CHAPTER XIII

BERKELEY

SOME knowledge, however slight, of the great eighteenth century thinker, George Berkeley, ought to be of some use to the student of English literature, who is obliged to be also a student of English thought. He belongs, both by his literary qualities and his philosophical powers, to the very first place among the men of his age; and this would be a sufficient reason to make him the subject of a separate lecture. Besides, at this time, when the charge of materialism is being foolishly made by many thoughtless people against the rising generation of Japan, and the tendency of our time is said to be towards the destruction of all religion, it is especially important that every student should know the relation between Berkeley and the great oriental philosophers whom Berkeley never read. Exactly the same charges were brought against the views of this great man that have since been brought against other thinkers too profound for the ignorant to understand. Every one who does not express his assent to commonplace ideas about the nature of man and of the universe, is likely to be thought either irreligious or heretical. Berkeley had to meet this kind of opposition, and he met it after a fashion that still commands the respect of thinkers, but necessarily calls forth the ridicule of ignorant people. Even Byron, liberal as he was in other matters, proved too shallow to appreciate the greatness of Berkeley, as he showed by the jesting lines

> When Bishop Berkeley said "there was no matter,"
> And proved it—'t was no matter what he said.
> (*Don Juan, xi, i*)

But on the contrary, what Berkeley said proved to be of the very greatest importance to western thought; and he must

be considered as a most valuable factor in the development of English philosophy.

Let us first say something about his life; for personally he was one of the most charming men that ever lived—who never made an enemy, and secured, not merely the friendship, but the adoration of men the most jealous and the most irritable of the time. Pope, who had so few friends, said that Berkeley possessed "every virtue under heaven." The terrible Swift worshipped him. Addison and Steele thought him worthy of all admiration. Nor was he thus loved only in his own country, but even on the continent, where he travelled.

Berkeley was born in Ireland in 1685, and educated at the best schools there, finishing his course at the famous Trinity College of Dublin, of which he became M. A., tutor, fellow, and Professor of Greek, in addition to holding an important office in the direction of the university. Here his mind was formed, first by the study of Locke, afterwards by the study of Plato. At the university he wrote his first works. Resigning his position, and going to London, he at once became a universal favourite in the best society by reason of his amiability, his great learning, and, last, not least, his remarkable beauty; for he was one of the handsomest men of his age. We next hear of him, after a course of travel in Europe, appointed to the church dignity of Dean of Derry, a very lucrative position. Then we hear of him before the English Parliament, arguing so eloquently on the advantages of founding an ideal university in the West Indies, or at least in the Bermuda Islands, that the Parliament forgot its common sense and voted twenty thousand pounds towards the establishment of the imagined institution. Afterwards the project was wisely abandoned; if it had not been, it would have proved, like the university of Tennyson's "Princess," only a beautiful dream. The incident is worth mentioning simply to show how Berkeley could fascinate and charm men by his manner and by his earnestness. As for himself, he determined to go to America

in any event. Perhaps he wanted to be left alone, in order to study, and felt that America was the best place for this, because in England or Ireland society wanted him—wanted to pet him, caress him, to make him rich, to give him great positions of honour which would have allowed him no opportunity to think or to write. He went to America in 1729, to the neighbourhood of Rhode Island, where he remained for three years. Even there he interested himself in education; and he was one of the first to assist in the prosperity of the now famous Yale College. After returning to England, he hoped to obtain the quiet which he needed, and expressed his wish to live in some very retired place. King George II loved him, and sent him word that he must become a bishop whether he liked it or not, but that otherwise he might live wherever he pleased. In 1753 he died one of those painless and beautiful deaths to which we give the name of euthanasia. The whole of his life was without blame of any sort, and few men have been so universally regretted.

Now we shall turn to the subject of this man's philosophy. His great work was the destruction of materialism. Since the day of Berkeley, there has been no real materialism among thinkers. He made that impossible. He made mistakes undoubtedly; but he also made great discoveries—which may not seem discoveries to you, because Berkeley's views had been anticipated by thousands of years in India, but which were very new to Englishmen in the time when he made them.

What materialism did he destroy? Let us consider what materialism means. In the first place, it may be argued that we know the world only as matter, and that everything which we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste is matter. This can be granted, provisionally. Then it can be argued that we know nothing about mind except in its relation to matter; that we have no evidence of an immaterial man or ghost; that all phenomena can be explained by material facts. This, again, may be provisionally accepted. Granting

that we know, outside of ourselves, nothing but matter, there can be very little question as to what becomes of religious faith. For a long time in England and in France cultivated men had been content with this position. They never suspected that they were stopping short in their investigation. Eighteenth century scepticism rested upon the assumption that everything must be explained by matter and by the forces inherent in matter. But it was rather startling to be asked all of a sudden, "What is matter? What do you know about it?"

