

BISHOP BERKELEY'S ESSAY ON MORAL ATTRACTION:

AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF SEVENTEENTH
CENTURY NATURAL SCIENCE ON SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY.

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I. INTRODUCTORY.

IT HAS long been recognized by historians of social, political and economic doctrines that the revival of natural science in the seventeenth century¹ had a remarkable influence upon the development of social, political and economic philosophy during the course of the next two centuries. The students in these fields were profoundly impressed by the fact that Newton, in his law of inverse squares or universal gravitation, had discovered what was believed to be a very simple formula for explaining the nature and movements of the physical universe. It was held that equally simple explanations could be found for social, political and economic phenomena. The English Deists and the French *Philosophes* contended that natural laws governed society as much as the physical universe, and they created the concept of a "natural order" to which, as the divine and physical norm, social institutions should conform.² In the field of political theory there developed the notions of the state of nature, natural law, the origin of society in a social contract, and the right of revolution.³ In economics this notion of "naturalism" was used to defend the economic aspirations of the rising commercial or middle class. In the hands of the Physiocrats and the Classical Economists it was employed to discourage and condemn all legislation limiting economic initiative. At first *laissez-faire* was utilized to secure free trade; later its chief use was to

¹ A. E. Shipley, *The Revival of Science in the Seventeenth Century*.

² See J. E. Gillespie, *The Influence of Oversea Expansion on England*, Chaps. vii-ix; O. F. Boucke, *The Development of Economics, 1750-1900*, Chaps. ii-iii.

³ W. A. Dunning, *Political Theories from Luther to Montesquieu*.

obstruct factory legislation.⁴ In the field of social philosophy at large, or what later became sociology with Comte, the chief result was to produce attempts to draw analogies between physical forces and laws and social factors and processes. Ultimately this type of thought led to such developments as Comte's *Social Physics*, Herbert Spencer's purely physical interpretation of social in Part II of his *First Principles*, and Professor Giddings' attempt to correlate physical and psychical factors in Book IV of his *Principles of Sociology*.

II. BISHOP GEORGE BERKELEY'S EXCURSION INTO SOCIAL PHYSICS, 1713.

It was in this field of social philosophy that Berkeley made his contributions. He was evidently profoundly impressed with Newton's law of inverse squares, and felt that he could apply its significance rather directly to social and moral phenomena. This essay is entitled "Moral Attraction," and shows the analogy between the operation of physical forces in the universe and the psychological attraction between individuals in society. While the attempt to correlate physical and social forces, or in other words to give a physical explanation of society, is very crude and elementary, still the effort is unquestionable and foreshadows the later work of Spencer and Giddings, in which this line of thought has culminated.

Berkeley shows how there is an attraction between all the bodies in the solar system, and, likewise, how in the minds of man there is a principle of attraction which operates in a similar manner and draws people into the various forms of society. In the same way, the nearer physical bodies are placed to each other, the stronger will be their mutual attraction, so also among men those most closely related or resembling each other are most strongly attracted to each other. But at the same time those physical bodies most remote from one another have an attraction for each other, though it may be imperceptible, and, if the stronger attraction of the bodies in close proximity were to be removed, then these remote bodies would be drawn together. So with men, if two who are different meet in a place inhabited by individuals differing from both more than they do from each other, then these two individuals will feel a mutual attraction.⁵

⁴ Boucke, *op. cit.*; Gide and Rist, *History of Economic Doctrines*, Books I, III.

⁵ As will be noted this bears a certain resemblance to Professor Giddings' theory of the "consciousness of kind," but Berkeley did not offer it as an explanation of society, but rather as a result of the social instinct, which he was content to explain by the theological assumption that it was due to divine action.

On the other hand there are centrifugal forces in the universe which prevent all the bodies in the solar system from uniting in one mass; similarly, in society, individual passions and desires tend to obstruct the perfect action of the social instinct.⁶

The attractive force in the solar system, he holds, cannot be explained in any other way than by the immediate action of God, and neither can the principle of human sociability. It does not originate, he says, from education, law, or fashion, but is an original gift of the creator. As the attractive principle of the universe is the key to the natural phenomenon, so is the social instinct the source and explanation of all the various actions of man in society which may be called moral. While Berkeley unfortunately stops short of trying to find a psychological explanation for the social instinct, the method which he introduces, the perception of the analogy between physical and mental forces, and the influence of the social instinct upon social activities makes this essay one of the most interesting contributions to social philosophy up to his time, aside from the theories of social genesis which had been offered by several previous authors. It thus seems that as early as 1713 there was a writer who has arrived at at least the rudiments of Prof. Giddings' famous contention that "sociology insists that one fundamental logic underlies the objective or physical, and the subjective or volitional explanations of social phenomena." Berkeley also foreshadows that emphasis on sympathy as a factor in society which was later in the century to be elaborated by Hume and Adam Smith.

III. TEXT OF BERKELEY'S ESSAY ON THE PRINCIPLES OF MORAL ATTRACTION.

The following is the significant part of the text of this important essay:

"I am a man, and have a fellow feeling of everything belonging to a man."

If we consider the whole scope of the creation that lies within our view, the moral and the intellectual, as well as the natural and corporeal, we shall perceive throughout a certain correspondence of the parts, a similitude of operation and unity of design, which plainly demonstrate the universe to be the work of one infinitely good and wise Being: and that the system of thinking beings is actuated by laws derived from the same divine power which ordained those by which the corporeal system is upheld.

