Passive Obedience and Berkeley's Moral Philosophy

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Abstract: In *Passive Obedience* Berkeley argues that we must always observe the prohibitions decreed by our sovereign rulers. He defends this thesis both by providing critiques against opposing views and, more interestingly, by presenting a moral theory that supports it. The theory contains elements of divine-command, natural-law, moral-sense, rule-based, and outcome-oriented ethics. Ultimately, however, it seems to rest on a notion of spiritual reason—a specific God-given faculty that all rational human beings have. Berkeley's work on immaterialism, for which he is better known, could thus perhaps best be seen as an attempt to find a scientific justification for his moral doctrine.

I. A Key to Berkeley's Moral Philosophy?

Passive Obedience, a treatise first delivered in three sermons to students at Trinity College, Dublin and published in 1712 as a book, is one of the main sources of knowledge concerning Berkeley's moral philosophy.[1] However, since the main point of the book is political—Berkeley defends a duty never to actively resist established authority—the text has given rise to diverse readings of the ethical views underlying it.

During the twentieth century, many commentators held that Berkeley's moral theory can be associated with theological utilitarianism, a doctrine according to which we have a duty to promote the good of humanity because God, our universally benevolent creator, wants us to do so.[2] Others, while recognizing this tendency, have emphasized a variety of further elements in Berkeley's ethical thinking: divine command and natural law considerations; rational self-love and ethical egoism; opposition to materialism, skepticism, and naturalism; and leanings towards or against Jacobitism.[3]

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[1] See George Berkeley, "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]," in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, vol. 6, eds. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1948). Numbers in square brackets in the text refer to the chapters of this edition.

[2] See, for example, Ernest Albee, *A History of English Utilitarianism* (New York: Macmillan, 1902); Ian D. S. Ward, "George Berkeley: Precursor of Keynes or Moral Economist on Underdevelopment?" *Journal of Political Economy* 67 (1959), 31-40; Paul J. Olscamp, *The Moral Philosophy of George Berkeley* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970); Richard B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); Geoffrey Warnock, "Berkeley's Moral Philosophy," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 16 (1990), 48-50; David Berman, "The Jacobitism of Berkeley's 'Passive Obedience'," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1986), 309-319; David Berman, *George Berkeley: Idealism and the Man* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Matti Häyry, *Liberal Utilitarianism and Applied Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1994); Matti Häyry and Heta Häyry, "Obedience to Rules and Berkeley's Theological Utilitarianism," *Utilitas* 6 (1994), 232-42.

[3] See, for example, T. E. Jessop, editor's introduction to *Passive Obedience*, in W 6; C. D. Broad, "Berkeley's theory of morals," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 23/24 (1953), 72-86; Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 5 (New York: Doubleday, 1959); David Berman, "The

In what follows, I will describe the argument put forward in *Passive Obedience* and then outline the ethical ideas that it employs and evokes. The description proceeds in three stages. I will first show how Berkeley explicates his thesis, second how he thinks it can be proven, and third how he defends his chosen position.

II. The Explication of the Thesis

Berkeley sets out to explain and defend the following scriptural thesis:

> *Whosoever resisteth the Power, resisteth the Ordinance of God.* (Romans 13:2)

Berkeley explicates the thesis in the following way. Contrary to the teachings of "some very rational and learned men" [2]—(Hugo Grotius and Samuel Pufendorf are mentioned by name [51]; John Locke also springs to mind)—we have an unqualified and unlimited moral duty of *passive obedience* to the supreme civil power of the land [3]. By "passive obedience" Berkeley means that we must either abstain from doing what the laws of the land prohibit, or we must patiently and without resistance suffer the punishment if we act against the law and get caught [3]. It does *not* mean that we should always actively do what the law requires us to do since this "active obedience" could prompt us to act against the laws of nature—which trump the positive laws of the land in conflict situations [26]. Passive obedience does not have this effect, because according to Berkeley, we cannot go against the laws of nature by doing nothing. Instead, we can observe all prohibitions simultaneously by not acting at all [26]. (Of course, if we refuse to act in ways that the law of the land defines, we must still suffer the set punishment without resistance.)

