

*PS English Literature 2: Religion, Science, and the Subaltern:
Concepts of Humanity in 18th- and 19th- Century English Literature (WS 2018/19)*

Background information: Bishop George Berkeley's (1685-1753) Response to Enlightenment: Some Essentials

- The Cartesian and Lockean influences were particularly prominent in Berkeley's early writings in which he fearlessly and provocatively elaborated his distinctive vision.
- Berkeley was 'disgusted with an Age and Clime/Barren of every glorious Theme' (cf. his only known poem *America or the Muse's Refuge, a prophecy* (1726))
- The Age and Clime from which he recoiled were the outcome of the new philosophical movement which, in his view, undermined the religious, metaphysical, and moral foundations of European culture and civilization by relegating the formative religious and philosophical experiences of the classical and Christian traditions to an earlier immature stage of human development. He was convinced that the new mathematical and scientific methods were unable to resolve religious, philosophical and moral issues that have been essential for man ever since. He deplored the fact that enlightened reason had already given rise to a mechanistic worldview which eroded traditional convictions concerning human dignity, freedom and the hope for immortality.
- Berkeley's works testify to his unremitting efforts to stem the tide of Enlightenment and vindicate what he took to be the indispensable foundations of European culture and civilisation.
- In his early writings, Berkeley argued consistently for the "non-existence of matter", i.e. he claimed that material substances were non-existent. Therefore critics called Berkeley a "dogmatic idealist who degraded bodies to mere illusion and regarded things in space as merely imaginary entities. " (I. Kant) and asked the rhetorical question: "Would not the dissolution of society and the destruction of mankind necessarily ensue? (James Beattie, 1774)
- With regard to the new Enlightenment philosophy and its scepticism, Berkeley criticized that it relentlessly exposed the fallibility of the senses and of reason and, as a consequence, inveighed against the religious and philosophical traditions; from his point of view, Enlightenment philosophy emphasized in an uncritical and unbalanced way utilitarian and hedonistic goals.
- For the philosophers of Enlightenment, the **primary or measurable qualities** of sensible objects really existed in the external world, whereas the **secondary qualities** such as colour and smell were only subjective and transitory phenomena. For Berkeley, the reasons given by Descartes, Locke and others for the subjectivity of secondary qualities could also be deployed to disprove the objectivity of primary qualities. Thus he concluded with regard to any object that their "**esse est percipi**", and that to ascribe existence to external realities, independently of their being perceived by a mind or spirit, was to succumb to the irreligious materialism of Epicurus or Hobbes.

- Berkeley was convinced that the distinction between ideas and objects was a cornerstone of scepticism and materialism; therefore he concluded that ideas were in fact the direct object of perception and that the terms “ideas“ and “objects“ (= things) could be used interchangeably.
- In his work *Alciphron or the Minute Philosopher* (1732) Berkeley stated that Enlightenment and its atheism subverted the traditional foundations of morality. He saw in the new philosophy the reduction of human nature to the level of animals or even machines. He was sure that the unbridled indulgence in animal pleasures was an inhuman mode of existence which stifled the voice of conscience and led to despair and even suicide. For him, the most basic flaw in Enlightenment philosophy was that it suppressed, or failed to respond to, the most crucial human questions.
- Although Berkeley shared the bias of his contemporaries against the conceptual and linguistic apparatus of the scholastic philosophers, he nevertheless admitted that they inherited the classical conception of reason and treated the great and important subjects. Enlightenment philosophy, on the other hand, frustrated the human quest for intelligibility and subverted the only secure foundations of personal and social order.
- Following the mainline Christian tradition, Berkeley was convinced that the existence of a world-transcendent and incorporeal God was a demonstrable truth. Since the *esse* of sensible objects consisted in their being perceived, and since it was evident that these objects and, also, the immense panorama of the universe continued to exist independently of the self or of any human perceiver, it was intuitively certain that an extra-terrestrial and omnipresent Spirit existed. Thus, for Berkeley, the sensible world was dependent on, or a manifestation of, a transcendent Mind or Spirit. In his work *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* Berkeley asserted: “Whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by sense have not a like dependency on my will. There is therefore some other will or spirit that produces them.“ (= God) The manifest evidence of order, stability, and purpose showed that the author of the universe is indeed “wise, powerful, and good, beyond comprehension. “
- Thus, Berkeley argued, nature is a visual language or system of signs through which the invisible author (God) communicates with his rational creatures. Therefore there could be no justification for conflict between faith and reason, since both were oriented to the one unchangeable Truth, the “Father of Lights“(God)
- Berkeley’s conclusion with regard to Enlightenment philosophy: “He who hath not much meditated upon God, the human mind , and the *summum bonum*, may possibly make a thriving earthworm, but will most indubitably make a sorry patriot and a sorry statesman.“