⁶ Cf. Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, Vol. I, Par. 271. And also Part II of the *First Principles*.

From the contemplation of the order, motion, and cohesion of natural bodies, philosophers are now agreed that there is a mutual attraction between the most distant parts at least of this solar system. All those bodies that revolve round the sun are drawn towards each other, and towards the sun, by some secret, uniform, and never ceasing principle. Hence it is that the earth (as well as the other planets) without flying off in a tangent line, constantly rolls about the sun, and the moon about the earth, without deserting her companion in so many thousand years. And as the larger systems of the universe are held together by this cause, so likewise the particular globes derive their cohesion and consistence from it.

Now if we carry our thoughts from the corporeal to the moral world, we may observe in the Spirits or Minds of men a like principle of attraction, whereby they are drawn together in communities, clubs, families, friendships, and all the various species of society. As in bodies, where the quantity is the same, the attraction is strongest between those which are placed nearest to each other, so it is likewise in the minds of men, *cæteris paribus*, between those who are most nearly related. Bodies that are placed at the distance of many millions of miles may nevertheless attract and constantly operate on each other, although this action does not show itself by a union or approach of those distant bodies, so long as they are withheld by the contrary forces of other bodies, which, at the same time, attract them different ways, but would on the supposed removal of all other bodies, mutually approach and unite with each other. The like holds with regard to the human soul, whose affection towards the individuals of the same species who are distantly related to it is rendered inconspicuous by its more powerful attraction towards those who have a nearer relation to it. But as those are removed the tendency which before lay concealed doth gradually disclose itself.

A man who has no family is more strongly attracted towards his friends and neighbors; and, if absent from these, he naturally falls into an acquaintance with those of his own city or country who chance to be in the same place. Two Englishmen meeting at Rome or Constantinople soon run into a familiarity. And in China or Japan Europeans would think their being so a good reason for their uniting in particular converse. Farther, in case we suppose ourselves translated into Jupiter, or Saturn, and there to meet a Chinese or other more distant native of our own planet, we should look on him as a near relation, and readily commence a friendship with

him. These are natural reflections, and such as may convince us that we are linked by an imperceptible chain to every individual of the human race.

The several great bodies which compose the solar system are kept from joining together at the common center of gravity by the rectilinear motions the Author of nature has impressed on each of them; which, concurring with the attractive principle, form their respective orbits around the sun: upon the ceasing of which motions, the general law of gravitation that is now thwarted would show itself by drawing them all into one mass. After the same manner, in the parallel case of society, private passions and motions of the soul do often obstruct the operation of that benevolent uniting instinct implanted in human nature; which, notwithstanding, doth still exert, and will not fail to show itself when those obstructions are taken away.

The mutual gravitation of bodies cannot be explained any other way than by resolving it into the immediate operation of God, who never ceases to dispose and actuate His creatures in a manner suitable to their respective beings. So neither can that reciprocal attraction in the minds of men be accounted for by any other cause. It is not the result of education, law, or fashion, but is a principle originally ingrafted in the very first formation of the soul by the Author of our nature.⁷

And as the attractive power in bodies is the most universal principle which produceth innumerable effects, and is a key to explain the various phenomena of nature; so the corresponding social appetite in human souls is the great spring and source of moral actions. This it is that inclines each individual to an intercourse with his species, and models everyone to that behavior which best suits the common well-being. Hence that sympathy in our nature whereby we feel the pains and joys of our fellow creatures.⁸ Hence that prevalent love in parents towards their children, which is neither founded on the merit of the object, nor yet on self-interest. It is this that makes us inquisitive concerning the affairs of distant nations which can have no influence on our own. It is this that ex-

⁷ It is this failure to attempt to explain the social instinct through the medium of psychology which separates Berkeley from modern sociologists.

⁸ Note the reversal of cause and effect, which is inevitable in case the social instinct is viewed as a metaphysical entity of special and original endowment. Most modern sociologists are inclined to believe that sympathy in part accounts for society.

tends our care to future generations, and excites us to acts of beneficence towards those who are not yet in being, and consequently from whom we can expect no recompense. In a word, hence arises that diffusive sense of Humanity so unaccountable to the selfish man who is untouched with it, and is, indeed, a sort of a monster or anomalous production.⁹

These thoughts do naturally suggest the following particulars. First, that as social inclinations are absolutely necessary to the well-being of the world, it is the duty and interest of every individual to cherish and improve them to the benefit of mankind; the duty, because it is agreeable to the intention of the Author of our being, who aims at the common good of his creatures, and as an indication of his will, hath implanted the seeds of mutual benevolence in our souls; the interest, because the good of the whole is inseparable from that of the parts; in promoting therefore the common good, every one doth at the same time promote his own private interest. Another observation I shall draw from the premises is, That it is a signal proof of the divinity of the Christian religion, that the main duty which it inculcates above all others is charity. Different maxims and precepts have distinguished the different sects of philosophy and religion: our Lord's peculiar precept is, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you love one another'.¹⁰

The March number of *The Open Court* contains an error, for for which we offer an apology. The author of "A Critical View of Progress" is Robert Shafer, of Wells College, Aurora-on-Cayuga, New York, and not as it reads "F. S. Marvin."

⁹ In spite of Berkeley's shortcomings in the matter of accounting for the social instinct, his method was in many other respects excellent; he endeavored to correlate social and physical forces and causation, and to organize about the social fact all the activities growing out of it. Cf. Giddings, *Principles of Sociology*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ *The Works of Berkeley*, Fraser edition, Vol. IV, pp. 186-190.