So we have a moral duty to observe the positive precepts (commands) of the law *as long as* they are not in conflict with the laws of nature; *and* (this is the actual thesis) a moral duty to observe the negative precepts (prohibitions) of the law, including the duty not to resist the execution of punishment, always, completely, and without exceptions.

But to whom exactly do we owe these duties? Berkeley does not specify, once and for all, the proper locus of the highest power in different societies. Instead, he contends more generally that "there is an absolute unlimited non-resistance or passive obedience due to the supreme civil power, wherever placed in any nation" [2]. He notes that it is normally clear where the supreme power is placed—usually in the hands of the uncontested legal rulers of the land—but in the course of the book he makes some exceptions which he prefers to call "specifications" to the definition of the thesis. We do not owe duties to

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Jacobitism of Berkeley's *Passive Obedience*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1986), 309-319; Warnock 1990; Stephen Darwall, "Berkeley's Moral and Political Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, ed. Kenneth Winkler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 311-38; Roomet Jakapi, "Was Berkeley a utilitarian?" in *Human Nature as the Basis of Morality and Society in Early Modern Philosophy*, eds. Juhana Lemetti and Eva Piirimäe (Helsinki: Philosophy Society of Finland, 2007), 51-68; Scott Breuninger, "Rationality and Revolution: Rereading Berkeley's Sermons on Passive Obedience," *New Hibernia Review* 12 (2008), 63-86; Daniel Flage, "Was Berkeley an Ethical Egoist?" *Berkeley Studies* 19 (2008), 3-18.

"usurpers or even madmen" [52]. And if it is genuinely unclear whether the supreme power rightfully belongs to this or that competing party, reasonable people are allowed to use their discretion in choosing their sides. But once the side has been chosen, absolute passive obedience is again owed to the chosen party [54]. So the claim Berkeley's evidence eventually supports is that we should never do what our (reasonably rightful) rulers forbid us to do. Nonetheless, the claim that he professes to defend remains the strict version without qualifications.

III. The Proof of the Thesis

Although the thesis is a fragment of the Christian doctrine, its proof and defense in Berkeley's sermon are not based on scripture but, as declared in the title, on the "law of nature" that can be grasped by "the principles of reason common to all mankind" [2]. The proof is by and large presented in the first part of the discourse [4–32]. It is, in essence, deductive and proceeds in the following steps.

It "is a truth evident by the light of nature, that there is a sovereign omniscient spirit," God, who "alone is the maker and preserver of all things" [6]; who is wise, good, and just [41–42]; who "alone can make us for ever happy, or for ever miserable" [6]; whose end of action is "the general well-being of all men" [7]; who has, to this end, designed laws of nature both for natural events and for human behavior [7]; and who has "appointed a day of retribution in another life" to secure eternal glory for those (and only for those) who observe the laws of nature in this life—which is the greatest human good and happiness [42, 5]. Human beings have two good reasons to aim to live by the laws of nature designed by God. As the sovereign provider of our eternal happiness and misery, God is the one we should please by our actions in order to guarantee our own long-term well-being [6, 42]. Also, as our creator, God is "with the most undoubted right the great legislator of the world; and mankind are by all the ties of duty, no less than interest, bound to obey his laws" [6].

Since God's aim in designing the laws of nature is the well-being of humankind, these laws could, in theory, be observed either by trying to promote humanity's well-being by each separate individual act and omission that we choose [8] or by following a set [15] of laws which, "if universally practiced," would have "an essential fitness to procure the well-being of mankind" [8]. Of these two approaches, the first one, according to Berkeley, fails on two accounts. Empirically, our imperfect judgment and limited knowledge render most of our individual decisions wrong [9]. And conceptually, to grant that everyone's every assessment has equal merit would eliminate the possibility of universally shared (or even personally held, fixed) substantive moral norms, and hence morality [9]. Subsequently, Berkeley advocates the second approach [10].

