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INTRODUCTION TO *SIRIS*

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In the hope that readers of the NEW PHILOSOPHY would find interest in it, I am here attempting a review of Bishop George Berkeley's *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions*, as its author, inventor of the system of subjective idealism now known as *Berkeleianism*, quaintly called it.

I shall spend most of my space in giving a summary of what seemed to me the author's most interesting or significant ideas, because I think they are more profitable *in se* than any criticism I can contrive of the last important work of this devout and clever contemporary of Swedenborg. Berkeley was born in 1685 and died in 1753.

Published in 1744, when Berkeley was 59, *Siris* is said to have cost its author more thought and research than any other of his works. According to A. C. Fraser, his editor and biographer, this is Berkeley's "last word in speculation."

Siris shows Berkeley's growth toward Platonism, and it advances his theory that a form or an accommodation of Divine Revelation existed with the ancient Greek philosophers. Basically it is a theologico-philosophical work, not concerned with problems of psychology as were his early works. Its approach to science is speculative, not experimental.

Introduced by a panegyric on tar-water as a cure-all, this work caused a controversy between representatives of the medical profession and Berkeley and receivers of his medical innovation. Quite a pamphlet war occurred, and Berkeley was not above fanning the flames of controversy by anonymous letters published in such journals as *The Gentleman's Magazine*.

The good bishop is evidently quite serious about tar water, which is made by mixing water with pine resin. He claims that

the wise ancients used it and dubs it a universal medicine—along with soap, opium and mercury. It cures scurvy, leprosy, gout and colic; it is good for sailors, students, or ladies with the vapors. It is the Hadacol of its age, and even if you are not sick, you can take tar-water to keep you well, and, to borrow the words of the Scotsman concluding his arguments for drinking whisky, “because it canna do ye nae harm.”

THE AIR

According to Bishop Berkeley, air is a mixture of ether and matter particles, that is, of wet and dry bodies volatized and rendered elastic by fire. Air is of a middle nature between ethereal fire and other things. “Whatever perspires, corrupts, or exhales, impregnates the air, which being acted upon by the solar fire, produceth within itself all sorts of chemical operations, dispensing again those salts and spirits in new generations which it had received from putrefaction” (Paragraph 137).

Air is the first link in the great chain of being, Berkeley says, and quotes “Mr. Boyle” as authority for the claim that “exhausted ores of tin and iron, being exposed to the air, become again impregnated with metal” (no. 143). There is some latent, vivifying spirit in air—all life needs it.

FIRE OR AETHER

Fire seems the most elastic and expansive of all bodies . . . in air we conceive two parts, “the one more gross, the other a fine, subtle spirit.” Ether is a pure invisible fire. Heat is a modification of motion in the particles of bodies.

The phenomena and effects do plainly show that there is a spirit that moves and a mind that presides. This mind or Providence, Plutarch said, was thought to be in the world what the soul is in man (no. 153).

The order and course of things, and the experiments we daily make, show that there is a mind that governs and actuates this mundane system as the proper real agent or cause, and that the inferior instrumental cause is pure ether, fire, or the substance of light which is applied and determined by an Infinite Mind in the Macrocosm or universe with unlimited power and according to

stated rules—as it is in the microcosm with limited power and skill by the human mind (no. 154).

Mind presides over both human body and the universe. The human body has the animal spirit as its immediate cause of motion. The mundane system has pure elementary fire as *its* spirit. Motion is to be called a *passion* or effect, as only one Prime Mover exists (no. 161).

Pure ether or fire has parts. It is also the origin of odors, flavors, colors (no. 162).

Heraclitus' doctrine of fire was accepted by the Pythagorians as the animal spirit. Plato also suggested the possibility of the animal spirit. According to the Peripatetics, a fiery ethereal substance existed containing the forms of all inferior beings. Aristotle thought the vital heat of living bodies divine—from pure ether, on which he supposed the Deity to act. The Platonists held that the intellect is in the soul, and the soul is in an ethereal vehicle. The Stoics said that the world was an animal, in which the mind is Providence, and that fire and mind were the governing principles of the world. Hippocrates spoke of a "strong, invisible fire that rules all things without noise." Herein reside soul, mind, motion—the government of all things. Heat is "something immortal." (no. 174)

Theophrastus, in *De Igne*, says that heat is cause, and that fire is an omnipresent principle in varied forms.

