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The Uneasy Berkeley on the Joys of Heaven¹

Abstract

Berkeley's First Sermon raises an interesting question: why are so few people motivated by the promises of heavenly bliss to lead virtuous lives? He tries to answer this question against the background of Locke's views on human motivation and semantics of words without corresponding ideas, but in his two later and more philosophically relevant manuscripts he rejects the Lockean approach. The Philosophical Commentaries provides a sustained discussion of the role of uneasiness in motivating the agent, with its eventual rejection being caused by a change in the concept of idea. The ensuing fragmentary account of the freedom of the will is published only in the much later Alciphron of 1732, because the second part of the Principles, which was to have treated of the spirit, never appeared. The Manuscript Introduction, on the other hand, comes with an original semantics of religious language, which is specifically applied in order to explain our understanding of the promises of heavenly bliss in the Bible. We try to avoid labelling it emotivism and also hope to correct a minor misconception regarding the semantics in the recent secondary literature.

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