The laws which, if universally practiced, would have an essential fitness to procure the well-being of humankind can be discovered by right reason [12]. They are "called *laws of nature*, because they are universal, and do not derive their obligation from any civil sanction, but immediately from the Author of nature himself" [12]. They are "said to be *stamped on the mind*, to be *engraven on the tables of the heart*, because they are well

known to mankind, and suggested and inculcated by conscience" [12]. They are also "termed *eternal rules of reason*, because they necessarily result from the nature of things, and may be demonstrated by the infallible deductions of reason" [12]. Those laws of nature include duties never to resist the supreme power [15], lie under oath [15, 25], commit adultery [15, 25], steal [15, 25], commit murder [32], or do evil so that good may come of it [35]. Whatever else Berkeley had in mind, this list records every universal moral law mentioned in the work.

As for the duty never to resist the supreme power—the duty of passive obedience—right reason puts it forward as a law of nature because it is the only thing that stands between us and total disorder. The wisdom and power of individuals is seriously limited, and the wills of individuals are in constant conflict. So if individual wills are not "combined together, under the direction . . . of one and the same will . . . the law of the society," a state of anarchy will prevail. In this state, "there is no politeness, no order, no peace, among men, but the world is one great heap of misery and confusion." If, on the other hand, individual wills are subjected to one will, anarchy will give way to a "state . . . as a reasonable creature." Such a state, with its system of laws, has "a greater reflection and foresight of miseries" than individuals could have, which is why it promotes the well-being of its subjects better than anarchy. These considerations demonstrate that unconditional submission to the supreme power fulfills the criterion of a "law of nature"—if always absolutely observed by everyone everywhere, the laws of any society keep anarchy at bay and prevent the chaos and misery associated with it [16].

Although passive obedience is suggested to right reason as a reducer of misery and promoter of well-being, it is not, according to Berkeley, a law of nature *because* it promotes the good of humanity (or because it is suggested by conscience) [31]. It is a law of nature "because it is decreed by the will of God, which alone can give the sanction of a *law of nature* to any precept" [31]. It follows that passive obedience—or any other law of nature—does not cease to be valid if it, in particular cases, happens to contribute to bad outcomes or seems to go against our sentiments or conscience [31]. Misery may occur as an accidental consequence when right rules are observed by the virtuous, but they flow from "the unhappy concurrence of events" or "the wickedness of perverse men, who will not conform to them" [13]. Cases in which this happens, although potentially numerous, do not dent the validity of laws of nature—whose universal observance would, as its necessary consequence, have promoted human well-being [46].

Not everyone believes that the duty to obey the supreme power could or should be absolute and unconditional; but there are, Berkeley argues, good reasons for thinking that it is. The well-being of humanity requires shared rules, but no such rules would exist if people could decide for themselves when to respect the limits set by the state and when to ignore them [27]. Besides, even God does not suspend the laws of nature just because their existence leads to bad things. Berkeley's example is a good ruler who falls off a cliff, dies, and leaves the nation in trouble: no divine intervention is normally forthcoming. So, imitating God, neither should we deviate from the rules set by political authorities to promote good in the short term [27]. And although unconditional obedience

may seem detrimental to ourselves, our friends, or our country, we have to abandon those perspectives and look at things as "distant spectators" [28].

When we assume the viewpoint of the distant spectator, we realize the error of certain popular criticisms. Some might observe that, even within the outlined model, people still need to decide for themselves that laws of nature exist, that they can be found in certain ways, and that certain rules belong to this category. Berkeley's response to this is that since the judgments of neutral, distant observers converge, relativism and chaos do not ensue from the introduction of the human element [29]. Others could argue that since ends are more important than means, obedience to the state should be moderated by the well-being of humanity [30]. Berkeley's answer is that while ends are indeed paramount, the ultimate end of human life is to act according to God's decrees, not to promote well-being [31]. Besides, he adds, all moralists agree that evil should not be committed so that good may come of it [35]. Yet others can note that even laws of nature must admit exceptions, since otherwise, for instance, the rule "Thou shalt not kill" would ban warfare and self-defense, which would be untenable. But Berkeley comments that this is just a matter of choosing language more carefully. Once properly specified as "Thou shalt not murder," the rule does not have to admit any exceptions [32].

To summarize, then, Berkeley's proof of his thesis is that:

- We have a prudential and a moral obligation to observe the laws of nature designed by God.
- The laws of nature are a set of rules that, if absolutely observed by all people in all times and all places, would secure the general well-being of humanity.
- The laws of nature are known to us by conscience and they can be demonstrated by right reason.
- Right reason tells us that the absolute duty not to resist the supreme power (passive obedience) is one of the laws of nature. Q.E.D.

