



Vulgar Talk and Learned Reasoning in Berkeley's Moral and Religious Thought

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Abstract

Berkeley “argues with the learned and speaks with the vulgar.” I use his double maxim to interpret his ethics. My approach is new. The *Sermons* and *Guardian Essays* mainly speak to the vulgar and *Passive Obedience* and *Alciphron* reason with the learned. The reward of ethics is eternal bliss in a future state: religion and ethics are connected. I study a set of problems: resurrection, eternal life, happiness, benevolence, the goodness of God, and self-love. Divine bliss is unlike any earthly happiness. The idea of law does not support benevolence, even if it is a Christian duty and virtue. God is good, but how to prove it? The learned must study the complex theodicy problem; the vulgar need assurance based on their sensuous experience and fervent hope of eternal bliss. Self-love may be a vital issue to the learned, although the vulgar may not realize their need to overcome it. The main questions concern Berkeley's two approaches to ethical problems: first, how do their topics differ, and second, are they mutually consistent?

Keywords Duty · Benevolence · Self-love · Happiness · Resurrection · Eternallife

1 Introduction: Religion and Method in Ethics

Berkeley is a religious philosopher. Think of his idea of natural laws: God is distributively the proximal cause of every natural event in the *Principles*. He regulates them one by one in a comprehensible manner; alternatively, we approach these events collectively, *en masse*, by formulating the scientific laws of nature that allow

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us to predict future events. Next, we learn natural laws that are both moral and scientific, and we realize that both promote human good. “Good,” in what sense should we understand the term “human good” is not easy to say?¹ Anyway, both types of God’s laws “have a necessary tendency to promote well-being” (*Passive Obedience*, W4, 10, 15, 16; *Principles*, W2, 14).² Otherwise, we could not live in this world of ours; but now we can, and we can adjust and even flourish, as Berkeley observes.

He says the laws of nature are not only descriptive; he is not a positivist. On the contrary, they are teleological because God has given them to us so that we would flourish.³ The laws of nature aim at a goal – from the human point of view, God’s actions entail something like benevolent causality. Therefore, we should not distinguish between the philosophical and religious Berkeley. Only one Berkeley exists, and he is at the same time a philosopher and religious thinker.⁴ And he is a moralist who develops a supernatural doctrine of ethics.⁵ However, as a priest and philosopher, he has two different audiences.

Some philosophers take Berkeley’s *Passive Obedience* as the primary source of his moral thought.⁶ Also, *Alciphron* contains discussions on morality, especially theological or supernatural theories of practical normativity.⁷ However, some commentators argue that *Alciphron* and PO do not necessarily agree.⁸ Of course, his largely

¹ Bertil Belfrage (“The Mystery of Goodness in Berkeley’s Passive Obedience.” In R. Brook and B. Belfrage (Eds.), *Bloomsbury Companion to Berkeley*. London: Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 15) insists PO does not tell.

² *Passive Obedience, Or the Christian Doctrine of not resisting the Supreme Power, proved and vindicated upon the Principles of the Law of Nature. In a Discourse delivered at the College Chapel* (1712). Abbr. PO and section number. I use George Berkeley, *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Edited by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop. 9 vols. London: Nelson, 1948–1957. Abbr. W and volume number. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, W2, abbr. *Principles*.

³ On the laws of nature, Timo Airaksinen, “Supernatural Morality in Berkeley’s *Passive Obedience*,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 37 (2022), 351–370, p. 357.

⁴ For an opposing view, see Daniel E. Flage, “Is Berkeley’s God Omnipotent?” *Review of Metaphysics* 71 (2018), 703–721. Berkeley’s philosophy has traditionally been read independently of his theology. A good example is J. O. Urmson *Berkeley*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 37f; he calls Berkeley a positivist. See also, Margaret Atherton, “Berkeley Without God.” In Robert G. Muehlmann (Ed.), *Berkeley’s Metaphysics: Structural, Interpretive, and Critical Essays*. Penn Station: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, pp. 231–248.

⁵ See Timo Airaksinen, “In the Upper Room: Metaphysics and Theology in Berkeley’s Ethics,” *Philosophy & Theology* 29 (2015), 427–456; and Timo Airaksinen, “Idealistic Ethics and Berkeley’s Good God.” In J. Farris, S. M. Hamilton, and J. S. Spiegel (Eds.), *Idealism and Christian Theology*. New York: T&T Clark, pp. 217–235. (*Idealism and Christianity*, vol. 1).

⁶ See Timo Airaksinen, “Berkeley’s Passive Obedience: The Logic of Loyalty,” *History of European Ideas* 47 (2021), 58–70. – About the enigmatic historical context and motivation of PO, see David Beriman, “The Jacobitism of Berkeley’s Passive Obedience,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1986), 309–319; and Graham Conroy, “George Berkeley and the Jacobin Heresy,” *Albion* 3 (1971), 82–91. Scott Breuninger, *Recovering Bishop Berkeley: Virtue and Society in the Anglo-Irish Context*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, Ch. 2. Also, Paul J. Olscamp, *The Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970.

⁷ *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher in Seven Dialogues, Containing an Apology for the Christian Religion, Against Those Who Are Called Free-Thinkers*. Abbr. *Alciphron*, W3.

⁸ Bertil Belfrage writes: “he defeated the fundamentalism he developed in his youth.” Op. cit., pp. 141–157, p. 154.

overlooked *Sermons* and *Guardian Essays* (W7) contain crucial material as well. Whatever the differences between these sources are, their fundamentals remain the same: correct morality is based on the “conformity to His will” because moral duty is part “of natural religion” (PO 6, 41). God has his foundational role in ethics, and ethical valuation starts from religion and reason (PO 12).⁹ According to Berkeley, ethics rests on divine laws of nature (PO 12). They are universally justified because they apply uniformly everywhere under heaven, although their acceptance may vary. Think of the duties of justice and chastity and their variable interpretations (PO 15). Nevertheless, moral questions and answers have the same human focus: how to live a virtuous life and guarantee oneself a place in heaven to enjoy its “infinite, eternal bliss” (Sermon I: On Immortality, W7, p. 11).

