from a staring dualism of Spirit and Idea, into a conception of God which incorporates "ideas," in the Platonic sense, in a logical chain of graduated universality, with the *anima mundi*, the expression of them all; and ascends from tarwater, acid, salt, and sulphur, "by a regular connexion and climax, through all these mediums, to a glimpse of the first mover, invisible, incorporeal, unextended source of life and being". So of ethical study Berkeley dedicates, in the *Siris*, the later growth as well as the first fruits; and we advance, from the earlier conception of law, as a synthesis of the succession of ideas in a personal God, a spirit limited, because distinct from ourselves, into a mystical identification of God with law and order (§ 334) and the elevation of the principle of order, or *λόγος*, into membership of the Trinity (§ 361).