IV. The Defense of the Thesis

In the second and third parts of the discourse, Berkeley defends his thesis against competing views [33–40] and objections based on the alleged evil consequences of passive obedience [41–52].

a. *Arguments that disobedience must sometimes be justifiable*

Berkeley presents and promptly rejects six objections claiming that there must be at least some circumstances in which defiance of prohibitions should be preferred to blind submission. One argument against unquestioned obedience is that self-preservation is the first law of nature. When the supreme power threatens our lives, we have a duty to resist it. Berkeley's answer to this is that the term "law of nature" has two meanings. It can denote, prescriptively, "a rule or precept for the direction of the voluntary actions of reasonable agents"; or it can designate, descriptively, "any general rule, which we observe to obtain in the works of nature." Since only laws in the first sense imply duties

and since self-preservation is a law of nature only in the second sense, the objection collapses [33].

Another critical consideration is that the public good of the nation might genuinely require resistance and rebellion. Unless corrupt power is overthrown, society can in some cases be damaged beyond repair. Berkeley's reply is that non-resistance is nonetheless an absolute moral duty. And since absolute moral duties cannot be limited by considerations of well-being (or of any other end of action), this view must be incorrect [36].

Many scholars in Berkeley's time believed that all political authority is derived from individuals, yet individuals do not have sovereignty over themselves. Political power comes from human beings but power over human beings is ultimately in God's hands. The supreme secular power cannot have an absolute right over individuals, because individuals cannot, logically, transfer to anyone what is not theirs in the first place. Berkeley agrees with this partly. The supreme power would be wrong to assume an absolute right over individuals and to dispense with people at will; and it follows from this that subjects would not wrong the ruler by resistance. But they would still violate the moral law of passive obedience, which is why they must suffer patiently the actions of the supreme ruler [37].

A popular objection against absolute compliance to political authority is that unconditional obedience would deprive citizens of their natural freedom and thus enslave them. Berkeley counters this by reminding us that, to make any sense of social life, our appetites must be "chained and fettered by the laws of nature and reason" anyway, and that this, in fact, "addeth much to the dignity of that which is peculiarly human in our composition." Therefore, appeals to slavery are alarmist exaggeration [38].

Focusing on the weaknesses of those in power, opponents can point out that it would surely be wrong to compel subjects to endure "insolence and oppression of one or more of the magistrates, armed with the supreme civil power," as this would mean pleading loyalty to tyrants. But Berkeley's defense is that the loyalty pleaded is not to tyrants, who "for their own sakes have not the least right to our obedience." What we must obey, instead, are "the laws of God and nature," and calamities only make our obedience more noble and meritorious [39].

A final call for exceptions notes that commands can, in Berkeley's view, be disobeyed if need be and asks why prohibitions should be treated differently. The answer in *Passive Obedience* is that the distinction and its normative basis are clear. By actively doing things we can violate the laws of nature, and this is why we must have discretion over obeying active commands. But by doing nothing we do not transgress the natural order, and hence prohibitions can be absolute—they can all be obeyed simultaneously [40].

b. *Objections based on the alleged evil consequences of absolute obedience*

Berkeley goes on to consider seven arguments claiming that blind compliance leads to such horrific outcomes that it cannot be reasonably recommended. To start with,

opponents say, if passive obedience is God's law, then God exposes, on many occasions, innocent people to "the greatest suffering and hardships without any remedy," and this has to be inconsistent with divine wisdom and goodness—that God should by definition have. Here Berkeley contends that we have to "distinguish between the necessary and accidental consequences of a moral law." The consequences of a complete set of moral laws are *necessary* only if they occur when all the laws in the set are universally and absolutely observed. If these are bad, then the laws are bad. But in all other cases the consequences of a complete set of moral laws are *accidental*, and they are then attributable to extrinsic events and the actions of weak and wicked human beings. Their badness does not have a bearing on the validity of the laws. Since the suffering and hardship referred to in the objection are accidental, they challenge the morality of people but not the wisdom and goodness of God [41].