2 Berkeley’s Double Maxim and its Import

“[T]hink with the learned, and speak with the vulgar” is a maxim that occurs verbatim in two places in Berkeley’s *Works: Principles* (W2, 51) and *Alciphron* (W3, I, 12, p. 53; Alciphron speaks). In the *Principles*, the context is metaphysical and in *Alciphron*, religious and ethical. Berkeley tells how the vulgar speak in the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (W2, 2, p. 225; Hylas speaks) and *Commonplace Book* (W1, 552, 643). *Principles* (W2, 51) provides the following example:

They who to demonstration are convinced of the truth of the Copernican system, do nevertheless say the sun rises, the sun sets, or comes to the meridian: and if they affected a contrary style in common talk, it would without doubt appear very ridiculous. A little reflexion on what is here said will make it manifest, that the common use of language would receive no manner of alteration or disturbance from the admission of our tenets.

Individuals speak of scientific facts in two ways: philosophers and the “illiterate bulk of mankind” see and comprehend the world differently (*Principles*, W2, 1). Luckily their accounts are intertranslatable, like the quote above shows: it does not matter how you speak. The quote above looks like Berkeley’s attempt to convince his learned audience of the non-controversial nature of his new doctrines concerning the world and vision. The learned will learn novel truths, but they can still speak vulgarly. Matter does not exist, yet they can speak of something like matter. Is this always the case? Or can we find examples to the contrary?

When the double maxim occurs in the *Three Dialogues*, the speaker is not Philonous, representing Berkeley, but Hylas, the freethinker. Its subsequent articulation, in *Alciphron*, is by Alciphron, again a freethinker, who represents the views Berkeley opposes. Why does he first state it himself and then let the enemy spokesmen say the same? Perhaps Berkeley wants to show that all the learned, including Hylas and

⁹ William K. Frankena (*Ethics*, 2. Ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1973, Ch. 2) offers a critical introduction to supernaturalism in ethics from the modern point of view.

Alciphron, may accept the double maxim and use it. It is the common property of all learned thinkers. If this is true, we have an indirect way of validating the maxim.¹⁰ The learned must agree on specific methodological ideas, or otherwise, they cannot conduct a rational debate.¹¹ And it seems undeniable that the learned should educate the “illiterate bulk of mankind.” To apply the double maxim is to join the Enlightenment.

The illiterates cannot appreciate Berkeley’s new metaphysical doctrine, regardless of self-evident and common-sensical it is.¹² They are too naive: “nothing that’s familiar appears unaccountable or difficult to comprehend” (*Principles*, W2, 1). Once we go beyond what is familiar, like the *Principles*, we lose the vulgar. But we manage without them when we do science and reason philosophically in the learned company. However, in ethics, Berkeley cannot leave it at that. He is a churchman, preacher, and religious teacher; therefore, neglecting ethics would be an irresponsible strategy—both the learned and the vulgar need ethics for practical purposes in social life. Also, good people’s salvation is a crucial issue and fervent hope. Ethics is part of religion, and everybody needs the right religion; thus, they need the ethics that is part of it. As a religious teacher, Berkeley must guide all, regardless of their level of learning and understanding, and therefore he must teach ethics to the illiterates. But he cannot expect them to understand the arguments of the learned. The vulgar do not comprehend subtle ethical ideas. Hence, he must make them more accessible to them. Concerning the *Principles* and Newton’s *Principia*, he can tell the vulgar that they cannot understand these works. The same strategy is unacceptable in ethics: he must explain what is unexplainable to the vulgar.

One can wonder whether this is my way of making sense of Berkeley’s ethical views, about which Berkeley might not fully concur. To what extent is the double maxim fully Berkeley’s, or how does Berkeley himself understand his ethical work and wish it to be understood? I suggest that his double maxim allows us to make sense of the two sides of his ethics, especially his talk to the vulgar. And obviously, his ethics has two sides. We should not neglect his minor writings, although they may not fit with his philosophical works. But what he thought of his use of the double maxim is impossible to say. We only know that he had religious teaching and preaching duties, and he produced a set of writings that are different in tone and content from his foundational learned work, and the double maxim makes sense of this. Perhaps Berkeley thought that he created a unified group of ideas concerning religious ethics – this is possible. The details of his vulgar ethics are so different from

¹⁰ The “double way of teaching” was not Berkeley’s invention but a common idea; see Simone Zurbuchen, “Heinrich Corrodi’s *Critical History of Chiliasm* [1781-1783].” In J. C. Laursen (Ed.), *Histories of Heresy in Early Modern Europe*. London: Palgrave, 2002, pp. 189 - 203, p. 195. Also, Kenneth L. Pearce, “Berkeley’s Philosophy of Religion.” In Brook and Belfrage, *Bloomsbury Companion*, 2017, p. 471.

¹¹ In the *Three Dialogues* and *Alciphron* Berkeley treats his learned opponents respectfully, but he also says that they deserve a death penalty (“The Ruin of Great Britain,” W6, 71). This looks like an application of the double maxim or the double way of teaching.

¹² Berkeley uses “common-sense” both pejoratively and laudatively (*Principles*, W2, 1, 11). See also Petr Glombíček and James Hill, “Common Sense and the Natural Light in George Berkeley’s Philosophy,” *Philosophia* 49 (2020), 651-665.

his learned writings that the realization of such a plan is unlikely. However, I want to emphasize that the basic tenets of his ethics always remain the same.

