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## History, Philosophy and Politics (10<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>th</sup> Centuries)

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Edited by  
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# Berkeley's Argument for the Existence of God in the *Alciphron* dialogue

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VLAD MUREȘAN

## 1. Berkeley's *Alciphron* dialogue

**A**LCIPHON IS the name of a Greek sophist that becomes the target-character in a late dialogue of George Berkeley, dedicated to the rejection of the main skeptical, agnostic, atheistic and materialistic arguments. The “free-thinker” is an atheist, a libertine, despiser, fatalist, skeptical. He is a “minute philosopher” because Berkeley is hesitant into accepting the notion of a free-thinker, because of the positive connotation it carries. According to the narrow-definition Alciphron offers for the free-thinkers (those rejecting the primal prejudice which is considered to be the very idea of God), such great philosophers as Plato or Aristotle would not qualify as “free,” even though they are “thinkers”.

In the context of the deistic debate, Berkeley highlights by means of the inciting dialogues his characters carry:

1. How deism is leading to agnosticism, which is leading to atheism, and to libertinage etc. Still, next to this moralizing discourse, we have philosophical arguments developing:

2. The optical (visual) theory of the language, as an alternative to the machine model of nature that we will consider in depth in what follows;

3. The emotive theory of the language and meaning, according to which God communicates with us through the sensible world (nature=things=signs). Observing signs which do not stand in for ideas, the analogical determination of God seems limited;

4. The relationship between free-will and determinism is discussed in view of offering a reconciliation between the foreknowledge of God and the freedom of man;

5. It is being argued that the Trinity is not absurd;

6. The concept of “*force*” is equally inconceivable as the concept of the “*grace*”;

7. A teleological argument has been formulated;

8. Faith is not dissociated from ideas;

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9. Finally, the nature of preconceptions is analyzed (etc.)<sup>1</sup>

Berkeley turns out not to be a simple anti-deist. But he behaves really “like” a rationalist, confronting religious and irreligious skeptics alike (pietism and atheism as well).

## 2. The current relevance of the *Alciphron* dialogue

THE *ALCIPHRON* dialogue does not carry a simple museum-like relevance. By virtue of his content and the quality of the philosophical thinking, he still answers to very heated contemporary challenges. The interpreters have traditionally minimized the status of this work because it appears to be too theological and less philosophical. This argument resembles the one that used to refuse the status of Philosophy to the medieval philosophy because it is too theological. In fact, setting aside the religious mobile and the purely religious problems, the work still retains a) a philosophical *dialectic*; b) a rich philosophical *content*.

Thus, next to the group of texts that consecrated him (1707-1712), this work (1732) reveals the metaphysical and religious reasons of the innovations and the epistemological arguments in the youth works. Berkeley’s philosophy is outstandingly developed in *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713) that comprise the essence of his early, purely technical and epistemological philosophical contributions. But *Alciphron* was also instrumental to his lifetime celebrity.

We know less of the maturity work *Alciphron* (1732), which, although engages into an explicit religious program of polemic against all forms of atheism, is not less philosophical whatsoever. I believe that the reception of this dialogue is still lagging behind, the focus of the interpreters remaining arrested by the purely philosophical early works.

Owing to the powerfully counter-intuitive character of his subjective idealism, Berkeley enjoys a reputation of eccentric philosopher, against whom a simple tactile argument will do in order to defy *theoretical immaterialism*. Still, the force of Berkeley’s arguments is so crushing that logicians, analytical philosophers and materialists have actually generated a huge literature of debate.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in the context of:

1. Current debates concerning monism and dualism in the philosophy of mind and neurology.

2. Discussions catalyzed by quantum mechanics regarding the actual “dematerialization” of matter, or the principle of the observer/subject within the experiment, we shall argue for the radical actuality of Berkeley’s philosophy.

The *Alciphron* dialogue, in particular, from the second phase of his creation, appears as powerfully relevant also as to:

3. The polemic opened by the so called “new atheism” represented by radical scientists (R. Dawkins, Daniel Dennett), because it develops an apologetical critique of “free-thinkers” prejudices. to engage into the core of fierce debates in XVIII-th England that still emanate consistent echoes in the contemporary debates.

