Berkeley's Philosophy of Religion

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Religion has traditionally been divided into two parts: *natural religion*, which purports to be justified by natural reason alone, and *revealed religion*, which purports to be justified only by means of supernatural revelation. One of the central aims of Berkeley's philosophy is to understand and defend religious doctrines and practices of both sorts. This chapter provides a survey of this aspect of Berkeley's thought.

Part I

Natural Religion

Berkeley, like many of his contemporaries, holds that natural religion is founded upon two principal doctrines, the existence of God and the natural immortality of the soul. These doctrines provide the foundation for moral motivation, and the resulting moral behavior is the practice of natural religion.

1 Berkeley's Arguments for the Existence of a Super-Mind

Berkeley's early works contain two arguments for the existence of God, known as the 'Passivity Argument' and the 'Continuity Argument' (Bennett 1971, ch. 7). Additionally, an argument for the existence of God from Berkeley's theory of visual language appears in the fourth dialogue of *Alciphron*.¹

Each of these arguments purports to establish the existence of a mind superior to us. However, the arguments do not, by themselves, show that this mind has the traditional divine attributes. Establishing traditional monotheism therefore requires further argument (Olscamp 1970a; Bennett 1971, 165; Grayling 1986, 194-195; Ksenjek and Flage 2012). We will therefore begin by considering each of the three groups of texts as providing an argument for the existence of a 'super-mind,' and postpone to §2 the question of whether the arguments, if successful, would support traditional monotheism.

1.1 The Passivity Argument

The explicit premises and conclusions of the Passivity Argument are these (PHK, §§25-26, 29):

(1) Changes in my ideas occur.

Therefore,

(2) Something causes changes in my ideas.

(3) No idea causes anything.

Therefore,

1. On the theory of visual language, see ch. ? of this volume.

- (4) Changes in my ideas are caused by a substance.
- (5) All substances are spirits.
- (6) Changes in my ideas of sense do not depend on my will.

Therefore,

- (7) Every change in my ideas of sense is caused by some spirit distinct from myself.

In order to render this argument valid, additional premises must be supplied. However, most scholars agree that *on Berkeley's principles*, an argument of this sort succeeds in establishing that a mind distinct from myself sometimes causes ideas in me. Thus the argument, although in a certain sense successful, has two limitations. First, it depends on controversial premises, some of which Berkeley defends elsewhere, and others of which he simply assumes. Second, the conclusion it supports is weaker than traditional monotheism. Most crucially, this argument gives no reason for supposing that all of my sensory perceptions are caused by one and the same mind (Tipton 1974, 299; Pitcher 1977, 133; Grayling 1986, 194-197; Roberts 2007, 159n36; Ksenjek and Flage 2012, 282-285).

Given the theory of ideas, premise (1) is a datum of experience, and so needs no defense. However, in order to get to (2), we need:²

- (1*) Every change is caused by something.

Berkeley supports premise (3) by remarking that ideas “are *visibly* inactive” (PHK, §25, emphasis added): we do not perceive any activity or causal power in them. To support (3), this observation must be combined with Berkeley’s claim

2. Tipton 1974, 302-320; Pitcher 1977, 131; Muehlmann 1992, 249-250; and Dicker 2011, 231 all take Berkeley to rely on a premise like this one.

that “there is nothing in [our ideas] but what is perceived” (PHK, §25). One of the fundamental principles of Berkeley’s theory of ideas is that ideas have only those features which they are perceived to have. But, he claims, ideas are not perceived to have any causal powers. Therefore, they have none.³

An implicit premise is again required to make the inference to (4). Berkeley is however certainly committed to the claim:

(3*) Everything is either an idea or a substance.

This renders the inference valid.

Berkeley defends (5) at PHK, §7. From (4) and (5) we can conclude:

(5*) Every change in my ideas is caused by some spirit.

Berkeley next argues that *some* changes in my ideas are caused by a spirit distinct from myself. He does not hold that *all* changes in my ideas are caused by a spirit distinct from myself, for Berkeley believes that I cause ideas in myself when I imagine things (§28). He therefore brings in the distinction between ideas of sense and ideas of imagination and claims that changes in the former do not depend on my will. In order to get to Berkeley’s conclusion (7), we then assume:

(6*) If a spirit *S* is the cause of a change *c*, then *c* depends on *S*’s will.

In a passage in Berkeley’s notebooks which gives an early version of the Passivity Argument, we read: “[a] Cause [is] ...nothing but a Being wch wills wn the Effect follows the volition” (N, §499; see Tipton 1974, 307). Berkeley here takes (6*) to be implicit in the very notion of (efficient) causation. Many scholars believe that Berkeley implicitly assumes this principle both here and elsewhere

3. As Richard Brook pointed out, Berkeley at one point concedes that we are often inclined to “*attribute* power or agency to the ideas themselves, and make one the cause of another” (PHK, §32, emphasis added). Nevertheless, we do not *perceive* any power or agency in our ideas, hence they have none.

(Tipton 1974, 320; Pitcher 1977, 132-133; Winkler 1989, §7.2; Stoneham 2002, §5.2; Roberts 2007, §4.2).

Berkeley's ultimate conclusion, that changes in my ideas of sense are caused by a spirit distinct from myself, follows from (5*), (6), and (6*).

The Passivity Argument is valid. Its premises are among the central commitments of Berkeley's philosophy. The mind (or minds) referred to in the conclusion can properly be described as a 'super-mind' insofar as it has a power which I evidently do not: the power to excite ideas in other minds (PHK, §33). According to some interpretations, Berkeley holds that I do something like this when I move the parts of my body, but I certainly cannot cause in other minds all the sorts of ideas which I receive by sense.

1.2 The Continuity Argument

In the *Principles*, Berkeley insists that in denying that objects of sense can exist outside the mind, he "would not be understood to mean this or that particular mind, but all minds whatsoever." It is therefore not a consequence of Berkeley's theory that bodies "have no existence except only while they are perceived by us" (§48). In the *Dialogues*, this line of thought becomes an argument for the existence of a super-mind (DHP, 212, 230-231).

Following Jonathan Bennett, we call the argument found in these texts 'the Continuity Argument.' Bennett chose this label because he held that in these passages Berkeley was arguing from the premise that objects have continuous existence despite gaps in human perception to the existence of a super-mind (Bennett 1971, §37). Similar interpretations have been advocated by Ian Tipton and Georges Dicker (Tipton 1974, 320-350; Dicker 2011, §13.3). This approach is disputed by another group of scholars who deny that the (so-called) Continuity Argument is actually about continuity at all. According to these scholars, the

central premise of the argument is the *independence* of objects from human perceivers (Ayers 1987; Atherton 1995; Stoneham 2002, §§5.3-5.4).

1.2.1 Continuity Interpretations

Bennett formulates the Continuity Argument as follows:

- (a) No collection of ideas can exist when not perceived by some spirit;
- (b) Objects are collections of ideas;
- (c) Objects sometimes exist when not perceived by any human spirit;

therefore

- (d) There is a non-human spirit which sometimes perceives objects (Bennett 1971, 169).