T. E. Jessop, the editor of *Alciphron* in the *Works*, comes close to applying the double maxim. He writes in his *Introduction to Alciphron*:

As the host, Crito acts as umpire in the conversations, but also takes a considerable part in them. His knowledgeable, sarcastic, and witty interventions express one side of Berkeley's mind; Euphranor's simple sincerity expresses the other side. (*Introduction*, W3, p. 15)

Instead of referring to the double maxim, Jessop applies a pseudo-psychological biographical idea of two different aspects of Berkeley's mind. Perhaps Jessop is correct, and his psychological speculations explain Berkeley's introduction and use of the double maxim in *Alciphron*, I cannot tell. Of course, all the discussants in *Alciphron* are learned men, yet wise Euphranor appears to show some vulgar features (*Alciphron*, W3, 1, 2, p. 34) – which is to say that the idea of a vulgar person is not merely pejorative. An honest and straightforward mind, in its simple sincerity, argues better than a sophist and freethinker. Jessop's argument has its weaknesses: the conversations occur in Berkeley's Whitehall farm in Newport, Rhode Island, where he composed the book. Therefore, the host, Crito, is his self-portrait, and not only “one side” of his mind. Also, Jessop may explain an aspect of *Alciphron*, but the double maxim occurs in other places in the *Works*, too.

3 Addressing the Vulgar: Resurrection, Eternal Life, and Happiness

Berkeley tries to minimize the role of divine revelation in religious life. Hence, he might even subscribe to the following view: “fully developed reason corresponds to the highest perfection of religion.”¹³ He writes, “As to the first point, the will of God is declared unto us in a twofold manner, by the light of reason and by revelation” (Sermon X: On the Will of God, W7, p. 130). For some reason he does not mention sensuous experience, which is so important to the vulgar – as we will see. Philonous says,

Whatsoever opinion we father on him [God], it must be either because he has discovered it to us by supernatural revelation, or because it is so evident to our natural faculties, which were framed and given us by God, that it is impossible we should withhold our assent from it. (*Three Dialogues*, W2, p. 243; see Sermon X, W7, p. 132)

We notice that revelation contrasts first with reason but here with “natural faculties,” that is, sensuous experience. Berkeley considers revelation, reason, and sensuous experience side by side. The motto in PO is Rom. 13, 2., although he says: “I intend not to build on the authority of Holy Scripture, but altogether on the Principles of

¹³ Zurbuchen, op. cit., pp. 194, 196.

Reason common to all mankind,” and he appeals to “very rational and learned men” (PO 2). Elsewhere he wants to speak to those who are less rational and learned and therefore dependent on the intimacies of sense perception.

Berkeley does not refer to revelation or reason when he explains resurrection to the vulgar but common and familiar sensuous experience. The following doctrine could not appear in his writings to the learned who would instantly notice its naïve inconclusiveness; it proves nothing:

Resurrection, I say, how strange soever at first sight will be found natural, that is conformable to the course of nature in her ordinary productions, which nature is the work of God. In the common course of things, that which was dead reviveth, that which was sown in the earth riseth again out of the earth. The winter is a kind of death to most things. The plants and herbs of the field decay and disappear. Fruits and seeds fall to the ground, and therein moulder and rot. The trees are disrobed of their beauty and look like dead and dry timber. In the spring all nature revives. New plants, new blossoms, new leaves. That which was sown being old and after sowing corrupted in the ground, now riseth again, fresh and young. (Sermon VII: On Eternal Life, W7, p. 107)¹⁴

He also must explain eternal life and its superior *happiness* after the resurrection. Initially, Berkeley tends to rely on revelation: “one would think he had not far to seek for ye effects of so important & universal a revelation, a revelation of eternal happiness or misery the unavoidable inheritance of every man deliver’d by ye Son of God, confirm’d by miracles & owned by all the professors of Xtianity” (Sermon I: On Immortality, W7, p. 10). He fails to provide logical reasons for the learned; instead, he says revelation makes it obvious; yet he produces the following argument to convince the vulgar. We can trust God, which is a valid premise:

We may add as a further proof of this point that natural appetite of immortality, which is so generally and so deeply rooted in mankind, and which we cannot suppose implanted in us by the author of our beings, merely to be frustrated. This would not be of a piece with the other dealings of God towards man. (Sermon VII: On Eternal Life, W7, p. 108)

After the resurrection, good Christians are immortal. Bad people have perished, but good people live an eternal and happy afterlife. Lasting happiness is what we want. Berkeley must show that happiness is a fact and describe eternal happiness. I will next review his learned argument beginning with the idea of deserving believers and moral people.

Natural and divine moral laws are universalizable, and thus the respective duties concern all people independently of their religion. The vulgar may resist, of course. However, God sanctions his laws by eternal life, death, heaven, and hell (PO 79; Guardian Essays V: Sanctions of Religion, W7, p. 199). “[S]o long as we apprehend

¹⁴ *Alciphron* begins by eulogizing natural beauty: “Our conversation began upon the beauty of this rural scene,” *Alciphron*, W3, 1,1, p. 33). Berkeley alludes to natural law and beauty of creation because he has two audiences, the vulgar and the learned.

no judgment, harbor no fears, and cherish no hopes of a future state, [...] how can we be said to be religious in any sense?” (*An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, W1, 4).¹⁵ But this is convincing only if we believe God exists. Berkeley thinks this is certain; it is evident even without formal proof: “it is evident by the light of nature” (PO 6).¹⁶ “Moral goodness [...] consisting in a conformity to laws of God,” this is the main point of ethics, and rational people know these laws of God and obey them (PO 7, 12). They will have eternal life. Berkeley is interested in happiness in a future state because it makes eternal life desirable. In the eternal perspective, our life under heaven does not matter much; it is “less than nothing” (PO 6). At the same time, we must remember that PO is an early work (1712), and Berkeley’s views developed and matured over time; for instance, the strong rationalism of PO is different from his later writings.

