Berkeley and Locke on Real Knowledge

Margaret Atherton

In one of his notes to himself, published as the Philosophical Commentaries, Berkeley lays out a project: “Mem: nicely to discuss Lib 4 ch 4 Locke” (PC 549). And on the opposite side of the page, he reminds himself that “it is of the Reality of Knowledge” (PC 549a). As it happens, Berkeley never followed up on this reminder in his published writings, inasmuch as there is no explicit reference in them to Locke’s Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book IV, chapter 4. An interesting question, therefore, might be, if Berkeley had followed up on his plan and provided a careful and precise discussion of Locke’s Essay 4.4, what might he have said? What did Berkeley think could be learned from Locke’s chapter entitled “Of the Reality of Knowledge”?

There are those, of course, who might think this is not such an interesting question. Surely, they might say, we already know what Berkeley thought about Locke’s position on real knowledge, even without any references to Book IV, chapter 4. Locke, after all, was a representative realist, and Berkeley was not. That is, in the eyes of many, it is Locke’s version of representative realism that forms the target of the negative arguments that Berkeley used to make room for his own positive doctrine of immaterialism. So, according to this view, we already know what Berkeley would say about Locke’s account of real knowledge, because that is exactly how many of Berkeley’s arguments are already read, as attacks on Locke.

I entirely agree with this last point that Berkeley is frequently read as fairly explicitly attacking Locke, but I am troubled that Locke is never named by Berkeley as a target with respect to the issue of representative realism. The discussion promised in Berkeley’s note to himself never materializes. When Berkeley does give names to those he more generally sees as his opponents, moreover, Locke is not among them. Consider, for example, Hylas’s final remarks, as he definitively throws in the towel:

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1 All references will be to Berkeley, George. The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne. Edited by A.A. Luce, and T.E. Jessop. 9 vols. London; Edinburgh; Paris: Thomas Nelson, 1948–1957. All references will be in the text. Principle of Human Knowledge: PHK, section number, Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous: 3D, dialogue number, page number.

You set out upon the same principles that Academics, Cartesians, and the like sects, usually do; and for a long time it looked as if you were advancing their philosophical scepticism; but in the end your conclusions are directly opposite to theirs. (3DIII 262)

A statement such as this at least raises as a question why Berkeley should have omitted the name of the man often taken to be his principal target. So I am going to assume that my original question, what would Berkeley have said if he had actually discussed Locke’s Book IV, chapter 4 is indeed a good question. In the course of answering it, I am hoping to be able to shed light as well on the question of Locke’s status as a target of Berkeley’s argument. For it will be my contention that a nice discussion of Book IV chapter 4 will in fact reveal a much more complicated relation between Locke and Berkeley.3

Locke’s project as he lays it out in Book IV chapter 4 is one that would clearly have interested Berkeley very much. Locke seeks in this chapter to dispel what seems to be an obvious objection to his account of knowledge. If knowledge is to be understood, as Locke maintains, to consist in the agreement and disagreement between ideas, then is there any difference between the products of the imagination and real knowledge? “Where is the Head,” Locke imagines an opponent asking, “that has no Chimeras in it? Or if there be a sober and a wise Man, what difference will there be, by your Rules, between his Knowledge, and that of the most extravagant Fancy in the World?” (ECHU, 4.4.1) Locke proposes in this chapter to lay these worries to rest, and to show that, his account of knowledge as consisting in relations among ideas notwithstanding, it is still possible, as he puts it, to go “a little further than bare Imagination.” (ECHU, 4.4.2) Locke promises a criterion that will enable us to tell when our ideas “agree with Things.” (ECHU, 4.4.3) This is clearly a matter that will strike Berkeley as important, for he conceives his own theory as open to the same objection. As he puts it in the mouth of Hylas, he too must answer the question that “according to your notions, what difference is there between real things and chimeras formed by the imagination, or the visions of a dream, since they are all equally in the mind?” (3DIII 235) The question for us now is, what did Berkeley make of Locke’s answer to this problem?

Locke proceeds in a very characteristic manner, by dealing, in order, with the categories of ideas that are important to him, namely, simple ideas, ideas of mixed modes and ideas of substances. The answer to the question, how we

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