Even while a student at the university, Berkeley had perceived that if you carry out the materialistic argument to its full conclusion, materialism itself must disappear. The great strength of the materialistic argument was that men should rely for evidence of any belief upon the testimony of their senses. Nobody had then seriously questioned the value of the testimony of the senses, except Locke, about whom we shall have more to say presently. Berkeley was the first to deny boldly all the testimony of the senses, while Locke denied only a part of it; and this position of Berkeley is, in the main, very powerfully sustained by the science of our own time. To quote Huxley's words, the great discovery of Berkeley was "that the honest and rigorous following up of the argument which leads us to materialism, invariably carries us beyond it." In short Berkeley proved to the world, as Schopenhauer would say, that under every physical fact there is a metaphysical fact.

Before Berkeley, Locke had been examining the theory of sensation, and had been treating it after a fashion decidedly remarkable for the eighteenth century. A short quotation will serve to show what I mean. He says: "Flame is denominated hot and light; snow, white and cold; and manna, white and sweet, from the ideas they produce in us; which qualities are *commonly thought* to be the same in these bodies; that those ideas are in us, the one the perfect resemblance of the other as they are in a mirror; and it would by most men be judged very extravagant if one

should say otherwise. And yet he that will consider that the same fire that at one distance produces in us the sensation of warmth, does at a nearer approach produce in us the far different sensation of pain, ought to bethink himself what reason he has to say that this idea of warmth, which was produced in him by the fire, is actually in the fire; and his idea of pain which the same fire produced in him in the same way, is not in the fire. Why are whiteness and coldness in snow, and pain not, when it produces the one and the other idea in us; and can do neither but by the bulk, figure, number, and motion of its solid parts?"[1]

Locke thus shows very clearly his conviction that impressions received through the senses have little or no resemblance to that which causes them. Modern science tells us the same thing,—and tells it to us much more positively than Locke does. I quote from Professor Huxley: "No similarity exists, nor indeed is conceivable, between the cause of the sensation and the sensation." But you will observe that Locke makes a distinction. He speaks of bulk, figure, and motion, as real, although pain, colour, etc., exist only in the mind. The fact is that Locke had not gone nearly so far as modern science. He went only half way. He made a distinction between what he called the primary and secondary qualities of matter. The secondary qualities according to Locke would have been colour, sound, smell, taste, warmth, cold, etc.; and these he said had no existence outside of the mind. But the primary qualities he believed to exist outside of the mind. These were extension, figure, solidity, motion, rest, and number. Now we come to the great difference between him and Berkeley. Berkeley said that even these primary qualities had no existence outside of the mind. In the sense that he meant, he is unquestionably right, so far as contemporary science is authoritative. At least we must put the fact as positively as Huxley puts it,—that the existence of what Locke called primary qualities is utterly inconceivable in the absence of a thinking mind.

1. Locke, *Human understanding*, Book II, chap. viii, §§ 14, 15.

It is, however, one thing to say that we can know nothing of ultimate reality, and another thing to say that the ultimate reality of matter does not exist. But Berkeley said it. He took the bold position that nothing exists except mind. Here science partly supports him, but not exactly in the way that he would have wished. That mind and matter are both but different phases of a single reality is as boldly stated by Herbert Spencer as it was by Berkeley, but upon other premises. Spencer will not tell you that matter has no existence. He says only that it is known to us merely as phenomenon, and that it cannot consequently be really cognizable, as to its ultimate nature, by the senses. But the difficulty which Berkeley less successfully attempted to avoid by simply denying all reality, Spencer meets by laying down what he calls the truth of "transcendental realism," — that is, of a reality in phenomena which we must believe in without being able to understand. Nevertheless it should not be supposed that even here Berkeley and Spencer are in very strong opposition, because Spencer says that "the test of reality is persistence." And as nothing phenomenal in the universe is eternally persistent, all things are unreal in the sense of being impermanent. A cloud is real; but it is transitory; and its reality is thus only a phenomenal reality. In short, we must understand Spencer's position to be that except as phenomenon the universe is unreal. We know of it only as the result of a play of forces.

Berkeley first put forth his views in an essay called "Essay towards a New Theory of Vision." This little book was written to prove the unreality of sight, to show that we see in the mind only what we imagine to be outside of the mind. The essay might have been called "On the Illusion of Sight." In a subsequent work entitled "Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge" he extended this theory of illusion to the other senses — hearing, touch, taste, smell. In his third and greatest book, "Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous," he proclaimed his whole position—that nothing exists outside of the mind. All that we

imagine we perceive by the senses, we perceive really within the brain only; and we have no proof of any reality outside of ourselves in the material sense. What we call the universe exists only, in the same way, in the mind of God; and what we know or feel is only the influence of His power upon ourselves.

Being a Christian, Berkeley could not go any further than this. And even this was going rather far—because if you follow out Berkeley's reasoning to its conclusion, the result is pantheism. Again it never occurred either to Berkeley himself, or to those with whom he argued, that the same reasoning might be used to prove the non-existence of mind. Berkeley said to the materialists: "You declare that there is nothing but matter and motion; now I shall prove to you that you know nothing of matter or of motion, and that you cannot give any evidence to me that they exist." But had there been upon the other side a reasoner of equal power, that man might have answered: "Very well; but if all things exist only in the mind of God, we ourselves also are but shadows within that mind, and have no real existence."