Others claim that when the vicious break the laws of nature, the virtuous have to suffer, and that this must be inconsistent with divine wisdom and justice—another pair of God's attributes. Berkeley grants that this would be true, were it not that God has set a day of retribution in the afterlife. The virtuous will, on that day, be rewarded with the eternal glory of the righteous, which will amply compensate for their worldly misery [42].

According to a psychological objection, passive obedience encourages all rulers to become tyrants—and, in addition, makes the oppression of tyrants more intolerable by denying any possibility of fighting back [43]. But Berkeley sees the situation differently. Rulers are either good, in which case they do not become tyrants, or bad, in which case they will become tyrants anyway, so passive obedience does not change the situation either way. As for fighting back, Berkeley thinks that rebellion always comes with a price that is not worth paying. A weak rebellion will be crushed, causing misery. A strong rebellion might be crushed, causing misery. A strong rebellion might succeed and lead to the appointment of a bad government, causing continued misery. And a strong rebellion might succeed and lead to the appointment of a good government, but misery has been caused in the process. Besides, even if the torment is intolerable and the relief through rebellion certain, considerations of accidental consequences do not trump laws of nature—Berkeley remarks that although adultery could in some instances increase the well-being of those concerned, this does not make it right [43–46].

Critics can, at this point, ask Berkeley sarcastically whether we should just "then submit our necks to the sword" and have "no refuge, against extreme tyranny established by law?" But not so, according to the author of *Passive Obedience*, because it is, he believes, unlikely that rulers would actively and deliberately seek the misery of those they rule. And even if they did (or seemed to do), "subordinate magistrates . . . ought not, in obedience to those decrees, to act any thing contrary to the express laws of God." To preach that public officials should limit their executive actions in the light of the laws of God and nature would, Berkeley claims, be more advantageous to the peace and safety of nations than to preach active resistance against the supreme power [49].

It could, however, be against our personal freedom and dignity to have to submit blindly and implicitly to the decrees of other human beings, even if they were not intentionally

malevolent. Berkeley's response to this is that those who are not entitled to manage the affairs of the state are unlikely to be clever and neutral enough to contribute anything significant to legislation or morals to begin with. So it is necessary that they submit to someone else's rules, and this being the case, what could be wrong with the rules of those who hold the power? [50]

Grotius and Pufendorf—presumably two of the "very rational and learned men" cited in the beginning of the treatise [2]—had argued that obedience must be limited by the spirit and intention of the original contract among individuals who set up a government. Since enduring death in the hands of tyrants without resistance would render people worse off than they would have been in the state of nature, absolute loyalty to the supreme power cannot be reasonably expected. To Berkeley, however, this argument is faulty because it is based on a clearly perverted premise. To say that dying in the hands of the rulers would be worse than the state of nature would be to say that obedience is worse than anarchy. Since we already know that anarchy is always worse than passive obedience, the latter claim is false and the objection is invalid [51].

The last resort of the critics is that obedience without limitations would imply that we are "bound to submit without any opposition to usurpers, or even madmen, possessed of the supreme authority," and this would be absurd. Berkeley concedes the point but does not see it as fatal to his view. Limitless obedience to usurpers or madmen would indeed be absurd and should not be considered a law of nature. But this is simply a specification to the phrasing of the law, not a limitation to our loyalty to the legitimate and sane supreme power [52].

V. Two Peculiarities in Berkeley's Presentation

Berkeley defends passive obedience against counterarguments in a way that places considerable weight on his underlying moral theory. God has certain qualities from which we can deduce that we have a moral duty never to resist the supreme power. There are competing views saying that we may sometimes resist the supreme power, but they must be wrong because we have a moral duty never to resist the supreme power. And there are objections based on the alleged evil consequences of non-resistance, but they must be wrong because we have a moral duty never to resist the supreme power. Since opposing views are not rejected by independent arguments, it is imperative that the theological, ontological, epistemological, and moral ideas underlying Berkeley's defense are well grounded.