In the realm of Eastern philosophy we find a fiery intellectual spirit. The engine of God is a fiery ether. The magi hold that light is the Body of God, as truth is the Soul of God. The Chaldees posit an intellectual fire. In the Psalms we read, "Thou art clothed with light as by a garment," and, "who maketh His ministers a flaming fire." The Divine was supposed to be omnipresent in fire, animating and ordering. The Chinese too had fire connected with their theology, and the Celtic Beltien rites were a form of fire worship. Berkeley's comment is: "The cleansing quality, the light and heat of fire, are natural symbols of purity, knowledge and power; or, if I may so say, the things themselves, so far as they are perceptible to our senses, or in the same sense as motion, are said to be action" (no. 182).

Boerhaave, Neuiwentyt and others distinguish between a pure elementary invisible fire, and that used for culinary purposes, attended by smoke and flames. "This former fire seems the

source of all the operations in Nature; without it naught vegetates or putrifies, lives or moves or ferments, or is dissolved or compounded or altered. Were it not for this, the whole world would be one great stupid inanimate mass. Fire dissolves all other bodies; fire, air, water are all three menstruums, but the two last seem to derive all their force and activity from the first. Oil is resolved into water, earth, and salt. The fire, or viriculum, escapes, disappears, but is not destroyed (no. 192). Solar fire or light adds weight to oil—but Berkeley adds that this claim has been exploded. Fire without burning is an ingredient in many things, as is water without wetting [as in potatoes]. Gold has been made from mercury by introducing light into its pores (no. 194)! Nothing flames but oil, and sulfur with water, salt and earth compose oil. Therefore [?] fire enclosed attracts fire. Air is necessary to both life and flame—air loseth in the lungs the power of feeding flame. Hence the same thing in the air contributes to the life of flame (no. 201).

Some peculiar points about ether: Particles of ether fly asunder with the greatest force; therefore, when united they must attract each other with the greatest force (no. 202). Acid and sulfur at bottom are fire. Vital flame or spirit seemeth to be set free and carried off by the superior attraction of a subtle and pure flame. Hence lightning kills animals and makes flat spiritous liquor. The soul is nourished by the ether through the air.

LIGHT

The next link after fire in the "Chain of Philosophical Reflexions" is *Light*. Light is said to be incorporeal: it moves not instantaneously; it is capable of condensation, rarification and collision; it can be mixed with other bodies, increasing their weight. Light is corporeal (no. 206). According to the Platonists, there is an occult light within sunlight (no. 210). Newton's ether is more subtle and swift than light: it has gravity, density and electricity; it is the cause of the natural motions of the earth. Vibration of ether is light, heat (no. 225).

It does not seem necessary to suppose any medium more active and subtle than light or fire. Light or fire seems the same as ether; and light moving C. 10,000,000 miles a minute, why conceive another medium of still smaller and more movable parts?

(no. 226). As the forms of things have their natural existence in the intellect, so it should seem that the seminal principles have their natural existence in the light.

Aristotle says that the elements are not animated, yet Berkeley asks why they might not be animated through the ether. Berkeley here is seen, like Plato, to recognize mind in all motion. The efficient and final causes of motion are not mechanical. "Certainly," quips Berkeley (no. 232), "if the explaining a phenomenon be to assign its proper efficient and final cause, the mechanical philosophers never explained anything." Then he criticizes the "corpuscular philosophers" for mechanistic explanations. "Nothing could be more vain and imaginary than to suppose with Descartes that merely form [a circular motion's] being impressed by the Supreme Agent, the whole world might be produced from the laws of motion" [Descartes's vortices] (no. 233). Nor will preestablished harmony solve the problem of creation (no. 239).

At this point Berkeley suggests control of the universe by the Creator through light of different properties—working through light as means, but not in a mechanical way (nos. 238–240). All agents, he adds, are incorporeal (no. 248). Force is to the soul what extension is to the body. There is a kind of divinity in natural law.

APPEARANCES

"For all phenomena are . . . appearances in the soul or mind; and it hath never been explained, nor can it be explained, how external bodies, figures and motions should produce an appearance in the mind (no. 251).¹

"As the natural connexion of signs with things signified is regular and constant, it forms a sort of rational discourse," says Berkeley. "The phenomena of nature which strike on the senses and are understood by the mind do form a most coherent, enter-

¹ Man never penetrates to reality, but only to appearances closer to reality. E.G.—The appearance to man must ever be that life is from himself. See article in *NEW CHURCH LIFE*, July, 1938, by the Rev. Norman Reuter. Appearances are forms and vessels in which reality may dwell. We are reminded here of Bacon's *idols*, and Plato's *cave*, classic images of the truth that human life must remain in appearances, because of man's finite limitations.

taining, and instructive discourse, and to effect this, they are conducted, adjusted, and ranged by the greatest wisdom."