It is a matter of controversy whether Berkeley is committed to premise (b),⁴ but the argument can clearly be adapted to other interpretations of Berkeley's account of physical objects. Subject to this caveat, most interpreters agree that Berkeley accepts all of the premises. Furthermore, the argument is valid. However, two difficulties remain: first, there is a problem about the status of premise (c); second, the conclusion of the argument is weaker than Berkeley's stated conclusion.

It has seemed to many scholars that Berkeley is not entitled to premise (c). As Bennett points out, premise (b) casts doubt on the commonsense principle that objects exist when no human perceives them (170). According to Bennett, Berkeley has done nothing to dispel this doubt because Berkeley was 'indifferent' to continuity: although he wishes to show that the continuity of objects is compatible with his system, he has no interest in showing that objects actually exist when humans do not perceive them (§38).

4. On Berkeley's theory of bodies, see ch. ? of this volume.

According to Tipton and Dicker, Bennett is mistaken about Berkeley's attitude to continuity: Berkeley defends continuity in other contexts (Tipton 1974, 320-350; Dicker 2011, 253-254). This does not, however, solve the problem. Dicker explains:

Berkeley cannot even legitimately use the continuity argument as a supplementary argument for the existence of God. For in his system the key premise of the continuity argument – the premise that objects continue to exist when no finite minds are perceiving them – rests solely on the existence of an all-perceiving God (Dicker 2011, 261).

The Continuity Argument is, therefore, problematically circular.

Bennett, Tipton, and Dicker all believe that Berkeley has made a serious error in the passages under discussion. One option for those who wish to escape this conclusion is to reject the continuity interpretation in favor of an independence interpretation of the sort to be discussed below. A second option, which has not previously appeared in the literature, is to appeal to the differences in dialectical situation between the *Principles* and the *Dialogues*. At the beginning of the *Dialogues*, the characters agree “to admit that opinion for true, which upon examination shall appear most agreeable to common sense and remote from scepticism” (DHP, 172). The continuity of objects could be regarded as an anti-skeptical principle and, if it is, then it might be held that, in the context of the *Dialogues*, it needs no defense. Immaterialism with God preserves continuity and immaterialism without God does not. This makes the former more “agreeable to common sense and remote from skepticism” than the latter. Immaterialism with God must therefore be ‘admitted for true.’⁵

Even if the dialectical problem can be solved, we are still faced with the problem that Berkeley's conclusion is stronger than Bennett's. One strategy for

5. On the skeptical consequences of ‘Godless immaterialism,’ see Stoneham 2013.

getting from (d) to the existence of “an omnipresent eternal Mind” (DHP, 231) would be to argue that the supposition of one mind which perceives everything is simpler than the supposition of a variety of different minds plugging the gaps in human perception to ensure continuity. Since distance is a sensible quality (PHK, §44) and time is merely the succession of ideas (§98), a mind which perceived everything would exist in every time and place. However, the introduction of these simplicity considerations would render the argument less than demonstrative, which means that Philonous’s claim that by this argument “the whole system of atheism, is ...entirely overthrown” (DHP, 213) would have to be regarded as hyperbolic.

1.2.2 Independence Interpretations

Responding to the difficulties faced by continuity interpretations, some interpreters have denied that the continuity of objects figures as a premise in the (so-called) Continuity Argument. Michael Ayers points out that both of the texts in question mention the existence of objects *outside my mind*. On this basis, Ayers suggests that Berkeley’s argument proceeds “from causal independence to ontological independence” (Ayers 1987, 120-121). On Ayers’ interpretation, the key premise of the Continuity Argument is also one of the key premises in the Passivity Argument: sensible ideas do not depend on my will. From this, Berkeley concludes that sensible things exist outside my mind. But (Berkeley has already argued) sensible things can only exist in a mind, so they must exist in some mind distinct from me.

The step from the claim that sensible ideas do not depend on my will to the claim that sensible things exist outside my mind sounds like an equivocation: Berkeley’s premise is that sensible ideas are *causally* independent of me (I don’t cause them), and his conclusion is that they are *ontologically* independent of me (they exist ‘outside’ me). Bennett has argued that this sort of equivocation

is found throughout Berkeley's writings (Bennett 1971, §§35-38). Ayers argues, however, that this is not a simple equivocation between two unrelated meanings of 'independent,' but an *inference* from one *species* of independence to another (Ayers 1987, 117-119).

Is this inference legitimate? Kenneth Winkler argues that the inference here, and in the other texts where Bennett charges Berkeley with equivocation, makes use of a suppressed premise which Winkler calls 'the Denial of Blind Agency' (Winkler 1989, §7.2). According to this thesis, which was widely accepted in the period and is explicitly endorsed by Berkeley in other contexts (N, §§812, 841-842; DHP, 239), an agent cannot act without having some conception of what she is trying to accomplish. Once this thesis is accepted, it will follow from the fact that some other mind is the *cause* of an idea in me that some other mind *has* that idea (or an idea like it). In other words, God has to have the idea of redness in order to cause me to have the idea of redness. This principle renders the first step of the argument, from causal independence to ontological independence, valid.

Advocates of independence interpretations have often held that the Continuity Argument is much more closely related to the Passivity Argument than the advocates of continuity interpretations suppose. For instance, according to Margaret Atherton, the Passivity Argument relies on the premise that the ideas of sense are independent of my *will*, whereas the Continuity Argument relies on the premise that the ideas of sense are independent of my *thought* (Atherton 1995, 247). According to Berkeley, "A spirit is one simple, undivided, active being. As it perceives ideas it is called the *understanding*, and as it produces or otherwise operates on them, it is called the *will*" (PHK, §27; cf. Ayers 1987, 123). It can thus be said that, on the independence interpretation, the central premise of Berkeley's argument for the existence of God in both the *Principles*

and the *Dialogues* is really that my ideas of sense are independent of *me*.

Independence interpretations do not face the dialectical difficulty faced by continuity interpretations: they do not rely on any premises which Berkeley elsewhere derives from the existence of God. However, there are other problems. First, as Stoneham has emphasized, the notion of ontological independence in this argument is somewhat puzzling. Ideas, on Berkeley's theory, depend on minds at least in the sense that they cannot exist without being perceived by some mind, but, on Berkeley's theory, the real things are the things sensed by *us*, and not merely known by God (Stoneham 2002, 158-159). The Denial of Blind Agency allows Berkeley to infer only that my ideas of sense must be copied from an 'archetype' in some other mind. This is, however, not a particularly robust form of independence. Stoneham argues that Berkeley is instead appealing to a notion of ontological dependence from traditional theistic metaphysics, that is, to the world's dependence on God to sustain it in existence (159-161). This, Stoneham thinks, vitiates the argument since atheists have no reason for thinking the world (i.e., on Berkeley's theory, our ideas) needs to be sustained in this way.

