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GEORGE BERKELEY ON MORAL DEMONSTRATION

BY GRAHAM P. CONROY

In the *Philosophical Commentaries*, his personal notebooks, which he was writing while still a student at Trinity College, Dublin, George Berkeley made the entry:

Three sorts of useful knowledge—that of Coexistence, to be treated of in our Principles of Natural Philosophy; that of Relation, in Mathematics; that of Definition, or inclusion, or words (which perhaps differs not from that of relation), in Morality.¹

Taking his cue from John Locke, whose *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* was being used as a philosophy text in his college classes, the young Berkeley saw an apparent similarity between the methods of proofs in mathematics and in morality, which should be called more properly demonstration than proof; for XVIIth- and XVIIIth-century philosophers had made a distinction between proofs and demonstrations. For example, Descartes took the experiencing of sense objects by our minds as proof of an external world, inasmuch as this experience was given to us even against our own acts of will or certainly independently of them. This proof did not carry the same measure of certainty for the Cartesians that a demonstration from self-evident rational principles could have given. But this latter was impossible since Descartes' Augustinian voluntarism ruled out a knowledge of God's intentions and acts. Thus any logical necessity or self-evidence in the observations of nature were precluded, for God could at any moment alter the ordered course of nature if he so chose.

Professor Adamson of the University of Glasgow has written in his article "Demonstration" in Baldwin's *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*:

The term demonstration does not appear to have become a current accepted equivalent [of the Aristotelian *apodeixis*] till the period of the Arabic writers on logic, who translated ἀπόδειξις by it. The earlier Latin use, as in Boethius, does not go beyond the etymological sense, of showing, bringing before the mind as if pointed to, which the term still retains even in its specialized acceptation. For it is the peculiarity of demonstration that it claims for the conclusion reached by a mediating process the same simple absolute certainty that we incline to allow, without question, to the direct apprehension of a fact. The fundamental problems regarding demonstration begin in English philosophy with Locke's assignment of relations among abstract ideas of demonstration, and contrast of them with matters of fact. . . .²

¹ *Philosophical Commentaries*, entry 853, included in vol. I of *Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London, 1948).

² R. Adamson in *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. by James Mark Baldwin (New York, 1918), I, 268-269.

Although the problem in its use originated with Locke and his particular way of ideas, the demonstration of moral truth had been a distinguishing feature of the XVIIth century. This was particularly true of the Cambridge Platonists. To Henry More and Ralph Cudworth, morality was "immutable and eternal" and its basic precepts were to be discovered *in rerum natura* by a wise employment of reason. In 1731, just one year before Berkeley published his *Alciphron*, Cudworth's *Eternal and Immutable Morality* appeared posthumously. Previously these notions had been treated in More's *Enchiridion Ethicum* and in Cudworth's *True Intellectual System of the Universe*. In fact, almost every XVIIth-century philosopher believed in the mathematical treatment of ethics. Among the earlier examples of the technique had been Spinoza's *Ethica Ordine Geometrico* and Arnold Geulincx's *Ethica*.

The origin and growth of a demonstrative method is in itself instructive. Descartes' influence was still strong as a founder of mathematical sciences and this, coupled with a desire of many moralists to divorce ethics from theological dogmatics, led to the general tendency of XVIIth-century thinkers to seek a mathematical system of ethics. The only alternative which the XVIIIth-century moralist saw open to him were an uncritical acceptance of dogmatic theological pronouncements or a theological utilitarianism such as that espoused by William Paley on the one hand or the adoption of a demonstration of immutable moral precepts on the other. It is this latter type of ethical doctrine which was most influential upon Locke. J. A. Passmore has pointed out the impact of Cudworth's thinking upon Locke,³ and W. von Leyden, the editor of Locke's *Essays on the Law of Nature*, has shown that of Nathaniel Culverwell and Bishop Cumberland.⁴ In addition to the Platonist influence, however, there is that of John Wilkins, Bishop of Chester, Warden of Wadham College, and one of the founders of the Royal Society.

