CHAPTER IV

THE ROLE OF GOD AND THE DEFINITION OF GOOD

A “definist” in ethics is a person who believes that “ought” can be defined in terms of “is”. For example, one might hold that “we ought to do X” means that “Society requires us to do X”. There are obviously many sorts of these theories, all variations of the same theme. Naturalism of all varieties, and intuitionism, are two classes of definist theories. “Theological definism” is a theory which holds that the facts in terms of which the basic moral concepts are defined are facts about God or some divine being. I believe that Berkeley held premises which imply what we would now classify as a version of theological definism. In this chapter, I shall try to support this thesis, and I shall also criticize Berkeley’s views on the subject. I shall also briefly examine the meanings of the basic moral terms for him, and try to relate them.

In order to accomplish these purposes, we must return to a subject which has already been outlined. This is the two part proof for the existence of God and his attributes which was discussed in the first chapter in connection with Berkeley’s theory of the natural language. It is now time to examine those arguments in more detail, for on them depends Berkeley’s definism, given certain additional premises.

Several fundamental assumptions, some assumed as axioms and never questioned by Berkeley, are at the foundation of the arguments. These assumptions are:

1. Like effects have like causes.
2. Resemblance in proportion is a sufficient ground for arguments from analogy.
3. From a difference in degree, magnitude etc. in an effect, we can infer like differences in causes.
4. Nothing is that which is not caused.

Berkeley believes that these axioms, together with the conclusions resulting from his analysis of mind, and what is given in sensation,
allow us to generate two arguments about God. The first of these arguments is "necessary", and the second is probable. The first argument purportedly proves that God is the immediate cause of the world of ideas, and the other concludes that God not only exists as the immediate and essential cause, but also that he is benevolent, provident, wise and good. As we shall see, the arguments are not dependent upon one another logically except in so far as they both depend ultimately upon Berkeley's unique analysis of the elements of knowledge.

I. THE NECESSARY ARGUMENT

This first argument can be stated briefly, and in fact it was so stated near the beginning of the first chapter. It is best presented in the Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous. This statement ties the proof directly to the esse est percipi principle, which is of course a conclusion from Berkeley's analysis of the objects of perception. In that analysis, Berkeley argues that an examination of the data of sense will show that ideas of sense are inactive, can only resemble other ideas, that the relations between ideas are founded on constant conjunction and resemblance, and that there is no such thing as an efficient cause relation in nature. At the same time, an examination of our minds shows that they are active, unextended, causal agents. We do cause some ideas, but we obviously do not cause others, nor does any human mind. It follows that either there are ideas with no causes, or their cause is a mind which is non-human. Because of his acceptance of his version of the principle of sufficient reason, (axiom 4 above) Berkeley concludes that all ideas have a cause, and that therefore the cause of at least those ideas which human minds do not cause is a non-human mind. His name for the activity of mind constituting the relation between minds and bodies is "perception", and he therefore thinks that ideas of sense are dependent upon their perception by some mind, or to put it his way, their existence consists in their being perceived – esse est percipi. A perusal of our experience verifies that there are no other causal agents which we know aside from minds, and that of all minds, we only know our own directly. But in order to know that there is a non-human cause, it is not necessary to know that non-human cause, or other minds for that matter, directly. In short, we can infer from the seen to the unseen, the directly known to the indirectly known, where "indirectly known" in this case means "known by inference". Therefore, the problem of other minds, and ultimately the entire subject of