BERKELEY’S DIALECTIC

(1) All things to all men
In a revealing jotting of his youth (apparently an addendum to the Note Books) Berkeley writes:

“He that would win another over to his opinion must seem to harmonize with him at first and humour him in his own way of talking. From my childhood I had an unaccountable turn of thought that way.” (Works ix, p. 153).

As A. C. Fraser observes: “This is an interesting example of a feature that is conspicuous in Berkeley – the art of ‘humouring an opponent in his own way of thinking’ which it seems was an early habit.”¹ Berkeley saw fit to humour his readers at first with phrases familiar to their ears. The early works were written in the language of Locke’s Essay: a plan already formulated in memoranda in the Note Books (e.g. P.C. 185, 553) and reiterated in a letter to Percival after the publication of the Principles:

“. . . I omitted all mention of the non-existence of matter in the titlepage, dedication, preface, and introduction, that so the notion might steal unawares on the reader, who possibly would never have meddled with a book that he had known contained such paradoxes.” (6th Sep. 1710).

Did Berkeley write in this style in a spirit of irrepressible miming? or of mockery? or of persuasive guile? We shall see more fully hereafter that it was an inspired combination of the three; and that this combination contributes to the unique endurance of his work. But in its immediate effect this style worked greatly to the detriment of Berkeley’s reputation: as we have already intimated (I, 7), his readers thought that his only concern was to draw sceptical conclusions from Locke’s principles. They overlooked the fact that Berkeley’s real intention was the reverse: to propound a radically new way of thought,

¹ Fraser’s edition of Berkeley, 1901, i, p. 92.
on new foundations, after a preliminary exposition of the bankruptcy of the way of ideas; yet a way of thought and a foundation not really new, but as old as the human race. Berkeley’s fundamental simplicity and modest reticence escaped the notice of his readers; the interim statements of his dialectical mode of exposition, combined with a certain buoyant impetuosity and pugnacity, bewildered them; his vocabulary misled them; and all combined together to further his reputation as a sceptic if not a solipsist. Even Reid and Hamilton, who have so much in common with Berkeley, dismissed the Irishman as a sophist. It is not surprising therefore that his later works, *Alciphron* and *Siris*, though largely emancipated from his youthful vocabulary and dialectic, did not gain the influence to which their intrinsic merits entitled them: an ambiguous reputation is not easily shaken off.

(2) *Is Berkeley a sceptic?*

To his contemporaries, Berkeley is the arch-sceptic; the philosopher who set out to disprove the existence of the external world (VI, i). To a reader looking for a purely intellectual refutation of solipsism, or of doctrines of a solipsistic trend, Berkeley must indeed have seemed to be a sceptic. But, as we have seen, Berkeley did not for a moment suppose that solipsism could be refuted in the way in which we would refute a false proposition in geometry, or refute a man’s opinion concerning a simple matter of fact. He sought rather to re-educate the potential solipsist so that he would no longer have inclinations in that direction. Since he was addressing a cultivated audience, steeped in the doctrine of “ideas,” he sought to bend their very vices into virtues; to lead them through their “ideas” back to things. (*H.P.* III fin.).

He does not exhort men to return to common sense. He throws the topic into the arena at the beginning of the Introduction to the *Principles*; thereafter his direct references to common sense are spare. He wants his audience to discover common sense for themselves. He embarks on the hazardous course of talking the language of the sceptic in order to gain sympathetic rapport with the sceptic; but the rapport is not with the sceptic as sceptic, rather is it with the common sense lying dormant within the sceptic.

He does not turn Pyrrhonism inside out; but he does strive to turn the Pyrrhonist inside out. The course which Berkeley chose accords with what we have called his incarnational view of the world (IX, 3). He had thereby to suffer grievous calumny, but it was the only effective course in the long term. He does not “disprove” the way of