In his *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* Wilkins distinguished among three kinds of certainty which he named Physical, Mathematical, and Moral Certainty, all else being relegated to the realm of probability. Physical certainty depended upon the evidence of sense, "which is the first and *highest Kind of Evidence* of which human Nature is capable."⁵ Mathematical certainty he held as applying to mathematical things primarily without excluding other matters which might be capable of a like certainty, viz. "all such simple abstracted beings as in their own Natures do lie so open, and

³ See J. A. Passmore's *Ralph Cudworth, An Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1951). Chapter VII, "Cudworth and the British Moralists," 90-106.

⁴ See W. von Leyden's *John Locke's Essays on the Law of Nature*, Latin text with tr. (Oxford, 1954), 39 *et seq.*

⁵ John Wilkins, *Of the Principles and Duties of Natural Religion* (9th ed., London, 1734), 5.

are so obvious to the Understanding, that every Man's Judgment (though never so much prejudiced) must necessarily assent to them." ⁶ Moral certainty is that whose evidence is not of the same kind as of the former, but is such as to necessitate the assent of everyone though there be no natural necessity that such things must be so else a contrary state of affairs involve a contradiction. The mark of their assent is that no one can "admit of any reasonable doubt concerning them." ⁷ But to expect demonstrative certainty in moral matters was not possible for Wilkins as it had not been for Aristotle, for "*Moral* things, which being not of such *simple abstracted* Natures, but depending upon *mixed* circumstances, are not therefore capable of such kinds of demonstrative Proofs." ⁸ Men must accept a statement or a conclusion as true on its own proper evidence or else nothing will be believed except that which has the highest evidence and all else will be uncertain or doubtful, and hence impossible of being known. Further, it was his belief that all conclusions deduced from first principles established on these grounds would possess the same degree of certainty as in the original principles.

But Locke wanted to go further; there was a basic unresolved tension between his Scholastic training at Oxford and the empirical direction of his thought. For him there was only demonstrative knowledge and intuitive knowledge (such as that of the self), and against this degrees of probability. If ethics was to be a 'science' in the Platonic-Scholastic meaning of 'science,' it must be composed of a body of demonstrably certain propositions. The way to this and over Wilkin's objections was to show that in spite of the mixed circumstances in which moral problems occurred, their demonstration could be rendered simple by illustrating that moral names were framed by men apart from real things and applied to situations, and thus are not signs for unknowable real essences as are the names of substances. The names of substances are the nominal essences men form from the real things but which cannot designate them since we have no knowledge of all the basic atomic, or corpuscularian internal relations of the substances being named. Therefore Locke thinks his way to a 'science of ethics' leads through the identification of real and nominal essence in moral ideas.

Both Locke and Berkeley were for certainty in knowledge and in this sense were heirs to the Platonic and Scholastic tradition while at the same time disavowing it. "Knowledge" was only that which was certain. Probabilities were not real knowledge; they were only "probable truths." Two sciences qualified for Locke as possessing this "certain knowledge." These were mathematics and ethics. Physics only possessed probable truths. Both mathematics and ethics consisted of perfectly demonstrable propositions. Both deal with complex ideas

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

which *are* their own archetypes rather than with simple ideas which always *point*, as their archetypes, to external objects, that is to say, deal only with those abstract ideas Locke calls "mixed modes and relations." Ethics, treating as it does of abstract ideas only, becomes a purely abstract science; and to the moral philosopher it would make no difference whether or not a just act anywhere or at any time ever existed. Such a view is completely foreign to Berkeley's insistence on the parallels between theory and practice in his ethical writings and alien to his general views on abstract ideas.

Locke had said, "I doubt not but from self-evident propositions by the necessary consequences as incontestable as those in mathematics the measures of right and wrong might be made out" and that such an interpretation as his might place "morality amongst the sciences capable of demonstration."⁹

Berkeley's entries in the *Philosophical Commentaries* show that in ethics as well as in metaphysics he was greatly influenced by Locke. These entries cannot be properly understood without reference to Locke. To appreciate and evaluate the meaning of these entries, it is necessary to have Locke's 'theory' of ethics in mind.

