

Review

Berkeley's Alciphron: English Text and Essays in Interpretation.
 Laurent Jaffro, Geneviève Brykman, Claire Schwartz, eds.
 Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2010. 443 pp.

With *Alciphron* (1732), George Berkeley made a fresh and important contribution to the large body of writings against the *free-thinkers*. The recent publication by L. Jaffro, G. Brykman and C. Schwartz restores the genuine text of the second edition. Reproduced without the addition of any annotations or comments, the text of *Alciphron* is flanked, however, with a collection of critical articles that help frame the work from the comparative perspective within the lively debates characterizing the eighteenth century.

In *Alciphron* Berkeley adopts a very different strategy from the dialectical battles making up the *Boyle Lectures*, particularly those of Samuel Clarke. Well aware of the impasse to which the extreme rationalization of Christian belief leads—if God is deprived of all his anthropomorphic attributes, his value is reduced to a mere cause—Berkeley chose to change the focus of the discourse. He argues that the good believer should know that the divine attributes, though different in proportion, are similar in nature to those of human beings; but the believer also has to realize that Christianity is essential for its effects on individual and social morality. Only the belief in a remunerative God provides adequate motivation for human moral action, which otherwise would be left at the mercy of conflicting passions.

For Berkeley, practice is driven by theory, and free-thinkers are “wicked upon Principles” (62). Ironically referred to as “minute philosophers,” free-thinkers are characterized by their atheism—from which, in turn, free-thought cannot be separated (274). The essays appended to this edition of the *Alciphron* frame this core of theoretical atheism by showing us the negative effects of practical atheism. As Jaffro puts it, Berkeley is concerned with the “éducation des éducateurs” (277): the subtle reasoning of the free-thinkers produces upheavals in society; and even if they appear not to realize it, their speaking openly and without restraint of all things causes people to lose their bearings.

Brykman rightly states that Berkeley, in a sense, “discovers” the perlocutory use of language (411); and it seems that the Irish thinker, throughout the whole course of his dialogues, continually returns to the role of speech in practice. A metaphor perfectly exemplifies this attitude: free thought is not like *gunpowder* but like *Brandy* (84). If the former is expressly malevolent, the latter looks and tastes pleasant, is valued for its digestive properties and aroma, gives comfort at first sip, but finally reveals its terrible effects on society. So, although it appears in innocent guise, it is more dangerous than what, at the first sight, appears to embody evil. The greatest danger of atheism does not lie in its theoretical core but in its constitution as a way of education. That is why, as Taranto insists, the theories of those free-thinkers who act as moralists are treated more harshly and with more contempt—in particular, Mandeville and Shaftesbury (364).

No doubt, this emphasis is plausible, and it recurs in other essays in the collection. But another

interesting aspect of the text lies in the discovery of an alleged theoretical proof of atheism. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the debate on the actual existence of a speculative atheism was as animated as it was confused. Apologists of Christianity clashed with one another—often falling into inconsistency—about the real sustainability of this kind of atheism. In *Alciphron*, though, Berkeley is clear about his stance: “though it has been often said, there is no such thing as a speculative atheist; yet we must allow, there are several atheists who pretend to speculation” (17). He then follows up with an account of the main features of this alleged atheism.

From a different standpoint, Berkeley positively claims to prove the truth of Christianity, starting from evidence rooted in *common sense*. As Fourny-Etchegaray suggests, this kind of common sense is not that of Shaftesbury (400), but rather that of a natural, ordinary man who lives in contact with the passage of the seasons, with manual work and intimate reflection. The character who most closely embodies this sort of common sense is Euphranor, a subtle but simple man who, after spending some time at university, understands that the highest degree of knowledge that can be taught is to be found in the fatigue of daily work in the fields. Thus he decides to devote himself passionately to managing his land. The characteristics and role of this character testify that Berkeley does not intend to linger long over theological discussions since, according to him, a proceeding of this kind only helps the well-known quibbles of the “minute philosophers.”