Independence interpretations also do not solve the problem of how Berkeley gets to his stated conclusion. It is not clear why, even given that my ideas are ontologically independent of me, I should suppose that all of them depend on one and the same other mind, let alone that that mind has many or all of the traditional divine attributes (158, 161-162).

1.3 The Divine Language Argument

In *Alciphron* IV, Berkeley argues, through his character Euphranor, that any argument which will justify belief in other minds can be used, *mutatis mutandis*, as a justification for belief in God. Euphranor's opponent Alciphron says that he

is most convinced of the presence of another intelligence when he witnesses “the arbitrary use of sensible signs, which have no similitude or necessary connexion with the things signified ...directing me how to act, not only with regard to things near and present, but also with regard to things distant and future” (Alc, §4.7). In the 1709 *New Theory of Vision*, which was included as an appendix to *Alciphron*, Berkeley had argued that vision was just such a system of signs: visual stimulus conveys complex practical information to us regarding our tangible environment, and the connection between these signs and their significations is arbitrary (see ch. ?). Thus, Berkeley thinks, if upon hearing human language we are entitled to infer the existence of human minds, then the visual language gives us grounds to infer the existence of a ‘speaker’ of that language, a super-mind.

E. G. King takes this to be a version of the analogical design argument (E. G. King 1970), similar to William Paley’s claim that observing biological organisms is like finding a watch on a heath: if the inference to a maker is justified in the latter case, it is likewise justified in the former (Paley 1809, 1-3). Berkeley’s analogy, on this interpretation, would be between the system of visual stimulus and a text or speech. If, Berkeley might say, one were to find a book on the heath, one would infer that it had an author. But, Berkeley argues, the total system of our visual stimulus is like a book in all the relevant respects. We should therefore conclude that our visual stimulus has an author.

Analogical arguments have been a staple of religious apologetics since long before Berkeley’s time. On this interpretation, all Berkeley has done is to adapt the argument to rely on his own idiosyncratic views. Some interpreters have, however, found more original lines of thought in Berkeley’s text.

According to an interpretation suggested by Michael Hooker, Berkeley’s argument can be seen as intended to uncover a presupposition of the commonsense

assumption that vision is *informative* (Hooker [1982](#), 267-269). It is rational for us to treat language as informative only because we take it to be a product of the intentions of agents. Since vision, like human language, consists of signs which are connected only arbitrarily to what they signify, it is not rational to take vision as informative unless we presuppose that there is a ‘speaker’ of the language of vision.

An interpretation along these general lines has more recently been defended by John Russell Roberts. Roberts interprets Berkeley as arguing that the world can be rendered intelligible to us only if we adopt what Roberts calls the ‘religious stance.’ To adopt the religious stance is to treat the deliverances of the senses as utterances of a perfectly trustworthy person (Roberts [2007](#), 83-87). No other way of looking at the world can, according to Roberts’ interpretation of Berkeley, justify our trust in the predictability of nature.

A. David Kline emphasizes Berkeley’s comparison of our knowledge of God to our knowledge of other minds, and argues that Berkeley’s Divine Language Argument is based on Descartes’s account of our knowledge of other minds (Kline [1987](#)).⁶ Descartes held that the complexity with which signs are recombined appropriately in human linguistic behavior was impossible to explain mechanically, and that we must therefore posit other souls like our own. Kline takes Berkeley to be arguing that all of the same features are to be found in much greater degree in vision.

According to Tom Stoneham, the central premise of Berkeley’s argument is that vision is *literally* a language. Since a language must have a speaker, the existence of a super-mind follows immediately (Stoneham [2013](#); cf. Olscamp [1970a](#)).

It is widely held that Berkeley’s argument here is an inference to the best

6. Roberts also lays a great deal of stress on the comparison to our knowledge of other minds, but does not take Berkeley to be following Descartes here.

explanation (Kline [1987](#), 131-132; Atherton [1995](#), 233-234; Jesseph [2005](#)). If so, then it must be regarded as merely probable and not demonstrative. The argument does, however, appear to favor a more religiously adequate conception of God than more ‘metaphysical’ arguments, such as the Passivity and Continuity Arguments (see [Alc](#), §4.14).

2 Is Berkeley’s Super-Mind God?

Berkeley’s Passivity Argument shows that, if Berkeley is right that only minds are causes and that minds cause only by volition, then many of my perceptions are caused by a mind or minds distinct from myself. Immediately following the Passivity Argument, Berkeley argues that this cause is a single “more powerful spirit” ([PHK](#), §33) characterized by “goodness and wisdom” (§32). Near the end of the *Principles* Berkeley defends the stronger conclusion that there is “one, eternal, infinitely wise, good, and perfect ...spirit, ‘who works all in all,’ and ‘by whom all things consist’” ([PHK](#), §146; cf. [N](#), §838; [DHP](#), 215). The later definition closely resembles a description of God found in the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, the doctrinal standard of Berkeley’s church (Ksenjek and Flage [2012](#), 291-292).

Both the earlier and the later argument are generally agreed to be inferences to the best explanation (Pitcher [1977](#), 133-135; Stoneham [2002](#), §4.4; Jesseph [2005](#); Ksenjek and Flage [2012](#), 292). Berkeley concludes that there is one ‘Author’ of our sensations, and that this author is wise and benevolent, from the fact that the ideas of sense “are not excited at random ...but in a regular train or series ...[which] gives us a sort of foresight, which enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life” ([PHK](#), §§30-31). Similarly, the evidence cited later in the *Principles* is

the constant regularity, order, and concatenation of natural things,

the surprising magnificence, beauty, and perfection of the larger, and the exquisite contrivance of the smaller parts of creation, together with the exact harmony and correspondence of the whole, but above all, the never enough admired laws of pain and pleasure, and the instincts or natural inclinations, appetites, and passions of animals ([PHK](#), §146).

The orderliness of the world does seem to favor the hypothesis of one super-mind over many. Simplicity considerations, which are admissible in inferences to the best explanation, also favor positing a single super-mind as the cause of all those perceptions which “are not produced by or dependent on the wills of men” ([PHK](#), §146; see Ksenjek and Flage [2012](#), 286-287). The existence of a single super-mind thus seems to be supported by Berkeley’s argument. If, however, there is only a single super-mind, then that mind must be eternal, at least in the sense of existing at every time the world does, since the existence of the world depends on there being a super-mind to cause sensory perceptions. The super-mind must also be able to keep track of the total state of the world and its complex laws so as to preserve its orderliness, and must therefore have wisdom far beyond mine. Furthermore, the super-mind appears to have selected rules which bring about a variety of beautiful and otherwise desirable results. For this reason, Berkeley says that the “consistent uniform working” of nature “displays the goodness and wisdom of that governing spirit whose will constitutes the laws of nature” much more clearly than exceptions to this consistent uniform working ([PHK](#), §32).⁷

Berkeley’s argument supports gives us some reason to suppose that there is only one super-mind and that wisdom, power, and benevolence are among the respects in which that mind is superior to us. Nevertheless, Berkeley’s

7. This causes obvious problems for belief in miracles. For Berkeley’s response to these difficulties, see [PHK](#), §63; [PO](#), §14.

claim that the super-mind is *infinitely* wise, powerful, and benevolent seems rather extravagant if it is meant to be drawn only from empirical observation of the character of our sensory perceptions (cf. Grayling 1986, 184-189, 195-198). Indeed, considerations of natural and moral evil seem to suggest just the opposite (PHK, §§151-153; Winkler 1989, 286).