The pivotal doctrine of PO is a strict and even harsh treatment of supernatural practical normativity. He sketches two goals for a virtuous person. First, to find a road to heaven and, second, a best possible social world that entails “the general well-being of all men, of all nations, of all ages of the world” (PO 7; also, PO 10). Such a holistic view amalgamates all individual good and evil, as the *Principles* (W1, 153) explains. We should “imagine ourselves to be distant spectators” who can see the overall beauty and goodness of the created world (PO, 28). This entails that the created world is good. All evil is illusory.

The problem with these doctrines is their overall brevity. Berkeley says that all that matters is infinite happiness in heaven, which entails that life under heaven indeed is “less than nothing.” Yet, God also wants our earthly happiness. Therefore, temporal life matters a lot. When you are in heaven, life on earth is nothing, but when you aim at heaven, morality here on earth is everything: moral life paves the path to paradise. Why call it something that is “less than nothing”? For the learned, when they ponder ethical problems, this life is meaningful and, in this sense, important; when Berkeley wants to console the suffering vulgar, our mundane life indeed is “less than nothing.”

Temporal life can be happy. For the vulgar, human happiness is a hedonistic proposition in a restricted Epicurean sense. According to Berkeley, good pleasures are natural and evil pleasures fantastical:

Natural pleasures I call those, which, not depending on the fashion and caprice of any particular age or nation, are suited to human nature in general, and were intended by Providence as rewards for the using our faculties agreeably to the

¹⁵ The term “future state” in mentioned in the *Works* 51 times.

¹⁶ I agree with Daniele Bertini, “Berkeley, Theology and Bible Scholarship.” In Silvia Parigi (Ed.), *George Berkeley: Religion and Science in the Age of Enlightenment*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 123-139, p. 123: “Indeed there is no need to prove God’s existence.” Yet, Berkeley proves it for his ever-skeptical learned audience. The vulgar should believe regardless of proof: God’s existence is so obvious. It was obvious to Berkeley himself.

ends for which they were given us. (Guardian Essay IV: Pleasures, W7, p. 193)¹⁷

This philosophical definition is abstract and therefore more suitable to the learned. It does not tell exactly what makes us happy. Berkeley immediately (op. cit., p. 196) illustrates it to the vulgar amusingly and charmingly:

The same Principles I find of great use in my private œconomy. As I cannot go to the price of history-painting, I have purchased at easie rates several beautifully designed pieces of landschape and perspective, which are much more pleasing to a natural taste than unknown faces or Dutch gambols, tho' done by the best masters: my couches, beds, and window-curtains are of Irish stuff, which those of that nation work very fine, and with a mixture of colours. There is not a piece of china in my house; but I have glasses of all delightful sorts, and some tinged with the finest colours, which are not the less pleasing, because they are domestick, and cheaper than foreign toys. Everything is neat, intire, and clean, and fitted to the taste of one who had rather be happy than be thought rich.

Now, heavenly happiness is different. It does not depend on colored glasses or even fine pieces of porcelain. It is an inconceivably positive state of being. Ironically, if it is happiness, we should know something about it – at least some features that allow us to call it happiness and not something else; but as the Apostle says, we cannot:

but proportionate to wt our faculties shall be wn God has given the finishing stroke to our nature & made us fit inhabitants for heaven, a happiness wch we narrow-sighted mortals wretchedly point out to our selves by green meadows, fragrant groves, refreshing shades, crystal streams & wt other pleasant ideas our fancys can glean up in this Vale of misery, but in vain, since the Apostle himself, who was caught up into the 3d heaven could give us no other than this empty tho emphatical description of it. 'tis wt eye hath not seen nor ear heard neither hath it enter'd into the heart of man to conceive. (Sermon I: On Immortality, W7, p. 12)

A philosopher may ponder why to call heavenly happiness unknowable when we already know this much: “And it is not in the power of man, to conceive a more complete degree of happiness, than that which must ensue from such orderly subjection to, and concurrence with the will of God.” (Sermon X: On the Will of God, W7, p. 135). This idea must be closely related to heavenly happiness and is undoubtedly different from earthly bliss or the “pleasant ideas of our fancys.” It is a beautiful promise: if we could enjoy the celestial happiness as angels experience it, one hour would be better than a lifetime of joy in this Vale of Tears and Misery (*Alciphron*, W3, 3, 23, p. 172; Euphranor speaks). God offers some people eternal

¹⁷ Cf. Against luxuries: “Preventing the Ruin of Great Britain,” W6, pp. 75ff. Pleasure and its excesses are a recurring worry in the *Works*: “so much Wealth and Luxury, and such dissolute Moral” (“A Proposal for the Better Supplying of Churches in Our Foreign Plantations,” W7, p. 349).

life and happiness, or “eternal happiness, a happiness large as our desires.” (Sermon I: On Immortality, W7, p. 12). Here, the reference to desire makes heavenly pleasure understandable to the vulgar: we get what we want and more. But this is inconsistent: eternal happiness is supposed to be a mystery; if it is understandable via our desires, it is not a mystery. Desire and “our fancies” are close relatives. This problem may not matter much when he speaks to the vulgar, but it bothers the learned.

