

Berkeley on Necessary Prejudices: A Note

Wolfgang Breidert

In the *Theory of Vision* (TVV 29, 36, 43), the *Principles* (PHK 73-75), and the *Dialogues* (*Works* 2: 238), Berkeley speaks about a special group of prejudices, namely, the inevitable prejudices connected with visual perception. Berkeley also concedes necessary prejudices in the foundation of elementary arithmetic, and he pleads for an instrumentalist approach to it (PC 758-768, PHK 118-122), but he denounces them in higher mathematics: theory of fluxions or theory of infinitesimals [*A Defence of Free-thinking in Mathematics* (1735), 21]. In *Alciphron* II.10-11 the discussion between the “minute philosopher” Lysicles and Berkeley’s champions, Euphranor and Crito, is concerned with one of the most important aims of the age of Enlightenment, i.e., the demolition of prejudices. Lysicles claims to belong to “the only unprejudiced part of mankind . . . whose constant aim it is to detect and demolish prejudices of all kinds.” Lysicles, speaking as though he had read Nietzsche’s theory of seduction, is convinced that “virtue . . . is a trick of statesmen.” But Euphranor turns the tables by taking into consideration whether an atheistic education could not serve as a prejudice toward atheism. Finally Crito draws the conclusion that the minute philosophers, i.e., the atheists, “have some small prejudice, though not in favour of virtue.”

In the *Discourse Addressed to Magistrates and Men in Authority* (1738), Berkeley gives a definition of prejudice: “Prejudices are notions or opinions which the mind entertains without knowing the grounds and reasons of them, and which are assented to without examination.” In the *Discourse* he is concerned with social education. For the aims of moral education some notions should be “early imbibed, before their grounds and reasons are apprehended or understood.” Berkeley is convinced “that a system of salutary notions is absolutely necessary to the support of every civil constitution.” These early imbibed salutary notions take the place of provisional morals, which are needed for the constitution of law and order as well as in the life of the individual human being in a state. “The first notions which take possession of the minds of men, with regard to duties social, moral, and civil, may therefore be justly styled prejudices.” In this case Berkeley did not use the term “prejudice” with disdain. Quite on the contrary he emphasized that there are and will be inevitable prejudices: “Do what you can, there will still be a bias from education. . . . These notions first instilled have the earliest influence, take the deepest root, and generally are found to give a colour and complexion to the subsequent lives of men, inasmuch as they are in truth the great source of human actions.” To Berkeley it seemed even to be dangerous to abolish all of the prejudices: “But if you strip men of these their notions, or, if you will, prejudices, with regard to modesty, decency, justice, charity, and the like, you will soon find them so many monsters, utterly unfit for human society.” Prejudices about morals, justice, etc. are essential foundations of a society” (*Works* 6: 203-204).

Berkeley stresses that a prejudice may be true, because we have to distinguish between false opinions (i.e., errors) and opinions accepted without reasoning (i.e., prejudices),

which may be true. Even the Euclidean axioms are “early imbibed” and “with most men an object of belief rather than knowledge.”¹ “Certainly, if a notion may be concluded false because [!] it was early imbibed, or because [!] it is with most men an object of belief rather than of knowledge, one may by the same reasoning conclude several propositions of Euclid to be false.” And in fact, we need some axioms without any reasoning for the establishment of state and for every social or scientific community (*Works* 6: 205-206).

Malsch-Sulzbach, Germany
Wolfgang.Breidert@philosophie.uni-karlsruhe.de

¹ In contrast to PC 163.