Berkeley's natural theology is ambitious, and it does not seem ultimately to succeed in its ambitions. However, it does come to a more modest conclusion which is still interesting and significant. If Berkeley's basic metaphysical premises are accepted, then I can have deductive proof that there exists at least one mind which is in certain respects superior to me and, further, I can have good reason to suppose that there is exactly one such mind, and that it is eternal, exceeds human beings in wisdom and power, and is at least somewhat benevolently inclined toward me. The further claim that this being is *infinitely* or *perfectly* wise, powerful, and benevolent can perhaps be regarded as a teaching of revealed theology, that is, an article of faith (see §6 below; cf. Grayling 1986, 188).

3 The Natural Immortality of the Soul

In addition to the existence of God, Berkeley saw the natural immortality of the soul as “a fundamental Doctrine ...of natural Religion” (BW, 7:114). In fact, he goes so far as to say that the denial of this doctrine is “the most effectual antidote against all impressions of virtue and religion” (PHK, §141). Berkeley understands the natural immortality of the soul as the doctrine that the soul “is not liable to be broken or dissolved by the ordinary laws of nature or motion” (§141). The religious (and moral) importance of this claim stems from the fact that it opens up the *possibility* of judgment after death.⁸

8. In a 1713 *Guardian* essay, Berkeley makes a slightly more ambitious attempt “to evince that there are grounds to expect a future state, without supposing in the reader any faith at

Berkeley begins his discussion by noting that the doctrine is *not* to be understood as the claim “that [the soul] is absolutely incapable of annihilation even by the infinite power of the Creator.” Rather, the doctrine states that the operation of “the ordinary laws of nature or motion” cannot lead to the destruction of the soul (PHK, §141). The view that the soul can be so destroyed follows from materialist theories of the mind: if the soul is “a thin vital flame or system of animal spirits” or if the soul (mind) is identical to the brain, then the destruction of the body would destroy the soul. However, Berkeley has argued that souls alone are substances, and bodies are “barely passive ideas in the mind” (§141). Bodies cannot, therefore, act on souls in any way. Furthermore, Berkeley has argued that the ‘laws of nature’ and the causal relations we attribute to bodies are merely regularities in our ideas of sense, and should be understood as relations of signification rather than genuine causation (§§66, 108). As a result, it is impossible that the soul should be destroyed by ‘the ordinary laws of nature.’

This is, as has been noted, a weak doctrine. It simply opens up the possibility that the soul may survive the destruction of the body. However, Berkeley believes that this mere possibility has a substantial effect on moral motivation, for if it is possible that I may continue to exist after the destruction of my body, then the fact that I escape punishment for my misdeeds, or go unrewarded for my good deeds, in this life, is no guarantee that I will escape punishment, or go unrewarded, altogether.

all, not even the belief of a Deity” (BW, 7:181). One of the arguments from the *Guardian* essay reappears in two later sermons (7:73, 114-115), and also in *Alciphron* (Ald, §6.11). Due to limitations of space, these arguments will not be discussed here.

4 The Language of Natural Religion

The traditional view in Western philosophical theology has been that all, or nearly all, religious language is *analogical*: when we apply predicates to God, we use them in a way that differs from their use as applied to creatures. Thus, for instance, the word ‘wise’ has a different meaning in ‘God is wise’ than in ‘Socrates is wise.’ On the traditional view, these uses are thought to be somehow related, but there is no consensus, within the tradition, on precisely *how* they are related. In Berkeley’s immediate context, the doctrine of analogy had two influential proponents, William King and Peter Browne (W. King 1709; Browne 1697, 1729, 1733).

King had attempted to use the doctrine of analogy to solve such problems as the existence of evil and the compatibility of human freedom with divine foreknowledge and predestination. All of these problems, King says, stem from the error of attributing goodness, foreknowledge, predestination, and other such attributes to God literally (W. King 1709, §§6-7). When these predicates are understood analogically, they will not support these inferences. As the Deist Anthony Collins pointed out, this seems to be because they will not support any inferences at all (Collins 1710; cf. CGB, §12).

In *Alciphron* IV, the freethinker Lysicles deploys Collins’ objections to argue that the dispute about the existence of God is purely verbal.⁹ Lysicles first argues that King’s doctrine of analogy makes God “an unknown subject of attributes absolutely unknown” (Alc, §4.17), then points out that “You cannot argue from unknown attributes ...You cannot prove, that God is to be loved for his goodness, or feared for his justice, or respected for his knowledge” (§4.18). Thus the existence of God becomes a point of, literally, no consequence.

In response to Lysicles, Crito describes King’s strategy as a “method of grow-

9. Collins appears under the pseudonym ‘Diagoras’ (Taranto 2010).

ing in expression, and dwindling in notion, of clearing up doubts by nonsense, and avoiding difficulties by running into affected contradictions” ([Alc](#), §4.19). Crito argues that the correct notion of ‘proper’ (as opposed to ‘metaphorical’) analogy, and the only notion of analogy which is needed in theology, is simply the mathematical notion of a ratio: divine knowledge is to human knowledge as the infinite to the finite.¹⁰ “We may therefore ...affirm that all sorts of perfection, which we can conceive in a finite spirit, are in God” *in the very same sense*, but in infinite degree (§4.21).

Berkeley thus agrees with Collins, against King and Browne, that the attributes ascribed to God by natural religion must be ascribed literally, differing only in degree from the human ‘perfections’ from which they get their names. The central reason for this is simply that, according to Collins’ published position,¹¹ and according to Berkeley, design arguments show that God is wise, powerful, etc., *in the ordinary, everyday senses of those terms*.¹²

In this discussion, Berkeley reveals a fundamental methodological disagreement with most of the defenders of divine analogy, especially Peter Browne.¹³ Browne seeks to support his theological position by quotations from the ‘Doctors of the Church.’ He takes these quotations to be authoritative both as to what the teaching of Christianity is and as to what the truth is.¹⁴ Berkeley,

10. According to James O’Higgins, in this discussion Berkeley follows the late Medieval philosopher-theologian Thomas de Vio Cajetan “with remarkable closeness” (O’Higgins 1976, 96).

11. Although Collins purported to be a Deist, Berkeley accused him of secretly being an atheist ([Alc](#), Advertisement, §4.16; [TVV](#), §6). For discussion, see Berman 1988, ch. 3; 1994, 78, 164-166; Taranto 2010, 361.