Berkeley also defends passive obedience in a peculiarly strict form. He seems to evoke, from time to time, qualifications that would soften the tone of the thesis, but their role is not fully explained in the text. These qualifications are that:

- We do not have to obey madmen. [52]
- We do not have to obey usurpers. [52]
- We do not have to obey the same supreme power as other rational individuals obey, if there are several equal claims to the highest authority. [54]

- We do not have to take traditional formulations of moral laws for granted: murder, not life taking, is absolutely prohibited. [32]
- We can normally assume that those in power do not act out of cruelty to their subjects or try to kill them at will. [49]

In the light of these exceptions, Berkeley could have defined the rule of passive obedience in terms that would have been easier to defend, for instance:

> *Never disobey the prohibitions of reasonably sane and rightful rulers or their officers, or resist them in the execution of their rightful punitive duties, unless they try to take your life without good reason or otherwise act cruelly!*

The key to *Passive Obedience* and possibly to Berkeley's moral philosophy could be that, instead, he held on to, or at least never explicitly gave up in the treatise, the more categorical formulation. I will return to this point after considering the other features of his ethical view.

VI. Berkeley's Moral Theory in *Passive Obedience*

The moral theory underlying Berkeley's claim that we have a duty never to resist the supreme power has several different elements. These are summarized in 21st century terms in Table 1. The left-hand column provides a summary of the view underlying *Passive Obedience* and the right-hand column lists the ethical doctrines, theories, and isms that scholars have identified in the treatise.[4]

We must obey God	► Divine Command Theory
because it is in our own best interest	► Rational Egoism
and because God is our creator;	► Divine Command Theory?
in the way that our conscience suggests	► Not Moral Sense ► Spiritual Reason?
and our natural reason can demonstrate;	► Natural Law Theory
i.e. by absolutely observing a set of rules	► Non-Consequentialism, Deontology
that would, if universally and absolutely observed, promote the general well-being of humanity.	► (Theological) Rule Utilitarianism

Table 1: The elements of Berkeley's moral theory

[4] See notes 2 and 3 for references to the literature.

A potential point of confusion is that many of the listed theories and approaches can be seen as mutually incompatible. If divine commands are crucial, then reason and consequences cannot be decisive for morality. If natural reason is critical, then we cannot simultaneously hold that conscience and well-being are paramount. If rational (private) self-interest is what we aim at, then the general (public) good of humanity cannot be our goal of action (although private and public welfare came to be combined later on in the idea of the "invisible hand"). If the theory falls under the heading of non-consequentialism or deontology, it cannot be counted as a proper form of utilitarianism (if this is seen as a branch of consequentialism). And so on.

Most of these frictions can be explained away by assigning different tasks to different principles, as Berkeley in fact did. Absolute obedience to the proper set of rules is the *criterion of behavior* set by God—for God when it comes to natural laws and for us in the case of moral laws. It is an *attribute of God* as our benevolent creator that the proper set of rules aims at general human well-being. Our *moral reason* for observing the criterion ought to be that God is our creator. Our own eternal self-interest should be our *psychological motivation* for it. Natural reason is our most *neutral way of defining our duties*. And conscience can be a *shortcut or a checkpoint in defining these duties*.

As for utility and consequences, some historical and dogmatic points should be kept in mind. As a precursor of proper forms of utilitarianism, "theological utilitarianism" as held by Berkeley and others is not necessarily compatible with all versions of the more modern creed. It is a view that gained its name retrospectively because it contains, among other things, consequentialist aspects. Especially if "proper" forms of the doctrine are defined by the assessment of individual acts, "rule utilitarianism" cannot be a genuine form of utilitarianism in any of its forms. The dispute concerning Berkeley's possible utilitarianism can be seen as mostly semantic, although many of the things he said in *Passive Obedience* have interesting affinities with later insights in British ethics.

Two points should be made about the principles listed in Table 1. First, it was apparently obvious to Berkeley that creatures must always obey their creators. This is, however, a difficult rule to comprehend in a secular context. Analogical cases could be provided by children and robots—both arguably duty-bound to their parents and makers. But the problem is that neither children nor robots are always morally expected to conform to all the rules (harmful and abhorrent ones are a case in point) that are invented by their biological and technological masters. The tenet's deeper meaning is probably impossible to grasp without a thorough account of its metaphysical basis—which is not included in Berkeley's treatise. Secondly, conscience is important to Berkeley, but in *Passive Obedience* he does not specify what he means by it. From his other works we can deduce that he did not mean a quasi-naturalized awareness of the right and the wrong, championed, for instance, by the moral-sense theorists of his time.[5] He seems to have meant, instead, some kind of "spiritual reason" that can be trusted even when natural or intellectual reason can only generate irresolvable disagreement.