### 3. Deducing the Soul as a Rational Agent of the Body

IN THE fourth dialogue, the character *Alciphron* is decided to disprove the existence of God, and *Euphranor* tries to counteract his arguments. What retains philosophy's interest here is not the theological, but the reflexive enterprise developed around the theological stake. For *Euphranor*, to unthrone this image of a monarch governing the world amounts to a state of anarchy in nature that is even more horrifying than a state of anarchy in the civil life. This is a first indication of the semantic dimension of the relationship of God to nature. Since eluding God amounts to a radical collapse of meaning: to a state of *meaninglessness* in nature.

The first step in the argumentation is that Euphranor asks Alciphron what kind of proof will he receive, since such arguments as the ontological proof or arguments that indicate the absurdity of an infinite regression will not do. The answer is plainly empiricist: I believe that there is a king of Great Britain because I had seen him, or because – in principle – I am able to seem since he falls within the realm of visible entities. As for the King of kings, Alciphron argues, I have never seen Him. What's more, it will be strange for a king to leave Himself without a witness. He should in fact be proven not by *notions*, but by *facts*. Alciphron will not receive any other proof than one addressed to the senses, to his very “animal spirits,” to his soul.

Euphranor retorts: but have you perceived your own soul? No, says Alciphron, but I am persuaded of their existence from their “effects and operations”. So, insists Euphranor, there is a *principle of thought and action* and that from *reasonable acts* we may legitimately infer a *reasonable soul*. The soul makes the difference between a real person and a shadow.

1. Acts perceived by the senses are reducible to motion.
2. But from motion we can infer a mover.
3. From reasonable motions we can infer a rational cause, or rational soul.

### 4. The Analogy of Soul and the Body with God and the Nature

ONCE THE admission of Alciphron concerning the fact that we infer the soul from the external appearances, even though it is not itself subjected to sense perception, Euphranor goes further to proposing an analogy between the way in which the *soul* conducts the *body* and the way *God* governs *nature*.

*The soul of man actuates but a small body, an insignificant particle, in respect of the great masses of nature, the elements and heavenly bodies, and systems of the world. And the wisdom that appears in those motions which are the effect of human reason is*

*incomparably less than that which discovers itself in the structure and use of organized natural bodies, animal or vegetable. A man with his hand can make no machine so admirable as the hand itself; nor can any of those motions by which we trace out human reason approach the skill and contrivance of those wonderful motions of the heart, and brain, and other vital parts, which do not depend on the will of man<sup>3</sup>.*

There's also a huge lack of analogy behind this analogy: the soul directs, but did not actually *create* the body, in the same way God not only governs the world, but also created it. There's also a huge *disproportion* involved in this analogical reasoning: the world is infinitely more complex than a mere body. Everything in nature "conspires to fulfill the same end". In the same way we can infer the infinity of the power and wisdom of this intelligent mover of the whole.

Alciphron takes a stand. The deduction amounts now to asserting that we can have the same assurance of the existence of God as we can have of an individual actually standing before us and talking to us. Euphranor confirms:

*I do not see Alciphron, i.e. that individual thinking thing, but only such visible signs and tokens as suggest and infer the being of that invisible thinking principle or soul. Even so, in the self-same manner, it seems to me that, though I cannot with eyes of flesh behold the invisible god, yet I do in the strictest sense behold and perceive by all my senses such signs and tokens, such effects and operations, as suggest, indicate, and demonstrate an invisible God, as certainly, and with the same evidence, at least, as any other signs, perceived by senses, do suggest to me the existence of your soul, spirit, or thinking principle<sup>4</sup>.*

To this Alciphron is perplexed. He wondered how is it that a God would hide Himself and left Himself without a witness, and now he faces a universe where everything becomes an operation of consequence of an agent wisdom running things.

Upon deep thought he retorts wittily: I know a man's soul exists, with whom I am speaking face to face because he speaks to me. Not only that his body moves so I can deduce a mover, but he addresses me. This is the point where Berkeley proposes his visual theory of language.