12. For Berkeley’s treatment of these arguments, see above, §§1.3 and 2. For Collins, see Collins 1710, 5.

13. Browne interpreted Berkeley’s discussion in *Alciphron* as a criticism of his *Procedure* (Browne 1729), so that when he published *Divine Analogy* (Browne 1733) he appended a reply to Berkeley which took up nearly one third of the book. It seems, though, that Browne was mistaken and King was Berkeley’s primary target in *Alciphron* (Berman 1976, 23; O’Higgins 1976, 94). Berkeley would, however, have been familiar with Browne’s earlier discussion of the doctrine of analogy in his *Letter* against Toland (Browne 1697, 37-58; see Berman 1976, 21-22; Pearce 2014). On Berkeley’s relation to Browne, see [CGB](#), §246; [TVV](#), §6; [Olscamp 1970b](#), ch. 9; [Winnett 1974](#), ch. 11.

14. One of the main aims of Browne 1697 had been to argue that ‘authority’ is an independent source of knowledge, distinct from ‘evidence.’

on the other hand, consistently seeks to answer the freethinkers on their own terms, allowing them to banish authority from discussions of natural theology ([Alc](#), §4.2). Furthermore, it is not often noticed that Berkeley’s famous comment about ‘siding in all things with the mob’ is made in a religious context. The complete notebook entry reads: “All things in Scripture wch side with the Vulgar against the Learned side with me also. I side in all things with the mob” ([N](#), §405).¹⁵ For Berkeley, although “the writings of the primitive fathers” are a source of theological truth ([BW](#), 7:146), in the end “our notions about faith [must be] taken from the commerce of the world, and practice of mankind, rather than from the peculiar systems of refiners” ([Alc](#), §7.13); those, such as Browne, who think otherwise “confound Scholasticism with Christianity” (§7.12). For Berkeley, philosophical theology attempts to systematize the beliefs of ordinary Christians, so that the success of the “particular systems of refiners” is to be judged by whether they accurately capture the beliefs of ordinary Christians. When ordinary Christians say ‘God is wise,’ they mean that God is wise.

5 The Practice of Natural Religion

Berkeley consistently insisted that the end of speculation must be practice ([DHP](#), 167). Belief in natural religion is meant to lead to the practice of natural religion, which consists in moral behavior.

The view that belief in the existence of God and the natural immortality of the soul is foundational to moral motivation was the philosophical orthodoxy of Berkeley’s day. However, it had recently come under fire from the Earl of Shaftesbury, who held that the foundation of moral motivation must be placed in aesthetic appreciation of the intrinsic beauty of virtue.

15. One commentator who does quote the entry in full and recognize its primarily religious significance is Roberts [2007](#), 142-143.

In the third dialogue of *Alciphron*, the title character makes use of Shaftesbury's moral theory to argue that "all the ends of society are secured without religion, and that an infidel bids fair to be the most virtuous man, in a true, sublime, and heroic sense" ([Alc](#), §3.3).¹⁶ According to Alciphron, genuine virtue cannot be produced by fear of punishment or hope of reward. Instead it can come only from appreciation of "the moral excellence, the beauty, and decorum" of the virtues ([Alc](#), §3.3; cf. Shaftesbury [1714](#), 2:21, 29-31, 55).

Euphranor agrees that virtue and the moral order are beautiful, and that the appreciation of this beauty is a strong source of moral motivation. However, according to Euphranor, this appreciation is tied up with "regard [for] the opinion of others concerning it" and is therefore not "a sufficient ground or principle of virtue, for a man to act upon, when he thinks himself removed from the eye and observation of every other intelligent being" ([Alc](#), §3.4; cf. Shaftesbury [1714](#), 2:57). Furthermore, Euphranor argues, the beauty of virtue is often insufficient as a motive to overcome our selfish desire for pleasure (cf. Shaftesbury [1714](#), 2:61).

Later in the dialogue, Euphranor provides a further argument for the fundamental dependence of moral motivation on natural religion. Alciphron had held that the moral sense consisted in an aesthetic appreciation of the beauty of virtue. Euphranor argues that beauty always consists in fitness for an end ([Alc](#), §§3.8-9). To suppose that the 'moral system' is beautiful is thus to suppose that it aims at some end. However, it cannot aim at an end unless it is a product of design (§3.10). Thus Shaftesbury's moral theory is to be seen as fundamentally presupposing theism, and hence is not a genuine alternative to a morality based on natural religion after all.

Berkeley also addresses this issue in *Passive Obedience*, where he argues that it is rational to obey God's commands because God alone is able to determine

16. On Berkeley's interpretation of Shaftesbury, see Olscamp [1970b](#), ch. 6; Jaffro [2007](#).

our eternal fate, which infinitely outweighs temporal goods ([PO](#), §6). However, our natural knowledge (i.e. our knowledge independent of revelation) of God's commands can only come from a prior conception of the good and of divine rationality (§7). From here, Berkeley argues that God's commands consist in a beautiful, harmonious collection of moral laws which together maximize human well-being. The goodness of the outcome (namely, human well-being) is prior to God's command, and so it is not merely because God commands it that we ought to value and pursue universal human well-being. However, knowledge that there is a good and rational God, and that it is within his power to confer a life after death, of whatever sort he chooses, upon us, ensures that we always have sufficient reason to follow these rules.

As Vanessa Nurock has emphasized (Nurock [2010](#)), Berkeley's interest in moral motivation is fundamentally different from Shaftesbury's. Shaftesbury has an elitist conception of ethics, whereas Berkeley the clergyman is concerned for the moral education of the common folk. Accordingly, Crito shrugs off the question of whether the virtuous atheist is a possible character ([Alc](#), §3.12), and focuses instead on insisting that an atheistic moral theory patterned on Shaftesbury does not provide adequate moral motivation for the ordinary person. As a result, by casting doubt on traditional religion and demeaning motivation based on reward and punishment, Shaftesbury has, "under pretence of making men heroically virtuous, endeavour[ed] to destroy the means of making them reasonably and humanly so" ([Alc](#), §3.13; cf. [TVV](#), §§3-5). Berkeley's central claim is that belief in God and in at least the possibility of reward and punishment in an afterlife is essential if we ordinary (non-heroic) human beings are to do our duty consistently. This consistency in our duty, done in obedience to divine commands, is the practice of natural religion.

Part II

Revealed Religion

‘Revealed religion’ is that part of religious belief and practice which is accepted on the basis of faith. The starting point, therefore, in any philosophical examination of revealed religion should be an examination the nature of faith and its relation to reason.

6 Faith and Reason

Locke defined ‘faith’ as belief on the basis of divine testimony ([EHU](#), §4.18.2). A crucial consequence of Locke’s definition of faith is that one must believe that God exists and has revealed some particular propositions *before* one can have faith. These claims must therefore be established by reason, that is, by our natural faculties, and cannot themselves be articles of faith ([EHU](#), §§4.18.6, 10; Jolley [2007](#), 443-444). Furthermore, Locke holds that, although it can be demonstrated that God exists, the claim that God has revealed some particular proposition is a historical claim and hence can never be more than merely probable ([EHU](#), §§4.18.5-6, 4.16.8-11). A consequence is that “*no Proposition can be received for Divine Revelation ...if it be contradictory to our clear intuitive Knowledge*” (§4.18.5), or, as Nicholas Jolley puts it “knowledge trumps faith” (Jolley [2007](#), 445).