Berkeley thus aims to denounce the social perversions of atheism and, positively, to inspire the Christian faith in the common man. Nevertheless, even if he refrains almost entirely from giving a strict theological refutation of atheism, he does have in mind a specific argument used by atheists, and he tries to answer it. According to the *Alciphron*, this argument is proposed by the *great* Diagoras. As Lysicles tells it, Diagoras expounds in private a two-step demonstration “clear as daylight” of the inexistence of God (42). First, taking advantage of the uncertainties of the theologians, Diagoras concludes that God is bereft of all attributes. Second, he shows that a simple “cause” of this kind cannot be distinguished from the material universe (132). This is not to deny the existence of a God, and in fact Lysicles is careful not to move in this direction (133). Rather, it is to deny all the essential attributes of God (e.g., kindness, intelligence, omnipotence) and to reduce his nature to blind necessity. The target of eighteenth-century atheism is therefore the existence of a divine mind, a *Nous* provided with planning capability and power (134). If God were a mere first cause, what we call God would be an empty term.

Berkeley, weaving the dialogue, tries to reply to the theory of Diagoras while admitting that the problem of divine attributes is a real one; for when you dissolve those attributes as being incommensurable, you open the door wide to atheism. In this connection, Berchielli writes that “Berkeley points out that any concept that presupposes the inaccessibility of divine attributes is a dangerous weapon in the hands of freethinkers” (388). The only viable solution that can save religion is to “return to the original meaning of the term analogy as a similarity of relations. . . . The corresponding terms have the same meaning, although their extension, when applied to God, is made proportional to its infinite nature” (389).

The characters of *Alciphron*, as Berkeley himself notes, may represent real people, even though several theories (e.g., priestcraft) are brought together under the single figure of the freethinker.

Le Jallé concludes that “Berkeley intends to produce a summary of the general position of freethinkers” (299). Diagoras, however, represents the speculative atheist par excellence, the mind of the freethinker, embodied especially in the ways and philosophy of Anthony Collins. This identification, already advanced by David Berman, is echoed in several of the essays collected in this volume. Brykman (332), for example, examines the relation between Collins’ determinism and Diagoras’ atheism, while Taranto (362) focuses on their similarity on the question of divine attributes.

The articles of this collection largely converge on the central role that Berkeley assigned to moral pedagogy. Attesting to the liveliness of the debate, however, some readings on more specific points are rather different, particularly on the question of the *heteronomy* of morality. Whereas Bertini writes that “Berkeley portrays the man without fear and hope as the epitome of existential angst” (317), emphasizing the need for a motive that resides outside those same morals, Nurock argues that Berkeley’s analysis “does not endorse externalism but a particular form of internalism, where the moral sense and religious sense are closely linked in the conscience of the same moral subject” (330). The question is of real interest, but should not be dealt with too rigidly, for experience shows that both the advocates of free thought—or the movement’s involuntary founders—and their opponents were not actually aligned with either moral autonomy or moral heteronomy. The movement’s advocates, although they rejected the concept of moral motive on the basis of divine justice, or on the basis of a remunerative God, nevertheless based their morals on external assumptions, that is, pleasure and pain. By contrast, Berkeley admitted the existence of a moral sense—the meaning of which is far from that of Shaftesbury—and yet had to hypothesize a God who gives rewards or punishments in order to instill morality into the human soul.

The volume appears to be well put together: in the first part, the text of *Alciphron* is carefully restored; the decision to omit notes removes little from the comprehensibility of the text, and it is also fully consistent with the intention of the editors to propose a clear reproduction of the second edition (1732). The rich collection of sixteen essays that make up the second part are well-matched, and the thematic organization is particularly functional. The choice dictated by the policy of the series, to propose essays in different languages (English, French, German and Italian) while perhaps making for slightly harder reading, also mirrors the successful internationalization that George Berkeley studies have achieved.

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