Now Locke had demonstrated, he believed, that mathematics was distinct from natural science and held that certainty was possible in the first case but not in the second since the object of the former was, in his estimation, a mode whose real essence is one with its nominal essence. Mathematics proceeded syntactically; it was a matter of discovering the necessary connections between the terms the exact definitions of which one knew. In like manner, Locke concluded, morality should be constructed as a demonstrative science since its objects—the abstract ideas of justice, right, fortitude, etc.—were also modes whose real and nominal essences coincided. Therefore, truth in both mathematics and morality should be independent of actual experience and to that extent *a priori*. Correspondences in language will have for him a corresponding relationship in the world of reality. "If it be true in speculation, that is, in *idea* that *murder deserves death*, it will also be true of any action that exists conformable to that *idea of murder*."¹⁰

Locke regarded his science of morality more difficult to axiomatize than the science of mathematics because the abstract ideas involved had only words for their symbols, possessing no further sensible signs. Conversely, mathematical questions utilize both since in geometrical demonstrations one may have both the word 'triangle' and the plane figure on paper. Moral concepts, being conveyed by words, only allow a greater possibility of confusion in their use. Nonetheless, if one is careful in applying these more complex notions, an exact science of morals actually can be achieved. Such was Locke's belief.

⁹ *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, IV, III, 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, IV, 8.

That Berkeley's early view on a science of morality is not dissimilar to that of Locke can be seen from the following entry from the *Commentaries*: "Morality may be Demonstrated as mixt Mathematics."¹¹ Later entries show Berkeley's position changing. He realizes that this type of demonstration does no more than inform us how people in a society have used words and in a lexicon fashion tell us which words include which.¹² This tells us nothing of the foundations of morality. It can only render an account of how at a given time people do indeed use language.

This is an advance upon his earlier stand in the *Commentaries* when he thought that morality was capable of rigorous demonstration. Ethics on Lockian terms, like mathematics, will be *a priori* and certain, but will be at the same time vacuous or tautologous. If one gives the proper definitions of moral terms, he can never err in deducing moral judgments. This Berkeley apparently believed at first and held that mathematics was easier to demonstrate than morals only because the "words in Metaphisiques & Morality being mostly known to all the definitions of them may chance to be controverted."¹³

Before long, however, Berkeley came to see the absurdity of this kind of extreme rationalism and the "trifling nature of Locke's propositions."¹⁴ Such propositions merely informed one of how a man intended to use moral terms. It has been said that Locke felt he was not dealing with descriptive words that functioned vacuously in purely syntactical contexts, but with actual ideas. His science of morality, nevertheless, even though it be allowed this provision, would fail to provide an empirical 'science of morality' as Locke conceived it. It would not be empirical since there are no ideas of sensation or reflection of the moral terms and non-deductive since empirical reference would have to be made for such a 'science' to be significant. Berkeley delivers a telling blow to this type of demonstration when he says, "fruitless the distinction twixt real and nominal essence."¹⁵

If this were all one wanted to know and nothing more, then Berkeley's blunt assertion, "To demonstrate morality it seems one need only make a dictionary of words and see which included which,"¹⁶ would spell the end of the matter. But he sees the trifling nature of the whole procedure. All statements that issue from definitions will be vacuous since tautologous; the definitions will tell us how the demonstrator uses words. It is not a "necessary truth" that the logical

¹¹ *Philosophical Commentaries*, entry 755.

¹² *Ibid.*, entry 690. This type of work was attempted prior to Locke by Wilkins, Bishop of Chester, in his book *An Essay Toward a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language* (London, 1668). It was commissioned by the Royal Society (see Sprat's *History*).

¹³ *Ibid.*, entry 162.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, entry 691.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, entry 536.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, entry 690.

order and the order of reality must in any way duplicate each other.