Unlike most of Locke’s early religious critics, Berkeley accepts Locke’s account of faith, along with these consequences (Pearce [2014](#)). Berkeley’s aim in his defense of Christianity, especially in the fifth and sixth dialogues of *Alciphron*, is to provide probable arguments in favor of the belief that the Bible is a revelation from God, and to rebut claims that it contains propositions known to

be false.¹⁷ On Berkeley’s broadly Lockean view, if it can be shown, by natural reason, that it is *probable* that the Bible contains a revelation from God, then it is rational to accept any proposition contained in the Bible as an article of faith.

Although both Locke and Berkeley usually treat faith as a purely doxastic state, they also both sometimes employ a more practical conception of faith. According to Berkeley, an individual has ‘saving faith’ when Christian doctrine “makes proper impressions on his mind, producing therein, love, hope, gratitude, and obedience, and thereby become a lively operating principle influencing his life and actions” (*Alc*, §7.11; cf. *LW*, 7:131). Here again “speculation [must be] referred to practice” (*DHP*, 168).

7 Bodily Resurrection

The standard view of the afterlife in Berkeley’s Anglican context was roughly as follows.¹⁸ Upon death, each soul is subject to an immediate ‘personal’ judgment, so that the (disembodied) soul experiences either immediate conscious bliss or immediate conscious torment until the end of the world. At the end of the world, the bodies of the dead will be raised and each soul will be reunited with *its own body*, the *very same* body it animated in its earthly life. At this point, there will be a public judgment and the creation of a ‘new heaven and new earth’ (Revelation 21:1) to be inhabited by the elect, while the reprobate are now sent permanently to hell.

When Berkeley mentions ‘Socinian scruples’ about this doctrine (*PHK*, §95),

17. The structure of the argument in *Alciphron* VI has been examined by Jakapi 2010 and Charles 2011. For more details on *Alciphron* and its arguments, see ch. ?? [Schwartz] of this volume.

18. The doctrine of the afterlife I describe can be found in the *Belgic Confession* (1561), art. 37; the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), questions 57-58; the *Irish Articles of Religion* (1615), §§101-103; and the *Westminster Confession* (1647), chs. 32-33. None of these documents was considered authoritative by the Anglican church in Berkeley’s day (and the *Thirty-Nine Articles* are silent on this matter), but the view continued to be the standard one.

he probably has in mind Locke's doubts, expressed in his correspondence with Stillingfleet, about the identity of the resurrected body with the earthly body (LW, 4:301-330).¹⁹ According to Berkeley, "the most plausible of [these scruples] depend on the supposition that a body is denominated the *same*, with regard not to the form or that which is perceived by sense, but the material substance which remains the same under several forms" (PHK, §95; cf. Stillingfleet 1698, 35). Thus, Berkeley suggests:

Take away this material substance, about the identity whereof all the dispute is, and mean by *body* what every plain ordinary person means by that word, to wit, that which is immediately seen and felt, and which is only a combination of sensible qualities, and then [the Socinians'] most unanswerable objections come to nothing (PHK, §95).

Berkeley claims here that the identity of bodies across a large gap, such as the gap between death and resurrection, is, on his view, utterly unproblematic. This is an exaggeration, for it is unclear how Berkeleian bodies can persist over time *at all*, even in the most ordinary cases. However, it seems likely that, for Berkeley, the identity of bodies over time consists in some kind of systematic, lawful relationship between one perception and another. If this is true, then there will not be any *special* problem about the identity of resurrection bodies as there is for the materialist (see Hight 2007).

19. Locke's ambivalence on this point led to his being charged with Socinianism (Milner 1700, 187). Socinianism was among the most extreme movements of the radical Reformation, emphasizing individual, rational interpretation of Scripture and showing open hostility toward tradition. Locke's relationship to Socinianism is studied in detail by Marshall 2000.

8 The Language of Revealed Religion

Even more than the debate about the divine attributes, the Anglo-Irish intellectual scene in Berkeley's lifetime was dominated by an extremely contentious debate about religious 'mysteries,' such as the doctrine of the Trinity. In 1696, John Toland, a native Irish convert to Protestantism, published a tract entitled *Christianity Not Mysteriorious*, in which he used Locke's theory of ideas as a platform to attack traditional Christian doctrines as inventions of 'priestcraft.' Most notoriously, Toland argued that Arianism and orthodox Trinitarianism are both incomprehensible (Toland 1696, 27).²⁰

The overarching argument of *Christianity Not Mysteriorious* is simple. Toland defines 'mystery' as "a thing of its own Nature inconceivable, and not be judg'd of by our ordinary Faculties and Ideas" (66). This implies that mysteries are really "Words that have no Ideas at all" (135). However, if the words to which we verbally assent in confessing our belief in mysteries do not correspond to ideas, we may as well be confessing "that something call'd *Blictri* [has] a Being in Nature" (128): the alleged belief has no content, and thus cannot be a genuine belief, but is only an empty form of words (134-135). It is therefore impossible to believe in mysteries.

Providing a response to Toland was one of Berkeley's main philosophical preoccupations, beginning at least as early as 1708 (BW, 7:9-15).²¹ Berkeley's earliest detailed treatment of the matter can be found in the *Manuscript Introduction*, which had been written by November of that year (Belfrage 1987, 20-23). Here, Berkeley considers St. Paul's statement that "the Good Things

20. Arianism is the view that the Son of God was the first and greatest creature, by whom all other creatures were made, and is called 'god' or 'divine' only as an honorific title. Orthodox Trinitarianism, by contrast, holds that the Son is "begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father" ("The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed," in Schaff 1931, 2:58), and hence is a divine person in precisely the same sense as the Father.

21. On the circumstances which may have occasioned this preoccupation, see Belfrage 1985, 117-119; Berman 1994, 11-17.

which God hath prepared for them that love [him]²² are such as Eye hath not seen nor Ear heard nor hath it enter'd into the Heart of Man to conceive" (MI, §36; see 1 Corinthians 2:9). Berkeley notes that the apostle says quite explicitly that the heavenly reward is presently inconceivable by us, but nevertheless expects us to understand him when he tells us that there is such a reward. The conclusion Berkeley draws from this is that the aim of St. Paul's statement "is not to raise in the Minds of Men the Abstract Ideas of Thing or Good nor yet the particular Ideas of the Joys of the Blessed. The Design is to make them more chearfull and fervent in their Duty" (§36).