Happiness is three different things: individual happiness, general well-being, and heavenly bliss. Good God aims at human happiness first here on earth and then there in heaven, and happiness is a theme that looms large in many of Berkeley’s writings. Still, it may only matter to the vulgar – PO mentions individual happiness once (PO 5). PO does not define “good,” and thus public good is called rather uninformatively “well-being” (PO 7), which is independent of the pleasures that define vulgar happiness. The argument of PO 5 shows how vulgar sensitivities turn into reasoned principles, or the search for happiness turns into morality. We turn from sensuous life and experience towards recognizing God’s will and from vulgar sensibilities to the worries of the learned. Natural laws, and hence moral good, are defined in God’s will and not derived from any idea of individual happiness or general well-being. This is something only the learned know.

Berkeley comes close to promoting theological voluntarism in PO, which is the view that God freely makes up good and evil and right and wrong. This view was unpopular among Anglicans in Berkeley’s time, being associated with radical forms of Calvinism. Berkeley’s claim that faith and good deeds *earn* us a berth in a future state is not thoroughly Anglican either. The following thesis is revealing: “every such practical proposition necessarily tending thereto [universal well-being] is to be esteemed a decree of God” (PO 11). Next,

[N]othing is a law merely because it conduceth to the public good, but *because it is decreed by the will of God*, which alone can give the sanction of a law of nature to any precept; neither is any thing, how expedient or plausible soever, to be esteemed lawful on any other account than its being coincident with, or not repugnant to the laws promulgated by the voice of nature and reason. (PO 31; my italics)

David Berman writes, “God does not, as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and presumably Molesworth, thought, will something because is moral. Rather, it is the will of God that makes an action moral. [...] Thus God could [...] make rebellion [...] justifiable” (Berman, 1986, p. 313).¹⁸ Why could he not? I agree with Berman. If we supported theological voluntarism, we could conclude that God’s will is necessarily good and his laws always promote human well-being – but this matters only to the

¹⁸ Samuel Rickless (“The Nature, Grounds, and Limits of Berkeley’s Argument for Passive Obedience,” *Berkeley Studies* 26 (2016), 3–19, p. 10) recognizes that God’s ends are *necessarily* good. See Daniel Flage (“Rickless and Passive Obedience,” *Berkeley Studies* 28 (2019), 24–47, p. 35) about God *making* moral rules. Stephen Darwall (“Berkeley’s Moral and Political Philosophy,” In K. P. Winkler (Ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 311–338, p. 326) calls Berkeley a theological voluntarist.

learned. The commentators who deny Berkeley's voluntarism assume the standpoint of the vulgar.

Once again, Berkeley writes in an inconclusive manner. The main point is clear, though. God's laws, or the divine laws of nature, promote *universal* human good, which is good in the end and on a global scale, collectively and not distributively. This good is the primary human good, in the sense of PO 5. Hence, our actions promoting general human good are right actions; but they are right only because good God wills them, and God's will constitutes our duty. Berman is right: God could interfere in politics (see PO 47), or he might authorize rebellion and remain a good and self-consistent godhead. Berkeley should agree, but this entails that God's law of obedience is good and right only because he wills it, and it is our "duty to copy after them" (PO 14). We find two sets of norms: first, obey the will of God; and second, act so that general, public, and universal good come about. The vulgar need not think of realizing the universal good in the long run; it is enough that they obey both the divine and mundane laws. But in principle, as the learned know, it does not matter which set one observes because the consequences are still the same: the agent may proceed to heaven. It is a special favour (PO 7).

Notice that Berkeley mentions two types of consequences, proximal and distal. Distal consequences are not empirically verifiable in the same way as proximal cases: they are the good consequences that necessarily flow in the long run from virtuous action commanded by God – seen from a distant viewpoint and global perspective. For instance, my just action may bring about nasty proximal consequences; however, just action necessarily has good consequences. Ironically, the learned can figure this out while the vulgar will have a hard time believing it – the critical point is *prima facie* unintuitive anyway.

The main question, however, concerns justification and not consequences. Why should we aim at (distal) general good even in those cases where it (proximally) hurts me personally and brings about something as serious as "poverty, death, or disgrace"? (PO 13). This is paradoxical: good deeds lead to personal disaster, and evil deeds save the agent.¹⁹ God's laws of nature are moral commands, and of course, and I may privately hope that the omnipotent godhead would have willed a more lenient system of laws, one that acknowledges some merciful exceptions. Why did he not do it? A voluntarist says: because he wanted it this way, thus this is a sound system, and we must be content with it. From the vulgar point of view, his ethics looks cruel because we must follow his rules independently of our needs, desires, and will, as the learned know.

God has chosen a world for us to live in, and he says it is good:

And these [God's laws] indeed are excellently suited to promote the general well-being of the creation: but, what from casual combinations of events, and what from the voluntary motions of animals, it often falls out, that the natural

¹⁹ This echoes Bernard Mandeville. Berkeley criticizes him in *Alciphron* 2 without understanding his irony. See Adam Grzelinski "Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher: Berkeley's Redefinition of Free-Thinking." In Brook and Belfrage, *Bloomsbury Companion*, 2017, pp. 174–195, pp. 177ff.

good not only of private men but of entire cities and nations would be better promoted by a particular suspension, or contradiction, than an exact observation of those laws. Yet, for all that, nature still takes its course; nay, it is plain that plagues, famines, inundations, earthquakes, with an infinite variety of pains and sorrows; in a word, all kinds of *calamities public and private, do arise from a uniform steady observation of those general laws*, which are once established by the Author of Nature, and which He will not change or deviate from upon any of those accounts, how wise or benevolent soever it may be thought by foolish men to do so. (PO 14, my italics)

Compare the italicized section with the following: “the Law of Nature is a system of such rules or precepts as that, if they be all of them, at all times, in all places, and by all men observed, they will necessarily promote the well-being of mankind, so far as it is attainable by human actions” (PO 40). The first pessimistic argument describes individual action and its observable proximal consequences, and the second an optimistic distal case.