Yet in a paper written after the *Essay*, Locke appears to take a position more in keeping with the tone of Berkeley. In this paper, *Of Ethics in General*, Locke deprecates a moral theory that concerns itself merely with the analysis of moral terms, for ethics should consider

species of action in the world, as justice, temperance, and fortitude, drunkenness and theft. But all the knowledge of virtues and vices which a man attained to this way would amount to no more than taking the definitions of the significations to the words of any language, either from men skilled in that language or the common usage of the country, to know how to apply them and call particular actions in that country by their right names, and so in effect would be no more but the skill how to speak properly. . . . The end and use of morality being to direct our lives and by showing us what actions are good, and what bad, prepare us to do the one and avoid the other; those that pretend to teach morals mistake their business and become only language masters.¹⁷

It is this type of stigma, that of being a "language master," of manipulating terms and framing meaningless and empty abstract ideas that Berkeley directs against his predecessor. It is probable that the statement in this later paper is not a *volte-face* for Locke, a repudiation of his 'science of morality'; for he had held he wasn't dealing with mere terms but with real ideas as well. Such a possible defense would have been untenable on at least two grounds, however. First, even though they (demonstrations) dealt with ideas, such ideas should be some kind of empirically derived abstractions if his earliest account of language and ideas in the *Essay* is to give him a consistent empiricism. But Locke specifically denies himself this escape by holding moral terms to have no symbols representing them other than names, no other sensible symbols, hence, no ideas—certainly not of sensation and not even of reflection. Second, any reference to empirical grounding of definitions would not properly be within the scope of the 'science of morality' as Locke conceived it.

Thus, Locke's rationalism will prove his undoing. Either Berkeley can reject his intended moral science as a web of empty tautologies which say nothing about the world and the actual habits of human beings; or, if he retreats back into empiricism and holds that moral terms stand for abstract general ideas, he can apply his own critique of abstract ideas to such terms and show them to be devoid of meaning, since they either involve contradiction or apply to no direct empirical referents, for we never meet "justice," but only just acts.

Lockian a priorism is rejected by Berkeley not simply because he

¹⁷ Included in Lord Peter King, *Life and Letters of John Locke* (London, 1858), II, 125-127. Also cf. 129, sect. 9, quoted by R. I. Aaron in *John Locke*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1955), 263.

maintains that 'good,' for example, cannot be defined completely apart from all contexts and that it does make a difference that some just acts do really exist; but because, in large measure, of his developing views on the nature of self, or spirit.¹⁸ Several entries on demonstration occur at the same place in the *Commentaries* where we find remarks expressive of Berkeley's completed views on the nature of spirit and there is, no doubt, a connection between the two sets of thoughts. The acts of spirit cannot be known by ideas since ideas are inert and cannot be like active things. These are known by notions. If demonstration can be only of names which represent ideas and ideas of spiritual activity are systematically unknowable and impossible, then moral demonstration is impossible inasmuch as morality is a matter which primarily concerns the will, or volitions. "The opinion," declares Berkeley, "that men had Ideas of Moral actions has render'd the Demonstrating Ethiques very difficult to them."¹⁹ And several entries earlier he also writes:

We have no Ideas of vertues & vices, no Ideas of Moral Actions wherefore it may be Question'd whether we are capable of arriving at Demonstration about them, the morality consisting in the Volition chiefly.²⁰

Berkeley's insistence upon morality as a matter of the will, his rejection of the meaningfulness of moral terms such as 'freedom,' 'good,' 'justice,' 'right,' 'obligation,' 'fortitude' and the like when prescindcd from all exemplifications of such qualities, and his denial of any *a priori* demonstrability of ethics, by no means can be assumed to be a dismissal of the use of reason in establishing moral precepts. For Berkeley moral acts will have an element of rational calculation within them. The goodness of an act is a quality perceived from the effects of that act in a specific moral situation or context. It is a matter of present or future pleasure felt or to be felt. The rightness of an act, however, is, Berkeley believes, a quality to be ascertained by the "fitness" of that act to a universal rule of reason, and a rule governing actions done, being done, and to be done—acts of basic human significance and import.