In order to explain how this works, Berkeley provides an account of how children learn the proper use of the English word 'reward.' According to Berkeley, we are *conditioned* by experience to increase our "Zeal and Activity" upon hearing the promise of a reward from "an honest Man" (MI, §37; see Berman 1994, 162). Berkeley does say that it may sometimes happen that upon a person's hearing the word 'reward' "there may be excited in his Understanding an Idea of the particular good thing to him proposed for a Reward" (MI, §37). However, Berkeley holds that even in many ordinary cases, in which we are capable of having ideas of the particular rewards in question, the effect of the words is nevertheless *directly* to motivate us, without the mediation of an idea. In the case of the heavenly reward – a particular example of a religious mystery – it is impossible for us (now) to have any such idea, but we nevertheless can and should be *motivated* by the promise of a heavenly reward, and that use of language is therefore meaningful.

According to Bertil Belfrage, Berkeley's view here is that,

What the apostle intends to do is to make people act in a certain way. Therefore, instead of saying:

22. Inserted above a caret mark.

- (4) There are inconceivably pleasant joys in store for blessed souls in heaven,
one could equally well say:
- (5) Act in accordance with what Christian doctrine prescribes as being our duty! (Belfrage [1986a](#), 646)

This interpretation of the *Manuscript Introduction* has been criticized by Kenneth Williford. Williford complains that Belfrage's interpretation reduces religious mysteries to nothing more than "useful nonsense" (Williford [2003](#), 291). Although Belfrage notes that Berkeley could not possibly accept the characterization of religious mysteries as 'nonsense' (Belfrage [1986b](#), 321), on his interpretation the 'sense' which religious mysteries make is merely emotional and practical, with no descriptive or cognitive component. Thus it is unclear how, on Belfrage's account, the mysteries can count as *true* (or false) rather than merely *useful* (or useless). On Williford's alternative interpretation, although the promise of an unspecified reward does not communicate any ideas, it does communicate the speaker's intentions. With respect to the heavenly reward, this theory has the benefit of explaining how, on Berkeley's view, we can expect really to be rewarded in the afterlife (something to which Berkeley is clearly committed; see above, §§[3](#), [7](#)) despite the fact that the promise on which this expectation is based conveys no ideas.

In *Alciphron* VII, the title character argues, following Toland, that religious mysteries are "empty notions, or, to speak more properly, ...mere forms of speech, which mean nothing, and are of no use to mankind" ([Alc](#), §7.1). Alciphron's particular target is the concept of *grace* which, he observes, "is the main point in the Christian dispensation" (§7.4). To the word 'grace,' Alciphron says, no idea can be attached. However, "there can be no assent where there are no ideas: and where there is no assent there can be no faith: and what cannot be,

that no man is obliged to” (A1c, §7.4).

Euphranor responds by arguing that there are in fact a great many meaningful words which do not stand for ideas (§§7.5-8). He emphasizes in particular the use of the word ‘force’ as a technical term in physics. Despite the lack of any idea corresponding to the word ‘force,’ Euphranor says, “there are very evident propositions or theorems relating to force, which contain useful truths” (§7.10). Euphranor emphasizes that these theorems of force guide our actions, explain various phenomena, and allow the construction of machines “by means of which things difficult and otherwise impossible may be performed.” Furthermore, “the same doctrine, which is so beneficial here below, serves also as a key to discover the nature of the celestial motions.” In light of these important results, Berkeley thinks, it would be absurd to “deny that [‘force’] is of use, either in practice or speculation, because we have no distinct idea of force” (§7.10).

From the fact that ‘force’ does not stand for an idea, but must nonetheless be regarded as meaningful because of its practical utility, Euphranor concludes that, ‘grace,’ despite not standing for any idea, can “be an object of our faith, and influence our life and actions, as a principle destructive of evil habits and productive of good ones” (§7.10). The same, he says, applies to other Christian mysteries. For instance, although no one can “frame in his mind any abstract or distinct idea of Trinity, substance, or personality” it is nevertheless possible that

the doctrine of a Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier makes proper impressions on [one’s] mind, producing therein, love, hope, gratitude, and obedience, and thereby becomes a lively operative principle influencing [one’s] life and actions, agreeably to that notion of saving faith which is required of a Christian (§7.11).

Euphranor’s claim is clearly that ‘grace’ and ‘Trinity’ have legitimate uses,

and are therefore meaningful, whether or not they stand for ideas. These uses evidently have to do with moral motivation. Beyond this, things become rather murky. In the discussion of ‘grace,’ there is a use/mention ambiguity. It sounds as though Euphranor is saying that *grace itself* “influence[s] our life and actions, as a principle destructive of evil habits and productive of good ones” (Alc, §7.10), and this would certainly be in line with traditional Protestant theology, and with Alciphron’s earlier description of what grace is supposed to be (“an active, vital, ruling principle, influencing and operating on the mind of man” – §7.4). However, in the discussion of ‘Trinity,’ it is not the Trinity Itself, but the “*doctrine* of a Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier” which “becomes a lively operative principle” (§7.11, emphasis added). Similarly, it is *belief* in Original Sin which is said to “produce in [the believer’s] mind a salutary sense of his own unworthiness, and the goodness of his Redeemer: from whence may follow good habits, and from them good actions” (§7.13). Furthermore, it is not clear how our lack of an idea of grace could be thought to be a hindrance to its being “a principle destructive of evil habits and productive of good ones.” On the other hand, if it is our *belief* in grace which is meant to be such a principle, then one can clearly see how it could be thought that the lack of an idea of grace would prevent this from happening. What is clear is that the notion we have of grace cannot be “separate or abstracted from God the author, from man the subject, and from virtue and piety its effects” (§7.10).

That ‘grace’ and ‘Trinity’ are connected to other notions in this way is crucial here, since Berkeley had said that ‘force’ is meaningful in virtue of the theorems which can be demonstrated by the use of that word. Thus Berkeley’s defense will not work if the mysteries are inferentially inert; instead, it must be possible to demonstrate ‘theorems of grace,’ analogous to the theorems of force (Pearce 2008, 261-262), and these theorems must, like the theorems of force,

have practical import.

David Berman has characterized Berkeley's thought on religious language as involving a contrast between 'cognitive theology' and 'emotive mysteries' (Berman [1981] 1993). It is indeed clear that there is a contrast to be drawn between Berkeley's treatment of the language of natural theology and the language of revealed theology. However, Berman's use of twentieth century terminology is apt to mislead (Williford 2003; Belfrage 2007). 'Emotivism' or 'non-cognitivism' about a domain of discourse is often understood as involving the claim that the statements (or pseudo-statements) in that domain of discourse are not truth evaluable (see, e.g., Ayer 1946, 107; cf. Williford and Jakapi 2009, 100). However, as Berman recognizes (Berman 1994, 161-163), Berkeley seems to think that claims about grace are genuinely *true* (Alc, §7.10; cf. Jakapi 2007, 189-190). Furthermore, in comparing 'grace' with 'force,' Berkeley connected the uses of language in religious mysteries with the use of language in physics, a paradigmatically cognitive domain of discourse (Williford and Jakapi 2009, 106; cf. Roberts 2007, 59-60).