In this connection one thinks of all that is said of *correspondences* in the Writings, and of the teaching that nature is a theater representative of the Divine.

Berkeley then criticizes Dr. Cudworth, who holds that nature is reason "immersed and fuddled" into matter. (N. B. Berkeley here does not insist on his denial of the objective existence of matter.) Natural productions are not all equally perfect. "What is done by rule must proceed from something that understands the rule" (no. 257).

The hidden force that unites, adjusts, and causes all things to hang together and move in harmony, which Orpheus and Empedocles styled *Love*, is no blind principle, but acts with intellect (no. 259). Socrates said that *mind* is cause sufficient for the universe. The instrument is not a help to the Creator, but only a *sign* to the creature. Excesses, defects and contrary qualities conspire to the beauty and harmony of the whole.²

The principles of science are neither objects of sense nor imagination; intellect and reason alone are guides to truth. This is the Platonic view. After rendering a tribute to the scientific learning of the ancients, Berkeley then states that the Pythagoreans and Platonists "had a notion of the true system of the world." In the ancient view, the Infinite Mind governed all; mind, soul, and spirit truly and *really* exist, and bodies exist only in a secondary and dependent sense (no. 266).

Greek ideas about the soul and the Divine creativity were derived from the Egyptian *via* Iamblicus. Fate and Providence are equated, if we understand what the Ancients meant by fate—"not a blind, headlong, unintelligent principle, but an orderly settled course of things, conducted by a wise and provident Mind." A spirit can begin, alter, or determine motion; that is not so of the body. There is an intellectual awakening as we grow up which makes us see *sense-life* as only a phantom existence. Then true sight sees mind containing and acting all, the source of all unity, harmony, order and stability. Plato and Aristotle con-

² Compare, here, the statement of the American philosopher, Hocking, that the truth is not what one or another sees, but is the *whole*, or what *all* see.

sidered God as abstracted or distinct from the natural world. But the Egyptians considered God and nature as one whole. "Whoever considers a parcel of rude savages left to themselves, how they are sunk and swallowed up in sense and prejudice, and how unqualified by their natural force to emerge from this state, will be apt to think that the first spark of philosophy was derived from heaven." (This idea strikes close to the mark, in view of the teachings of the Writings about the close relationship between the most ancients and the spiritual world; also the teaching that Socrates had a daemon, and Aristotle is described as having been obedient to influx.)

DOCTRINE FROM THE ANCIENTS

The Egyptians and Greeks posited a fallen human nature. In the great chain of being the meanest things are connected with the highest . . . therefore . . . "a low sensual reader [may] from mere love of the animal life, find himself drawn on, surprised, and betrayed into some curiosity concerning the intellectual."

Aristotle held the mind to be a *tabula rasa*, without innate ideas. Plato held that the mind comes stocked with original ideas such as beauty, being, goodness, etc., which are aroused or awakened only by the sense-life. Aristotle spoke of forms in the soul, and Themistius held that soul imparted form to matter. There are some expressions in Aristotle which seem to favor the absolute existence of corporeal things. Aristotle posits a two-fold existence—potential and actual—but there is no sensible thing without perception. It was the Platonic belief that human souls descended from above, and were stunned, stupefied and intoxicated by this descent and immersion into animal nature. Hence learning seems in effect reminiscence.

Matter, at the opposite end of the scale from *esse*, can scarcely be said to be anything *in se*. Neither Plato nor Aristotle by matter understood corporeal substance. The Egyptians, says Iamblichus, held that God produced matter by a separation from all substance, essence, or being. (Is this far from saying that the Divine produced finite substance by successive finitions?) That matter is actually naught, but potentially all things, is the doctrine of Aristotle, Theophrastus, and all the ancient Peripatetics. "The force that produces, the intellect that orders, the goodness that

perfects all things, is the Supreme Being." Although the ancients speak of God as mixing with or pervading all nature and all the elements, yet this must be explained by force and not by extension (no. 329).

Plato said that in the contemplation of God we found a proper means to know our own soul. None of the ancients was an atheist.