Bearing this in mind, the demand for relativism and reality in ethics, it is surprising to know that in 1712 Berkeley composed a treatise which seems to be a direct violation of his stand on demonstration. The question then arises as to whether his rationalist doctrine of the *Passive Obedience* can be reconciled with his sensate eudaemonism. In actuality it cannot. The basic technique of the *Passive Obedience* is that very same demonstrative procedure which

¹⁸ The Berkeleian doctrine of spirits makes it increasingly clear that ideas of moral actions are not possible; hence no demonstrability to ethics. Berkeley even comes to question the possibility of the demonstration of ideas themselves.

¹⁹ *Philosophical Commentaries*, entry 683.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, entry 669.

Berkeley dismissed in the *Philosophical Commentaries* and in the *Principles*. Demonstration is of ideas and there are no positive ideas of moral terms and moral acts strictly speaking. Berkeley had written earlier in the *Commentaries*: "I must not to pretend much of Demonstration, I must cancell all passages that look like that sort of Pride, that raising of Expectation in my Readers."²¹ In the face of his many strictures upon demonstration, he then writes a book on a demonstrative theory of ethics whose "eternal rules of action" have "the same immutable universal truth with propositions in geometry."²²

This change of direction is puzzling. Yet if one realizes that Berkeley is here writing a treatise that is primarily political in nature and only secondarily ethical, one can better understand the particular problems. The ethical notions which Berkeley brings to bear on the question of political loyalty are only extended and developed as far as his immediate purpose required. *Passive Obedience* is not an attempt to work out an ethical system in whole or in brief.

The chief difficulty arising in the questions Berkeley discusses lies in his meaning of 'negative moral precepts.' According to this treatise those statements and precepts admit of no exceptions. In other words, those precepts are such that they admit of no empirical or prudential qualifications to men's unquestioned obedience of them. What kind of propositions then could these be that would possess such a high degree of certainty?

In attempting to find candidates for the appellation of 'negative moral precepts,' one is ultimately driven to consider the Decalogue. Therein we seem to find such candidates. Among these would be such moral imperatives as "thou shalt not to steal," "thou shalt not murder," "thou shalt not commit adultery." If a negative moral precept is defined as one which admits of no exception, then these sentences qualify admirably. The reason why they so qualify is not because, as a matter of fact, to transgress their admonitions would be wrong, but because each is a tautology and says nothing. Each is necessarily true, but true vacuously. 'Steal,' 'adultery,' and 'murder' are all words which contain a built-in moral judgment. Each stands for a type of wrong act. Therefore, when one says, 'one ought not to murder,' he is only saying 'one ought not to engage in immoral killing.' Since what is immoral is always wrong in matters of morals, this is no more than saying 'one ought not to do what one ought not to do.' In these cases it would seem that any validity the sentences have would have to come (according to the demands of certainty) through revelation rather than reason of the sort being used, or must be empirically grounded as ultimately concerning the being and cohesion of some kind of moral order of spirits.

²¹ *Ibid.*, entry 858.

²² *Passive Obedience*, in *Works*, VI, 45.

It is significant that Berkeley writes in the *Philosophical Commentaries*: "Reasoning there may be about things or Ideas or Actions but Demonstration can only be verbal."²³ Reasoning for Berkeley can never be abstract reasoning; it is always reasoning-cum-sense. In the last analysis, the moral principles of the *Passive Obedience* are not established by the type of demonstration of Locke nor by the kind of rationalist argument one finds in Kant. His precepts on investigation illustrate themselves to be empirical generalizations upon experience or prudential maxims. He takes into account the feelings and inclinations of men. He starts from these and asks how they can be harmonized with God's purposes which cannot be demonstrated but which must come through revealed pronouncements to the common man, to the philosophical man through an induction of particulars, i.e. through seeing what courses of life, kinds of characters, and what types of acts lead to men's real happiness.