Berman sees *Alciphron* VII as arguing that terms like 'grace' and 'Trinity' are meaningful *in virtue of* their ability to "produce emotions, dispositions, and actions." In this, they are like such utterances as 'Cheer up!', 'Life's a bore' and 'Get out!' (Berman 1994, 148).

This account has been challenged by Kenneth Williford and Roomet Jakapi, who argue that the motivational force had by terms like 'grace' is not constitutive of their meaning, but simply evidence of their meaningfulness (Williford and Jakapi 2009, 105). In place of the emotional and motivational associations of words, Williford and Jakapi emphasize the inferential relations in which the words stand, and claim that it is only indirectly, by means of these inferences, that the words impact actions and emotions.

On either of these interpretations, Berkeley has a serious theological problem, for Berkeley says that ‘grace’ and ‘Trinity’ are meaningful in much the same way that ‘force’ is. However, Berkeley’s *De Motu* was dedicated to showing that “‘Force’, ‘gravity’, ‘attraction’ and similar terms are useful for reasoning, and for calculations about motion and moving bodies, but not for understanding the simple nature of motion itself or for designating so many distinct qualities” (DM, §17). If the analogy is to hold, Berkeley would seem to be committed to the claim that ‘grace’ and ‘Trinity’ are useful for religious and moral reasoning, but not for understanding the nature of God or for designating qualities of God. To state the matter more emphatically, Berkeley’s aim in his discussions of ‘force’ is to argue that discourse involving ‘force’ can be useful and perhaps even (in some sense) true, despite the fact that, strictly speaking, there are no such things as forces. From the perspective of Christian orthodoxy, the application of the same line of thought to revealed theology would be a disaster. Berman and Belfrage seem to hold that Berkeley does indeed depart from (or at least radically reinterpret) Christian orthodoxy in this way, while Williford and Jakapi argue that Berkeley would have found this conclusion unacceptable (see especially Jakapi 2007).²³

This problematic aspect of Berkeley’s view was recognized early on by Peter Browne. Browne complains that “in the particular Instance of divine Grace, [Berkeley] in effect gives up the whole Cause of Revelation and Mystery” (Browne 1733, 508), and, more generally, that, on Berkeley’s account, Christian faith “is no other than believing in certain Sounds and Syllables,” so that belief in God becomes “no more than Faith in a Monosyllable” (539). Berkeley never answered these strong words of Browne’s. As a result, the question of whether he

23. Belfrage, however, never applied his thesis beyond the *Manuscript Introduction*, and in a later paper he explicitly agrees that Berkeley would have been dissatisfied with this account. He therefore holds that Berkeley’s view underwent significant ‘transformation’ throughout the course of his career (Belfrage 2007, 51).

would have accepted Browne’s characterization of his view remains open.

9 The Practice of Revealed Religion

At the end of the *Principles*, Berkeley indicated that it was part of “the main drift and design of [his] labours” to “dispose [us] to reverence and embrace the salutary truths of the Gospel, which to know and to practise is the highest perfection of human nature” (PHK, §156). In revealed religion, as in natural religion and in life in general, belief must not be divorced from practice.

According to Berkeley, the central elements of Christianity are “the love of God and man, the practising every virtue, the living reasonably while we are here upon earth, proportioning our esteem to the value of things, and so using this world as not to abuse it” (Alc, §5.5; cf. Alc, §5.15). This is very similar to Berkeley’s account of the practice of natural religion, and indeed Berkeley holds that one of the most important recommendations of Christianity is that it has succeeded in popularizing natural religion (Alc, §§5.9, 5.27; cf. Leibniz [1710] 1985, 50-51). Nevertheless, Berkeley holds that the specific, distinctive doctrines of Christianity can shape our practice in morally beneficial ways which go beyond the effects of natural religion.

Berkeley says that when the “doctrine of a Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier makes proper impressions on [one’s] mind, producing therein, love, hope, gratitude, and obedience, [it] thereby becomes a lively operative principle influencing [one’s] life and actions” (Alc, §7.11). Why exactly this doctrine should produce love, hope, gratitude, and obedience is not explained by Berkeley. However, it is clear that these attitudes toward God provide a deeper sort of moral motivation than a mere prudential calculation on the basis of the promise of reward and threat of punishment. In this way, revealed religion goes beyond natural religion with respect to moral motivation.

In the succeeding portions of *Alciphron*, Berkeley discusses the motivational impact of two other distinctive Christian doctrines. Berkeley says that when we “believe the divinity of our Saviour, or that in him God and man make one person ...by virtue of such persuasion [we] submit to his government, believe his doctrine, [and] practice his precepts” ([Alc](#), §7.11). In other words, the doctrine that God became a visible human person in concrete historical circumstances makes it easier for us to accept that certain beliefs and practices are backed by divine authority.

Similarly, the doctrine of Original Sin,²⁴ we are told, “may produce in [our] minds a salutary sense of [our] own unworthiness, and the goodness of [our] Redeemer: from whence may follow good habits, and from them good actions” (§7.13). Here the effect of the doctrine is tolerably clear: a belief in one’s own innate moral corruption, accompanied by the belief that one has been saved by the grace of God, produces humility and gratitude toward God. These mental attitudes have a positive effect on moral behavior.

Moral behavior is not, however, exhaustive of religious practice. According to Berkeley, the claim that “God Ought to be worship’d” is an analytic truth, and so a proposition of natural theology ([N](#), §705). The *manner* of worship is, however, a matter of revealed religion. The government and precepts of Christ, which belief in the Incarnation leads us to obey, include regular communal meetings for worship featuring the Christian sacraments. The sacraments are ‘means of grace’ and grace, for Berkeley, is “a principle destructive of evil habits and productive of good ones” ([Alc](#), §7.11), which is to say that God’s grace is his supernatural intervention for the reformation of the believer’s moral character. Thus, in Berkeley’s view, participation in Christian worship is important in

24. The doctrine of Original Sin states that human beings inherit moral corruption from the first sin of Adam. In the West, a stronger version, sometimes called ‘Original Guilt,’ has traditionally been held. According to this view each of us bears moral responsibility for Adam’s sin.

large part because of its effect on moral character ([BW](#), 7:121).

In revealed as well as natural religion, “the end of speculation [is] practice” ([DHP](#), 167). In particular, “the sum and substance, scope and end of Christ’s religion, [is] the love of God and man” ([Alc](#), §5.15). It is the practice of this religion which Berkeley’s philosophy aims to promote ([PHK](#), §156).

Abbreviations

Alc	<i>Alciphron</i>
BW	Works
CGB	<i>The Correspondence of George Berkeley</i>
DHP	<i>Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous</i>
DM	<i>An Essay on Motion</i>
EHU	<i>An Essay Concerning Human Understanding</i>
LW	<i>The Works of John Locke</i>
MI	<i>George Berkeley’s Manuscript Introduction</i>
N	<i>Philosophical Commentaries</i>
PHK	<i>A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge</i>
PO	<i>Passive Obedience</i>
TVV	Theory of Vision Vindicated

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