## 5. The Visual Theory of Language

**D**EVELOPING ON older theoretical developments concerning an empirical assessment of vision, Euphranor (=Berkeley) introduces his theory that vision is a sort of language the objects are signifying to us:

*The proper objects of sight are light and colours, with their several shades and degrees; all which, being infinitely diversified and combined, do form a language wonderfully*



*adapted to suggest and exhibit to us the distances, figures, situations, dimensions, and various qualities of tangible objects: not by similitude, nor yet by inference of necessary connexion, but by the arbitrary imposition of Providence, just as words suggest the things signified by them*<sup>5</sup>.

Objects address to the *eyes* in a similar way words address to the ears. Combining *syntax* (connection between signs) and *semantics* (connections with the things), the order of things is itself a language permanently communicating something to us. Of course, we do not learn this language conceptually, from books but from daily experience. But since its matter is objects, reality, this visual language speaks nothing else than the truth. When I see a rock, it is the same philosophical content as if I were to speak the word “rock”.

But if vision would be nothing else than a language speaking to the eyes, when did people learn this language? Ever since we were born, together with the very first experiences we had. It's exactly because it is regular and customary, it doesn't awake our attention, highly habituated to it to interrogate further. “There must be time and experience, by repeated acts, to acquire a habit of knowing the connexion between the signs and things signified; that is to say, of understanding the language, whether of the eyes or of the ears”<sup>6</sup>.

The demonstrative stake of this argument is revealed: to reply to Alciphron's objection that he can believe in the existence of some-body's soul, he must hear him talking, Euphranor argues that the Author of nature, as a coherent systematic unity constantly speaks to the eyes of all mankind, beginning with their first experiences.

*That is really and in truth my opinion; and it should be yours too, if you are consistent with yourself; and abide by your own definition of language. Since you cannot deny that the great Mover and Author of nature constantly explaineth Himself to the eyes of men by the sensible intervention of arbitrary signs, which have no similitude or connexion with the things signified; so as, by compounding and disposing them, to suggest and exhibit an endless variety of objects, differing in nature, time, and place; thereby informing and directing men how to act with respect to things distant and future, as well as near and present. In consequence, I say, of your own sentiments and concessions, you have as much reason to think the Universal Agent or God speaks to your eyes, as you can have for thinking any particular person speaks to your ears*<sup>7</sup>.

With this, the objection that we believe in the soul not only because it is the: 1. *invisible principle moving the body*, but also because: 2. *it speaks to our ears*, finds a complete answer in the theory of the visual language. God is 1. *The invisible principle providing cohesion to the huge material masses of the universe*; and He is also testified in 2. *His visual language*, perpetually and discretely addressed to our eyes, but analogous to our language addressed to the ears.



## Notes

- 1 David Berman, "Introduction," in George Berkeley, *Alciphron in Focus*, London/New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 1-17. This is the edition we will quote from now on.
- 2 Which has an estimated rythm of 20 substantial contributions per year.
- 3 *Alciphron*, Fourth Dialogue, p. 89.
- 4 *Alciphron*, Fourth Dialogue, p. 90.
- 5 *Alciphron*, Fourth Dialogue, p. 96.
- 6 *Alciphron*, Fourth Dialogue, p. 97.
- 7 *Alciphron*, Fourth Dialogue, p. 99.

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## Abstract

### Berkeley's Argument for the Existence of God in the *Alciphron* dialogue

One of the latest works of George Berkeley, the neglected dialogue *Alciphron* develops – among other philosophical contributions- an innovating argument for the existence of God, during a debate with a character standing for a "free-thinker" representative of the Enlightenment critique of religion. The argument has three stages:

1. against the claim that we can only accept perceptible proof, he constrains Alciphron to admit that the soul, as an *invisible principle* governing the motions of the body cannot be perceived but is real nevertheless.

2. in the same way we infer an invisible principle as the mover of the visible body, we must infer an invisible principle as the mover and unifying agent of all the coherent material masses and motions exhibited by nature.

3. finally, against the objection that I can believe in somebody's invisible soul because it is speaking to me face to face, Euphranor (=Berkeley) develops a most innovative theory of the visual language: the rational Agent governing the word has arranged things in regularities that combine themselves exactly like a language: this visual language speaks to our eyes, instead of speaking to our ears, but it speaks nevertheless.

## Keywords:

George Berkeley, the existence of God, atheism, visual language