By experience, our own as well as that of others we do see that certain kinds of activities and lives seem to lead to observable consequences and we come to learn that the life of license will not pay off in the long run except in debased coin. Pure ratiocination will not tell us this; observation will give us a clue. As for finding the patterns of conduct that will lead us to "the Happiness of the life to come,"²⁴ that will have to come ultimately through an investigation of natural and revealed religion.²⁵ It is a measure of Berkeley's realism on moral issues that he realizes men are not won over to the practice of virtue merely by increasing their power of abstract reasoning. He understands that most human beings must be won over to this conduct by persuasion and education.

We may say that Berkeley ultimately abandoned demonstration of moral matters for three reasons: (1) systematic: since morality concerns actions, actions are not given through ideas, and only ideas can be demonstrated (which is itself doubtful),²⁶ moral truths are incapable of being demonstrated; (2) psychological: the abstract nature of demonstration makes it difficult for the common man and is incapable of providing him with motives for just acts. "In short the dry strigose rigid way will not suffice, he must be more ample &

²³ *Philosophical Commentaries*, entry 804.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, entry 539.

²⁵ This will be largely a matter of revelation which will set the larger ends of morality and leave to us the discovery of the means and types of acts necessary to attain them. Revelation will not prescribe all the human duties, much will be left to empirical considerations.

²⁶ Berkeley eventually comes to hold that only names, rather than ideas strictly, are demonstrable; hence all demonstration is merely verbal. Mathematics (excepting geometry), being only about names or signs, is the demonstrative science par excellence.

copious else his demonstration²⁷ tho never so exact will not go down wth most";²⁸ (3) procedural: Berkeley is unwilling to divorce theory completely from practice in human conduct.

Yet, Berkeley was not the only moralist of his age to abandon the rationalistic and demonstrative approach to ethics in favor of an empirical consideration of its subject matter, the acts of men in concrete situations. In the swing from the Platonic-Scholastic tradition, which found its last great upholder in Locke, he was joined by his theological colleague and fellow bishop, Joseph Butler.

In his *Ethical Sermons* Butler maintained that the subject matter of moral philosophy could be treated in either of two ways: from the abstract relations of things apart from exemplifications in human acts and from a study of the acts as they occur in life situations in which the actor is the central figure for investigation. He also maintained that each method has its advantages and that each leads to the practice of virtue. Butler probably had Samuel Clarke in mind as the chief proponent of the former view and his contemporary the Earl of Shaftesbury as representative of the latter method. His preference for the empirical method over the demonstrative appears to be based on the wider appeal which a discussion of concrete moral situations would have rather than upon any belief that the rationalist method is in any way inadequate to its subject. Butler must be said to have believed each of the two approaches to be valid.²⁹

Foreseeing and modern as were Butler's views, George Berkeley went beyond him by completely rejecting demonstration and thereby opened the way for a further reduction of the field of moral propositions, more of which he took simply as matters of fact. This he did in a more thorough and polished way than Butler, Shaftesbury, or Mandeville who are often held up as precursors of David Hume in ethics.³⁰ Thus Berkeley stands as the transitional figure between XVIIth-century rationalistic ethics and the empirical moral philosophy of the XVIIIth, although his very position as a transitional figure has caused his interest and merit as a moralist to go unacknowledged.

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²⁷ It is possible that Berkeley may occasionally be using demonstration in two different senses: as a technical term and in the common usage of "to show or illustrate." This quotation could be employing the term in the latter way (*Philosophical Commentaries*, entry 163). In this usage of 'demonstration' *Alciphron* would be the "more ample & copious" method of offering proof on moral subjects.

²⁸ *Philosophical Commentaries*, entry 163.

²⁹ Joseph Butler, *Analogy of Religion and the Fifteen Sermons* (London, 1893). In Author's Preface to Sermons, 372.

³⁰ Hume himself names "Mr. Locke, my Lord Shaftesbury, Dr. Mandeville, Mr. Hutcheson, Dr. Butler," in the Introduction to the *Treatise of Human Nature* as among "some late philosophers in England, who have begun to put the science of man on a new footing, and have engaged the attention, and excited the curiosity of the public."