[5] See Olscamp, *Moral Philosophy*, 165 ff.

The role of conscience, like the duty to obey one's maker, creates a lingering tension. When private self-interest is conceptually excluded from the moral picture (as a prudential consideration) and the well-being of humanity is rejected as a source of moral guidance (as something that comes to play only indirectly, mediated by the God-given laws of nature), the remaining contenders for discovering our duties are divine commands, natural reason, and conscience. But divine commands, as stated in scriptures and church teaching, are inadmissible as evidence by Berkeley's own limitation of the discussion to natural reason at the outset of *Passive Obedience*. Natural reason, again by Berkeley's own admission, is divided on the matter. Many rational people (e.g. Grotius and Pufendorf) have thought that our obedience to the supreme power should be limited; and that human sociability rather than blind obedience gives a foundation to the moral laws of nature. This leaves conscience as Berkeley's last resort, but at least in *Passive Obedience* he does not give a satisfactory account of it. Somehow this faculty of "spiritual reason" should explain his disagreement with other scholars *and* his own greater moral acumen, and at the same time conform to his idea that his conclusions can be accepted by all reasonable people alike.

Despite the question marks left by Berkeley's treatise, it is relatively easy to formulate the moral theory underlying *Passive Obedience* and to outline its main practical implications. Let me express the view in a series of questions and answers. What is it that human beings morally ought to do? They ought to conform to God's will. What does God will? As our benevolent creator, God wills the good of humanity. How can we best conform to God's will? We can do this by observing the moral laws of nature. How can we acquire knowledge about the moral laws of nature? We can do this in the light of our reason and conscience. What are the rules that reason and conscience tell us to observe? They are traditional Christian prohibitions, including the prohibition against actively resisting the supreme civil power of the land. (Positive Christian commands like "Honor thy father and thy mother" cannot, interestingly, be added on the list, because obeying them could force us to violate more important prohibitions.)

What does all this mean in practice? What should an individual do to be moral? When all six laws of nature identified by Berkeley are given their appropriate positions, *Passive Obedience* actually lays a foundation for a surprisingly practical morality. The outcome is a layered view which provides a sketch of a minimalist private morality and very specific instructions on public ethics. The latter define the conditions under which we ought to act and refrain from acting in accordance with the laws of the land *and* the ways in which we can challenge them.

The core of private morals can be found in the laws of nature dictating that we should never lie under oath, commit adultery, steal, or commit murder. According to *Passive Obedience*, this list can be continued to comprise all absolute prohibitions that are decreed by "the principles of reason common to all mankind" [2]. The starting point of public ethics is the protection of social and political order. Individuals should never actively defy the supreme power either by doing what it prohibits or by resisting public authorities in the execution of their legal duties. Individuals should also usually act in the ways commanded by the supreme power, but the obligation ceases to bind them when

this would lead to violations of the moral laws of nature. Since people ought to observe the laws of nature, they have, in fact, a moral duty *not* to violate absolute prohibitions at the orders of their civic leaders. If they are in positions of subordinate power, they should also refuse to carry out orders which would violate the moral law. Passive obedience and passive resistance are compatible in Berkeley's system.

The last points are particularly intriguing, because they give credibility and moral fiber to the strict compliance that Berkeley seems to demand of individuals despite his own rational qualifications. Even if the supreme power were in the hands of madmen, usurpers, murderers, or politicians who do not share our views, we would not, even if passively obedient, be powerless. Subjects, including public officers, can render it impossible for immoral people to be in power by simply refusing to carry out orders that would force people to violate the laws of nature.

The fundamental questions concerning the nature and role of conscience and the existence, properties, and authority of God are not answered in *Passive Obedience*. It is possible that Berkeley was aware of this, and that his work on immaterialism and God as the maker and keeper of ideas can be seen as an attempt to provide a theoretical foundation for a scientific and non-nihilist morality. In this model, the function of Berkeley's theoretical philosophy is to fill in the blanks left by the outline of ethics presented in *Passive Obedience.*

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