We see at once that Berkeley could not have ventured to sustain such a position as that. He had already proclaimed the existence of souls, indivisible and immortal. This declaration was nothing more than a declaration of faith. It was not philosophy and it was in strong contradiction to his views elsewhere expressed. But no one thought of attacking him with his own weapons until a much more recent time. In our own day Spencer has torn to pieces some of his reasoning, and other scientific men have pointed out his mistakes. Nevertheless one half of his philosophy remains, and will always remain, unassailable.

To find the other half we must go to the East. Hundreds of years before Berkeley, a great Indian thinker had thought out everything that Berkeley had thought, but had also thought much more. He did not stop at the question of soul. He declared matter non-existent, and the

universe a dream; but, much more consistent than Berkeley, he declared also that the matter perceiving the dream was equally unreal.

"Strange," exclaims Huxley, "that Gotama should have seen more deeply than the greatest of modern idealists." He might also have said, "Strange that, without any knowledge of modern science, he should have seen quite as deeply as the greatest psychologists of the nineteenth century!"

The difference between Berkeley and the founder of the Buddhist religion was only the difference imposed upon Berkeley by his religious training. Could we imagine a meeting of the two men, and the conversation between them, we might suppose that the Indian teacher would say to the English bishop: "You have great perceptions of truth; but it is a one-sided truth. You have not yet obtained the supreme enlightenment. Matter, indeed, has no existence; but neither has what you have been imagining to be mind. The mind, which you call soul, is quite as unreal as matter. It is only a mass of sensations, volitions, ideas, as impermanent as the dew on the morning grass. All that you call soul is impermanent; and all that you call knowledge springs from some form of touch, and touch itself is an illusion. There is but one reality behind all this; but you never will be able to perceive that reality until you learn that soul 'indivisible and immortal,' as you call it, does not exist, and could not possibly exist. Come and be my disciple."

One of the most astonishing texts of the Buddhist literature, that which declares that all knowledge springs from touch, has been first fully confirmed by western science within our own century. I am referring to the actual discovery that the senses — sight, hearing, taste, and smell — have all been developed from the skin. The eye, the ear, the tongue, even the brain itself have been proved to grow and evolve from an unfolding of the body's covering. Thus, everything of sensation, and therefore of knowledge, originally sprang indeed from touch. And now if we accept, as

we must, the statement that touch itself is illusion in the meaning of Berkeley, we find that the position of the eastern teacher is incomparably stronger than that of the eighteenth century idealist. But upon one point, and that the most important ethically, the two are one. There is but a single reality, transcending all human knowledge, and human life and conduct must be regulated in a code with such perceptions as we can obtain of the only true and everlasting law. The antagonism of the two systems is really only in minor details; in the deeper thoughts of both there is absolute harmony — only it must again be pointed out that the greater mind was not the European.

And what is the latest position of modern science on the subject of human knowledge? We have really advanced no whit further than the position taken by Berkeley and by Descartes. Descartes said that we know a great deal more about mind than we do about matter; and summing up all the modern evidence in relation to the nature of things, Huxley declares that the more elementary study of sensation justifies Descartes' position, that we know more of mind than we do of body; that the immaterial world is a firmer reality than the material. Nevertheless the same writer is obliged to declare that it is merely a question of comparative ignorance, for coming to the ultimate question, we cannot conceive either of a substance of mind nor of a substance of matter; and the phenomena called by either name are essentially impermanent. All human knowledge applied to the question of ultimate reality, amounts to absolutely nothing.

Now the greatness of Berkeley's intellect is proved by the fact that he reasoned out all this when he was only a student at the university, and in an age when science was only beginning. Even if we cannot grant that his brain was equal to the magnificent Indian brain that saw further and deeper thousands of years before him, we must at least acknowledge him one of the greatest of European minds. He achieved a great deal in preparing the way for the

larger thought of future generations. Hume took up and developed and fixed for all time some of his best thought; then came the great evolutional school with a new philosophy, and marvellously developed sciences to complete, not only what Hume had left undone, but to go back also to Berkeley, and test his reasoning, and find it among the greatest achievements of the human intellect. Again in a merely ethical way Berkeley did a great service. He prevented free thought from becoming shallow, just as much as he supported Christian beliefs. In fact more so. Naturally he wished to attack free thinking, without which there could have been no great religious progress; but he really did it a service. After him no great thinker could affect materialism in the sense that it had been affected previously. We still have the word materialism, loosely applied by uneducated people to any opinions at variance with a belief in orthodox dogma; but the materialism of the seventeenth century—the real materialism, involving a belief in matter as reality — shrivelled up and vanished from the time that Berkeley struck it. It was not a belief worth regretting, for it would have kept the human mind within very narrow limits, somewhat as winter-ice confines and checks the flowing water. The work of Berkeley was like a generous thaw, freeing the European intellect from old trammels, and hastening its progress toward the larger thought of the present time.

To literature Berkeley's service was chiefly that of aiding the cultivation of an exquisite taste. He wrote English of great simplicity and clearness, through his ambition to imitate as far as possible the beautiful strength and lucidity of Plato; and he brought into English something very much resembling the fine quality of the Greek philosopher.