Even if we follow his laws, the prospects of individual well-being and happiness are bleak. God gave us this Vale of Misery and Tears, which certainly is disappointing (see Sermon I: On Immortality, W7, p. 12; Sermon VII: On the Mystery of Godliness, W7, p. 94). We always meet a mixture of good and bad proximal consequences. Still, as I see it, the main point is that the laws of nature and their immutability make our world regular and predictable and, therefore, liveable. Perhaps we should not want more. How could we not want more? This intuition is a vulgar one. Indeed, from God’s point of view, the world is good, but an unhappy vulgar believer should focus on personal obedience and its reward, a future state. Berkeley’s two accounts of our earthly prospects are mutually inconsistent. For the vulgar, this is a Vale of Tears; for the learned, our world is beautiful and happy, as the *Principles* tells us. We only need to see it from a distant and comprehensive perspective.

Why did good God create such a Vale of Tears? Here Berkeley should address the theodicy problem à la Leibniz if he wanted to defend the goodness of God to learned sceptics. The vulgar may not worry about this as they have distinctive sensuous experiences and hopes and fears concerning the prospects of resurrection, salvation, and eternal happiness. Rationally speaking, God is good in the sense that God’s acts are good. And God causally determines – distributively – every aspect of the sub-lunary world. Hence nothing evil may exist, except in an illusory sense (*Principles*, W1, 153ff). Of course, human agents are free so that they also can err (*Alciphron*, W3, Advertisement, p. 23).²⁰ Human freedom is good even if we err and do wrong, yet it follows that we are responsible for something God does not directly want. In this perspective, only two types of moral problems exist, namely, disobedience to God and human suffering (PO 5).²¹

²⁰ Timo Airaksinen, “Vulgar Thoughts: Berkeley on Responsibility and Freedom.” In Sebastian Charles (Ed.), *Berkeley Revisited: Moral, Social and Political Philosophy*. Oxford: University of Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 2015, pp. 115–130. (*Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment*, no. 2015:09).

²¹ Natural calamities are common source of suffering (PO 14). – Is Berkeley a utilitarian? This has been debated recently, but the issue is anachronistic. The correct question is, as I see it, what are Berkeley’s utilitarian-style innovations? See Belfrage, op. cit., n. 25. Berkeley may come close to the early theo-

Berkeley's solution to the theodicy problem and his voluntarism are interconnected, as the learned will notice – yet he does not discuss it explicitly. Suppose we are voluntarists; in that case, what God calls good is good by fiat (and not only in the Pickwickian sense). He calls our world good, and therefore it is good, or as Berkeley says, necessarily good. We humans may consider its evil aspects, but then we err, as the vulgar do. If we are non-voluntarists, we say God is good, but we also realize that the definition of good challenges God by presenting a standard for Him to meet.²² Goodness is holier than Him.

What happens from the point of view of the double maxim? Berkeley offers two different solutions to the problem of evil. He provides a compensatory argument for the vulgar by saying that the world is evil, but you still can go to heaven, or first you are unhappy and then happy. For the learned, he says the created world is necessarily good. It only appears evil, and therefore your suffering is illusory and meaningless. If you simulate God's perception, you will miss all evil – and here, no reference to heavenly bliss is relevant. The double maxim leads to two conflicting accounts of the problem of evil.

4 Problems of Benevolence

Berkeley says, and every learned person can verify this truth, that one must obey God's laws regardless of the observable proximal consequences and trust that obedience somehow promotes distal general good. Notice that one cannot break scientific laws although moral laws are easy to violate, for instance, when they threaten to lead us towards subjectively untoward consequences. You can bypass any moral law whenever you like, but none of the scientific laws – one may act unethically but not “unphysically.” This trivial point displays a non-trivial side: God's moral laws are strictly categorical, but we can apply them benevolently, showing compassion, charity, and mercy. We use them flexibly and even hypothetically – in Kant's sense. This idea is evil, which surprises a new reader of PO who knows Berkeley's other moral writings. What does he mean? Benevolence is an essential Christian virtue that Berkeley, in other places, keenly promotes. Still, mercy, charity, brotherly love, benevolence, and forgiveness may entail exceptions to moral laws – this is the problem. Yet, God is benevolent (*Principles*, W2, 30), and the three theological virtues of faith, hope, and love or charity follow from 1 *Corinthians* 13: “But the greatest of

Footnote 21 (continued)

logical utilitarianism, see Julia Driver, “The History of Utilitarianism,” Ch. 1. Precursors to the Classical Approach. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2014/entries/utilitarianism-history/>, and Colin Heydt, “Utilitarianism before Bentham.” In Ben Eggleston and Dale E. Miller (Eds.). *Cambridge Companion to Utilitarianism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 16-37. Heta Häyry and Matti Häyry, “Obedience to Rules and Berkeley's Theological Utilitarianism,” *Utilitas* 6 (1994), 233-242, and Matti Häyry, “Passive Obedience and Berkeley's Moral Philosophy,” *Berkeley Studies* (2012), 3-14.

²² In Ancient Greek mythology fate, *moira*, is above the will of gods. In non-voluntarist theology, the idea of goodness is like *moira*. See Robert C. Solomon, “On Fate and Fatalism,” *Philosophy East and West* 53 (2003), 435-454.

these is love.” Classical Greeks did not consider benevolence a virtue or *arête*; it is a typical Christian good.

