

Book Review

BERKELEY, George, *Alciphron or The Minute Philosopher*, The Works of George Berkeley, ed. A.A. Luce-T.E. Jessop, Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 2nd imp., London 1964, Vol. III.

George Berkeley (1685-1753) wrote *Alciphron or The Minute Philosopher* when he was Dean at Newport, Rhode Island, awaiting the issue of his project of a college in Bermuda. It was published in London in February 1732. So, it must have been completed when Berkeley landed in England in October 1731. A Dublin edition and a second London edition appeared in 1732. Each of these three editions was in two volumes, and in all of them the *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* was appended. A third edition did not appear until 1752 (London) and the *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* was omitted this time. Though the authorship was not in fact concealed, all these editions were anonymous. *Alciphron* was incorporated in the subsequent collections of Berkeley's works. There have been two early translations of *Alciphron*, into French (1734) and German (1737).

Alciphron was the first of Berkeley's writings to provoke a literature of response. In 1732 two anonymous tracts came out: *Some Remarks on 'The Minute Philosopher'* by Lord Hervey, and *A Letter to Dion*, which was Mandeville's answer to Berkeley's attack on him in Dialogue II. In the same year there was a letter in the *London Journal* of 18th May in defence of Shaftesbury, and a letter in the *Daily Post-boy* (London) of 9th September. Bishop Peter Browne replied in *Things Divine and Supernatural* (1733) to Berkeley's criticism of him in Dialogue IV. A common feature of these responses is that all of them were antagonistic.

Alciphron is described in its sub-title as 'an apology for the Christian religion against those who are called free-thinkers'. In it Christian beliefs are stated defensively with a shape and emphasis devised to meet the contemporary objections of intellect and mood. The philosophy in it is subservient to that aim. The dialogues go beyond philosophy as natural theology to the vindication of a particular revealed religion against the current apostasy of belief and practice.

The book can also be seen as a part of the anti-deistic controversy that absorbed much of the attention of the orthodox in eighteenth century. In general, deism is defined as 'the opinion of those that only acknowledge one God, without the reception of any revealed religion'. In fact, it commonly went beyond the claim that all religion other

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than natural religion is superstition to the charge that whatever in this sphere has not rational coherence is the pernicious addition of priests for their own livelihood and power. While some of the deists were sincere seekers after a pure religion, others enjoyed negations and eccentricity, and found an endless pleasure in exploiting theological controversies (blowing the coals between polemical divines, Dialogue II, 23).

These latter were deists in name only, caring little for religion, though professing one of a sort because of social prudence. Hence, in *Alciphron* Berkeley preferred to speak of free-thinkers rather than of deists, twisting their own term to make it stand for libertines in thought and practice. He also called them ‘minute philosophers’ because of their belittling everything they touched on (Dialogue I, 10). His representation of them as opposing not only superstition, ecclesiasticism, priestcraft and pedantry, but also true religion and sound learning, is true of many of them. It was these, the ‘second-hand philosophers’, that Berkeley’s frequent asperities had in view (Dialogue VII, 30).

Alciphron includes only a partial reaffirmation and no expansion of the philosophy which Berkeley had published in his earlier works. His theory of vision is emphatically repeated, but with its original limitation (Dialogue IV, 10). It is again used for the contention that sense-experience is a language with which God speaks to us, so that He is never far from us. The contention presupposes, and is in fact preceded by, a proof of God’s existence (Dialogue IV, 4 f). Berkeley’s denial of physical causality is just discernible in *Alciphron*. What is not present at all is his basic and distinctive doctrine of *esse as percipi* and *percipere*, that corporeal reality is all that it is perceived to be and no more, and exists only as an object to an apprehending mind; there is no underlying matter independent of mind. Therefore it is vain to turn to *Alciphron* for Berkeleianism. Because *Alciphron* goes beyond natural theology to the defence of the Christian faith, Berkeley, with a fine scruple, did not think it right to rest the case for that faith on his own philosophy.

Berkeley’s remarks on one topic of natural theology are made against an historical background. The sections on the nature of our knowledge of God spring out of an old problem. The Fathers and the Schoolmen had been well aware of the difficulty of an anthropomorphic conception of God. Under the influence of Neo-Platonism some of them had gone so far as to declare the radical heterogeneity of the finite and the Infinite. Thus a ‘negative theology’ attributing only negative predicates to God arose (Dialogue IV, 16-22; and VII, 31). To this, some theologians, the most famous of whom is St. Augustine, had given some support. Others had held that there is a genuine analogy between man’s mind and God’s, so that predicates applicable to man are significant also of God. Berkeley raised the subject because it had recently been brought to the fore by two Dublin theologians. Peter Browne (Provost of Trinity College 1699-1710) had admitted the merely analogical character of our knowledge of God. William King (Archbishop of Dublin), in a sermon published in 1709, *Divine Predestination and Foreknowledge*, emphasized the deficiency rather than the positive aspect of the analogy. Berkeley expressed his surprise at this in a letter of 1st March 1710 to his friend Percival.

Alciphron consists of seven dialogues which purport to be a week’s conversations. The reporter, Dion, who does not take part in them, is a guest of

Euphranor, a farmer who had been through the university and retained his habits of study. Both are invited by Euphranor's friend Critio to meet two free-thinkers who are staying with him. As the host, Critio acts as umpire in the conversations, but also takes a considerable part in them. His knowledgeable and witty interventions express one side of Berkeley's mind; Euphranor's simple sincerity expresses the other side. The older of the free-thinkers, Alciphron, who had been trained for the law, is the chief interlocutor with Euphranor and Critio, except in Dialogue II, where he is replaced by Critio's young kinsman Lysicles, who, "after passing the forms of education", had fallen into the free-thinking set "to the damage of his constitution and his fortune" (Dialogue I, 1).

From the literary point of view, *Alciphron* is the best of Berkeley's works. Indeed, one can even say that as a work of art it stands supreme in the whole body of English literature of philosophy. It carries a considerable bulk and a wide variety of argumentation and learning with ease to a consistently high level of statement. The organization of the content is masterly; the style is astonishing in its sustained excellence. It swings freely from solemnity to levity, holding and communicating every mood except the tragic. Yet it is simple.

For Berkeley literature was not a craft to shine in, but a medium of communication. His sentences never suggest the anxiously poised pen, but seem to come submissively as the fit companions of his thoughts. His language is clear and clean because his thinking was, and it is sensitive and lovely because he had a mind of the rarest refinement. These and other features that are not covered in this review make *Alciphron* essential reading for scholars and students concerned with moral and religious philosophy.