The idea of a Trinity in the Godhead is to be found in the writings of many old heathen philosophers—or a notion of three Divine hypostases.

"In the tenth book of the *Arcane*, or Divine Wisdom of the Egyptians, we are taught that the Supreme Being is not the [direct] cause of any created thing; but that he produced . . . the Word; and that all created beings were made by the Word, which is accordingly styled the cause of all causes: and that this was also the doctrine of the Chaldeans."

Bishop Berkeley kicks up his heels a bit near the end of his disquisition. Here are a few of his colorful remarks: "Plato's writings are the touchstone of a hasty and shallow mind . . . many an empty head is shook at Aristotle and Plato as well as at Scripture."

"The dry and barbarous lucubrations of the schoolmen."

"He who hath not much meditated upon God, the human mind, and the Summum Bonum may possibly make a thriving earthworm, but will most indubitably make a sorry patriot and a sorry statesman."

And Berkeley's own reason for his pursuit of philosophy is well expressed in no. 330: "These disquisitions will probably seem dry and useless to such readers as are accustomed to consider only sensible objects. The employment of the mind on things purely intellectual is to most men irksome; whereas the sensitive powers, by constant use, acquire strength. Hence the objects of sense more forcibly affect us, and are too often counted the chief good. For these things men fight, cheat, and scramble.

"Therefore, in order to tame mankind and introduce a sense of virtue, the best human means is to exercise their understanding, to give them a glimpse of another world, superior to the sensible, and while they take pains to cherish and maintain the animal life, to teach them not to neglect the intellectual."

And in the last paragraph of *Siris*: *Truth is the cry of all, but the game of few.*

JAEGER AND BERKELEY

I am inclined to follow this partial presentation of *Siris* with some comments based upon Werner Jaeger's *Theology of The Early Greek Philosophers*. The relation of Jaeger's findings to Berkeley's discussion of Ancient thought will be apparent.

1. Augustine proceeds, in the Sixth Book of *The City of God*, to expound the Christian doctrine of the one God, and sets out to demonstrate its thorough accordance with the deepest insights of the Greek Philosophers—after attacking Greek paganism in the first five books. Augustine here affords us a view of Christian theology as confirming and rounding out, *not* abrogating, the fundamental truths of pre-Christian thought.

2. For Augustine and other Neo-Platonists of his century, Plato was the one commanding figure. During the Middle Ages, this position was gradually usurped by Aristotle, and it is only since the Renaissance that Plato has again been his serious competitor.

3. The continuity of the ancient Greek tradition was never entirely broken, because study of the ancient Greek philosophers kept it alive. That same philosophy, as *theologia naturalis*, served as the basis for the *theologia supernaturalis* of Christianity.

4. God is essentially universal, and must be worshipped universally: This concept was familiar to the ancients, as well as to Augustine and Christianity.

5. Greek philosophy is genuine natural theology because it is based on rational insight into the nature of reality itself. The theologies of myth and state (mentioned by Varro) on the contrary, have nothing to do with nature, but are mere artificial conventions, entirely man-made.

6. Theology means approach to God (or gods) by means of the Logos. To the Greeks, God became a problem. Plato was the first to use the word "theology."

7. Philosophical assertions about the Divine are to be found in pre-Platonic thinkers from the very first. These seem significant as to the early relationship of religion and philosophy.

8. The problem of the Divine occupies a much larger place in the speculations of the early natural philosophers than Aristotle

indicates in his *Metaphysics*. These thinkers did not separate their speculations about the Divine from their science. Physicists from Thales to Anaxagoras were first theologians, as Cicero did point out.

9. We should be wary of imposing our "most unfortunate lack of integration in human life, characteristic of our modern civilization" upon former ages in our interpretations of their thought.

10. The philosophical theology of the early Greek thinkers marks the starting point of their gradually developing universal theology.

11. Of Pre-Socratic philosophy and the Christian tradition: "I . . . am deeply impressed by the continuity of the fundamental forms of thought and expression which triumphantly bridges the chasm between these antithetic periods of the human mind and integrates them into one universal civilization" (Jaeger).

12. In Hesiod's *Theogony* (C. 800 B.C.), the marriage of heaven and earth is presided over by Eros.

THE WRITINGS

Here follow some passages from the Writings which cast illumination over the common themes noted in ancient Eastern thought, early Greek philosophers, later Greek and early Christian ideas. It is evident that the science of correspondences provides the master-key to the ancient puzzle.