Berkeley realizes that benevolence conflicts dangerously with legal rigor and religious zeal.²³ The correct application of moral laws has nothing to do with such charitable sentiments as love, which can “corrupt the mind.” One easy solution exists: the law concerns actions but not the agent, or we hate crime but not the criminal – this is a conventional Christian platitude (Sermon II: On Religious Zeal, W7, p. 17). Therefore, we punish without mercy but, as benevolent Christians, we still love the criminal. Compassion and mercilessness, even cruelty, may exist side by side. Be this as it may, Berkeley writes:

Tenderness and benevolence of temper are often motives to the best and greatest actions; but *we must not make them the sole rule of our actions*: they are passions rooted in our nature, and, like all other passions, must be restrained and kept under, otherwise they may possibly betray us into as great enormities as any other unbridled lust. Nay, they are more dangerous than other passions, insomuch as they are more plausible, and apt to dazzle and corrupt the mind with the appearance of goodness and generosity. (PO 13, my italics)

This quote deserves careful reading. First, benevolence is praised in a genuinely Christian manner, and then it is said it cannot be the *only* rule of action, which is trivially true: how could it be, benevolence entails no rule but an attitude? Restraints are needed because benevolence may “betray us into [...] great enormities.” Why say this? Perhaps benevolence represents corrupt generosity? Maybe the point is, benevolent feelings follow no action justifying rules, or benevolence cannot be a duty? Anyway, the text slides from praise to condemnation in a closely guarded rhetorical manner. Berkeley says benevolence is dangerous because it *may* lead you astray in moral matters. He carefully watches his deontic modalities, although his true purpose also comes through: flexible benevolence corrupts rigid morality.

Benevolence as a passion is not guided by reason or defined in terms of moral laws; that is why it must be “kept under.” Does Berkeley’s ethics in PO have any place for benevolence? In his *Works*, he mentions benevolence 22 times and charity 125 times, which shows how vital this virtue is. For example, in his sermon “On Religious Zeal” (W7, p. 18), he writes:

It is the very axiom and perfection, the peculiar aim and design of Christianity to put away the narrowness of a party Spirit, and instead thereof to introduce a largeness of soul, a noble and diffusive charity and unite the hearts of all men by the strictest bands of love and benevolence. We are told the end of the

²³ See Sermon 2: On Religious Zeal, W7, p. 16: “RELIGION must not be thought to consist in a lazy inactive contemplation of virtue and morality.” We need passion, or zeal. However, Berman says he was a man of “little or no religious faith” and his religion was “based entirely on reason,” that is, on lazy contemplation. His sermons do not support this view, they insist on zeal, and the sermons address the vulgar. The learned contemplate rationally, the vulgar believe zealously. See Berman, “The Distrustful Philosopher.” In S. Parigi (ed.), *George Berkeley: Religion and Science in the Age of Enlightenment*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2010, pp. 141–157, p. 141. We must read Berkeley’s vulgar texts, too.

commandment is charity out of a pure heart and a good conscience and love unfeigned.

One cannot demand charity, love, and benevolence as one demands justice (*Alciphron*, W3, 6: 15, p. 249), but we may still make a plea for it. Of course, the limitations in PO on charity follow logically from the premises of its moral theory. Still, they do not easily fit into the more humane and generous worldview of his sermons and, perhaps, of *Alciphron* as well. Above, he says charity is the “end of the commandment,” yet PO is all about divine commandments and against charity – this is inconsistent. Benevolence and charity are perfectly virtuous options on exceptional cases that are morally open-ended and practically undecidable. Also, the supreme power traditionally has the right to pardon an offender.

This discussion confuses the learned and the vulgar approaches, yet we can easily keep them apart. Berkeley emphasizes benevolence in his minor writings aimed at the vulgar. He mentions it only three times in *Alciphron*, then condemns it in PO. The learned readers of PO may be sensitive and even responsible for the applications of the civil law, and thus Berkeley says they should think of the law and nothing else. The vulgar obey the law, they cannot insist on anything like legal mercy and benevolence, yet they must show Christian benevolence to their brethren in everyday life. As discussed in PO, the legal context is the realm that the learned should come to understand, unlike the vulgar, whose mutual relationships should stay within the legal limits but otherwise show mutual love, charity, and benevolence. Berkeley looks like a class-conscious thinker.

Berkeley’s ethical thought in PO is a typical example of a normative system that we do not want, and thus we may create our own rules and norms that serve our needs by being more merciful, or at least the vulgar do so. They instinctively recognize and insist on caveats like supererogatory cases and prima facie clauses. In the moral sense, says Berkeley, this doesn’t seem right because then we create many mutually conflicting systems – or no system at all (PO 13, 20). The resulting subjectivity is harmful: “the prospects men form to themselves of a country’s public good are commonly as various as its landscapes, which meet the eye in several situations” (PO 20). This variety may not be a problem from a subjective vulgar perspective. Still, PO constructs an ideal case of a theologically and rationally justified legal system for the learned to study and apply. Only they may understand and accept its challenging theses. The vulgar may not bother as the text is not for them. Berkeley talks to them using much more lenient language.

5 Egoism and Self-Love

The norm of obedience in PO also raises a question of egoism: only by obeying the law does the agent promote the general good and, at the same time, her interest in the heavenly lot.²⁴ Berkeley speaks of “interest” in this connection (PO 6). Suppose

²⁴ See Daniel Flage, “Was Berkeley an Ethical Egoist?” *Berkeley Studies* 19 (2008), 3–18.

you do good deeds *only* because you want to go to heaven. Then the following is true: If heaven did not exist, you would not act morally. When you act, the heavenly lot becomes your rightful reward and entitlement. However, the learned realize that no one can reclaim one's right to eternal life against God. Therefore, whatever the vulgar may think and say, good deeds are subjectively irrelevant. In other words, to say good deeds earn one a place in heaven is vacuous because one cannot cash them in at will. Berkeley, on the contrary, insists that the learned do their moral duty, and the good deeds follow, but one's fate is always dependent on God. Anglican theology does not favor this idea, as the learned know. Unlike the learned, the vulgar may at least introduce the concept of egoism, although this problem is insignificant.

