

George Leedham A4; 28 04 17

Question 4 – 'What did Samuel Johnson hope to accomplish by kicking a stone? Did the incident succeed in proving a valid point against Berkeley?'

The physical act of kicking the stone may have satisfied Samuel's inquiry at the time he did it but it could be that he just found Berkeley's theory on matter so outlandish that the act of kicking the stone was just straight forward frustration, just as we do things today in the heat of the moment. Johnson's health was poor for most of his life; he suffered from; tuberculous scrofula, deafness in one ear, blindness in one eye and in later life gout, depression and tourette syndrome! With all these problems it is a wonder he was able to kick any stone. His disagreement with Berkeley's theory and his desire to refute it so dramatically needs to be examined. To do this we need to know at what time in history this took place, and who were the leading lights of philosophy at that time. Maybe Berkeley's theory on matter was so diametrically opposite to established thinking at the time that kicking a stone was, for him, adequate refutation.

Most philosophers agree that there is a material world and acknowledge the reality of non-material things like heat and light, and feelings and emotions – things that we cannot touch but we can still experience the sensations of these things.

Descartes (1596-1650) suggested that there is a total reality comprising an ideal world and a material world. He believed that our only true knowledge of the world lay in our reasoning, and he was a rationalist like Berkeley.

John Locke (1632-1704) an empiricist who was opposed to Descartes rationalism.

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784) writer who is famous for writing the English dictionary in 1755 after nine years of work.

David Hume (1711-1776) was an empiricist but also believed that our perceptions of the world are personal, not universal.

Plato was a rationalist; and proposed that we are all born with knowledge and this knowledge is retrieved through our reasoning. Reality consists of truths that we discover by our reasoning and rational thought.

Aristotle was an empiricist; and proposed that we acquired all our knowledge of the outside world through our senses. There is no innate knowledge or abilities, our knowledge is learned from our experience of the world around us. (And our senses can be tricked.)

George Berkeley (1685-1753) was at first ridiculed for proposing that nothing material exists in the world. Maybe his ideas, though radical at the time, are now not so absurd. We now know that nothing is really solid. If you believed that material is 'solid' that would have seemed reasonable at the time Berkeley proposed that theory but now we know that nothing is really solid, everything is made up of atoms and there is a lot of space, relatively speaking, between them. However, the things that we consider 'solid' though just atoms, is still matter.

'There is no reason why philosophy should conform to common sense, but people expect it to.'¹

He was an ardent protestant, and a bishop.

His belief was that if knowledge is based on our experience of the world then we only know our own experience of it, we do not know the world, just our perception of it, so if we are not perceiving the world it does not exist. When you do not see the world it is not there and we cannot touch it or experience it through our senses. So if we cannot see, touch or smell something it cannot exist (to us) but it obviously exists for other people who see the world of things. So there must be an all seeing God – so all the world and all its things do exist. But this is an empirical thought – the world and its things are being materialised through senses and knowledge of the existence of these things are being perceived through our senses. This seems an absurdity – a rationalist is using empiricism to support his theory on matter. Also, his theory depends on the existence of an all seeing God and so makes no sense to an atheist. However, at the time he proposed his theories on matter society was much less secular and the church had considerable authority and influence.

Most philosophers of the period were religious. Vanin, Hobbes and Spinoza were atheists and opposed Berkeley's views. And to speak against the established church could have you in a lot of trouble so where Berkeley et al talk of an all seeing God their objectivity is questionable as it must be tempting to suggest and favour theories that support a God. And this then begs the question – is Berkeley's ideas on matter then only true to, and apply to, non atheists? Or are atheists wrong? This is another absurdity. His ideas, to be believable must apply to everybody and the whole world – not just non-atheists.

Johnson – in his action of kicking the stone was trying to prove that the stone exists, and so matter exists but Berkeley's theory is about perception, he is not denying the existence of the stone, but how it is perceived. Johnson was a realist and believed that the stone existed whether or not anyone was there to perceive it, that the stone was mind independent. However, realist or not there are things like heat, taste, fear, hunger that cannot be touched, only sensed. And what is matter? According to the Collins English Dictionary matter is -

- 1) the substance of which something, especially a physical object is made; material
- 2) substance that occupies space and mass as opposed to something mental or spiritual
- 3) substance of a specified type, e.g. vegetable matter.

After reading through Berkeley's dialogues I think that what Berkeley is stating is that sensible things can only exist in mind or spirit, not that they have no real existence but that perceiving them depends not on just ones perception of it, that all things have an existence, and that there must be some other omnipresence wherein they can exist. A sensible world does exist because of the omnipresent spirit (God) that supports it. So if we are not there to see and therefore perceive the stone, it is still there as God sees all.

Conclusion

The act of kicking the stone did not prove to be a valid point against Berkeley as Berkeley did not deny the existence of things in a sensible world but how we perceive things.

¹ Philosophy in an hour – Berkeley by Paul Strathern

Johnson perceived the stone to be there and to prove it he kicked it – but as the stone is a sensible thing it moved like all objects that occupy space and have a mass would have done; like slamming a door, picking up an apple etc. Perhaps the point Johnson was trying to make was that though the stone moved he felt the impact and so in feeling the stone via his senses he thought the stone to be solid and therefore must have matter. But our senses can be fooled – the sensations he presumably felt when he kicked the stone may have been caused by something else, gout, or other medical condition that simulate the sensation expected when kicking anything. Perceptions are individual. What is sweet to some may be bitter to others, a colourful display of a birds plumage is not colourful to someone who is colour blind, yet they still perceive the thing that is colourful. Something must hold this colour and this sweetness, and for this something to exist it must have mass and occupy space. This is the direction that Johnson should have proceeded with, this 'thinginess' that contains the stuff that enables one to perceive it so this stuff is there, whether or not we are there personally to perceive it. A rational riposte to the rationalism of Berkeley would have been more effective whereas the act of kicking a stone was inconclusive and may have even further supported Berkeley's position.