"How much the ancients surpassed the moderns in intelligence can be seen from the fact that they knew to what things in heaven many things in the world correspond, and consequently what they signify; and this was known not only to those of the church, but also to those out of the church, as for instance to the inhabitants of Greece, the most ancient of whom described things by significatives which at this day are called fabulous because wholly unknown. That the ancient Sophi were in the knowledge of such things is evident from the fact that they described the origin of intelligence and wisdom by a winged horse which they called Pegasus, who with his hoof broke open a fountain, at which were nine virgins, and this upon a hill; for they knew that by a 'horse' was signified the intellectual, by his 'wings' the spiritual, by 'hoofs' truth of the ultimate degree, where is the origin of intelligence, by 'virgins' the sciences, by a 'hill' unanimity, and in the spiritual

sense, charity. So with everything else. But such things at this day are among the things that have been lost" (AC 7729: 8).

"And it is wonderful that in so learned a world as in Europe above all the rest, where they have the Word, in every particular of which there is an internal sense, the very knowledge of this sense is wanting; when yet this knowledge existed among the ancients in Chaldea, in Assyria, in Egypt, in Arabia, and thence in Greece, in whose books, emblems, and hieroglyphics such things are still to be met with. But the reason why such knowledge has perished is that there is no faith that the spiritual is anything" (AC 9011e).

"I have been instructed that the men of the most Ancient Church [the church before the Flood] were of a genius so heavenly that they spoke with angels of heaven, and that they were able to speak with them by means of correspondences. From this the state of their wisdom was rendered such that whatever they saw in this world they thought not only in a natural way, but spiritually also at the same time, so that they thought unitedly with angels. I have been instructed besides that Enoch (of whom mention is made in Genesis v: 21-24), together with his associates, collected correspondences from the lips of those men of the Most Ancient Church, and transmitted the knowledge of them to posterity, and that in consequence of this the science of correspondences was not only known, but was also cultivated in many kingdoms of Asia, especially in the land of Canaan, in Egypt, Assyria, Chaldea, Syria, Arabia, and also in Tyre, Sidon, and Nineveh; and that it was carried over from places on the sea-coast there into Greece; but there it was turned into fabulous stories as is evident from the earliest writers of that country" (SS 21).

"But when in process of time the representative things of the church, which were correspondences, were converted into things idolatrous and also into magic, then of the Lord's Divine Providence the knowledge of correspondences was gradually blotted out of remembrance, and among the Israelitish and Jewish people was altogether lost and annihilated. The worship of that nation did indeed consist exclusively of correspondences and was consequently representative of heavenly things; but still they did not know what anything of it signified, for they were utterly natural men, and therefore were neither willing nor able to know anything

about spiritual things, nor consequently about correspondences” (SS 22).

“The ancients, possessing a knowledge of correspondences, made for themselves images that corresponded to heavenly things, and delighted in them because they signified things such as belong to heaven, and therefore to the church. They therefore set them not only in their temples, but also in their houses, not to be worshiped, but to call to remembrance the heavenly things they signified. . . . Consequently in Egypt and elsewhere there were images of calves, oxen, serpents, also of children, old men, maidens; because calves and oxen signified affections and powers of the natural man; serpents, the sagacity of the sensuous man; children, innocence and charity; old men, wisdom; and maidens, affections of truth; and so on. When the knowledge of correspondences had been blotted out of remembrance, their descendants began to worship as holy, and at last as deities, the images and emblems set up by the ancients, because they stood in and about their temples” (SS 23).

THE TREATISE ON THE INFINITE

W. CAIRNS HENDERSON

On May 10, 1733, Swedenborg left Stockholm to see through the press his *Opera Philosophica et Mineralia*, the first volume of which is the *Principia*. The printing of that massive work, at Dresden and Leipzig, was finished in April, 1734; and early in that year he issued from the same press the treatise *Prodromus Philosophiae Ratiocinantis de Infinito, et Causa Finali Creationis; deque Mechanismo Operationis Animae et Corporis*—*Outlines of a Philosophical Argument on the Infinite and the Final Cause of Creation, and on the Mechanism of the Operation of Soul and Body*. As Swedenborg had not mentioned this treatise in his petition to the King for leave of absence to publish the major work, it may be concluded that he did not then have it in mind. Indeed the first draft seems to have been written late in 1733, within a single month. And there is evidence that it was written after the *Principia*, for in it the reader is referred to that work,