A vulgar person who zealously nurtures his chances of salvation is not a normative egoist because he wants to earn his rightful place in heaven. He does not claim any special rights or privileges. Berkeley speaks of *entitlement* (PO 7), and one certainly can enjoy the heavenly reward without hurting other peoples' chances. We all may be psychological egoists, but this is different – it means immaturity. The question of egoism is not real: the learned may obey because they are, as believers, rational ethicists, but the vulgar want to consider their heavenly lot – we must not confuse these two standpoints, and Berkeley serves them well in his Sermons when he discusses a future state – in his learned writings he subdues the issue. In W7 he mentions heaven 82 times and a future state 31 times. The learned may not be motivated by their salvation in the same way as the vulgar: “And indeed there is no such antidote to vice, no such guard of virtue, no such comfort in affliction as a right belief and thorough persuasion of a future state” (Sermon VIII: On Eternal Life, W7, p. 106). Entirely rational people do not think about their future happiness, unlike the vulgar. They want to follow God's commands. This is important because only duty makes one an obedient and loyal citizen, as required in PO. The will to do good does not guarantee it. However, both the vulgar and the learned will meet in heaven.

“Egoism” does not occur in Berkeley's *Works*; instead, he speaks of self-love, but only on a couple of occasions. Anyhow, PO introduces the topic, and in PO 5 he discusses self-love as something like psychological egoism. In PO 5, he does not refute self-love as a motive; he provides, as we saw, an account of moral development and tells how the vulgar understanding develops towards full moral consciousness, as understood by the learned. Here is the starting point: “Self-love being a maxim of all others the most universal, and the most deeply engraven in our hearts, it is natural for us to regard things as they are fitted to augment or impair our own happiness.” Next, “as the nobler faculties of the human soul begin to display themselves, they discover to us goods far more excellent than those which affect the senses.” Finally, “[t]his obliges us frequently to overlook present momentary enjoyments, when they come in competition with greater and more lasting goods, though too far off, or of too refined a nature, to affect our senses” (PO 5). A person is now a fully formed, rational, and learned moral agent. She has sublimated self-love.

Self-love concerns emotional, personal, and exclusive sensuous good here and now; the more refined goods are devoid of immediate personal involvement. A learned person does not focus on heavenly bliss in the same way a vulgar person does. The idea of bliss reminds her of sensuous pleasure, which does not interest the

learned. Nevertheless, Berkeley does not address the problem of self-love in detail; PO 5 simply reminds the learned reader that self-love belongs to our original vulgar psychological constitution. He says “it is natural for us” to think in terms of self-love, but here the term “natural” cannot refer to natural law or natural pleasure. Instead, it ambiguously indicates low-level, vulgar thinking that we need to fight if we want to be moral. Here Berkeley misuses the term “natural.”

Vulgar human action is subjectively and sensuously motivated. It is less than perfect because self-love lacks in the universalized perspective. As we know, PO emphasizes the universalizability of moral duties. To correct his ways, an agent must think of God, the possibility of general well-being, and his divine laws of nature. One should become virtuous, and virtue is possible only because moral laws “are well-known to mankind and suggested and inculcated by conscience” (PO 12). They “are said to be *stamped on the mind*,” just like self-love is “engraven on the tables of the heart” (PO 5, italics in the original). Ironically, the same holds of contraries like morality and self-love. Self-love and ethics will conflict, but both are part of the human constitution. Hence, the two opposing tendencies must struggle – but morally, self-love will be defeated because it does not recognize the universal moral laws and thus entails a personal failure. Berkeley names the evil and learned people: atheists, freethinkers, and deists. They will get their punishment at the end of time, if not earlier.²⁵ Unbelievers cannot do the right thing, but Berkeley’s vulgar Christian audience must also learn to do better.

6 Conclusion

Berkeley addresses two audiences, the learned and the vulgar. Ideally, he should present a set of true propositions and explain them in two ways: a rational argument and popular narrative – he would argue *with* and speak *to* his audiences. This happens when he discusses natural pleasures, first defined as something “suited to human nature in general,” and then illustrated by Berkeley’s modest lifestyle. Sometimes he comes close to contradicting himself, for instance, when he discusses the dangers of benevolence and charity, or perhaps we say the learned should avoid this irrelevant virtue and the vulgar practice it? Some issues are too tricky for the vulgar to understand, like theodicy and theological voluntarism. His explanation of the mystery of resurrection to the vulgar sounds naïve and unconvincing to the learned who are used to the dualistic Cartesian theory of mind and body: complex bodies disintegrate and perish, and the singular souls survive, or if the body survives it becomes, say, an astral body. The vulgar self-love is a problem. They are selfish and insensitive, which necessitates a discussion that might look unnecessary and misleading to the learned: Am I an egoist if I focus on my future life? Berkeley reminds the vulgar of their prospects of eternal happiness in a future state to make them obedient; the

²⁵ See Timo Airaksinen and Heta Gylling, “A Threat Like No Other Threat, George Berkeley Against the Freethinkers,” *History of European Ideas*. 43 (2017), 598–613.

learned know the laws of morality in the categorical proto-Kantian sense: you obey God's commands without considering the consequences.

I have argued that the double maxim offers us a novel approach to understanding Berkeley's otherwise problematic and confusing ethical writings, which we must do if we ever hope to understand the man and his works comprehensively and in a historically justifiable manner. We should not neglect some of his writings and, for instance, pretend that PO is the only relevant moral text. Did Berkeley apply the double maxim self-consciously aiming at an entirely consistent exposition? It isn't easy to tell. But the maxim still allows us to read his ethics better, even if we admit that it contains disparate elements. Jessop said he could find two Berkeleys in *Alciphron*. I would say the double maxim is one of Berkeley's many underdeveloped philosophical insights, just like, say, his idea of the divine language of nature.

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