The Ancient Roots of Berkeley’s Immaterialist Idealism

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This being so, no one should still be cornered by the question of the matter and how and whence it arose. You can hear people saying things like this: if God is matterless, where does matter come from? How can quantity come from non-quantity, the visible from the invisible, something with limited bulk and size from what lacks magnitude and limits? And so also for the other characteristics seen in matter: how or whence where they produced by one who had nothing of the kind in his own nature?

Gregory of Nyssa, *Explicatio apologetica in Hexaemeron*, Patrologiae Graecae 44, 69B-C.

By his wise and powerful will, being capable of everything, he established for the creation of things all the things through which matter is constituted (di’hôn synistatai): light, heavy, dense, rare soft, resistant, fluid, dry, cold, hot, colour, shape, outline, extension. All of these are in themselves thoughts (ennoiai) and bare concepts (noêmata); none is matter on its own. But when they combine/run together (syndramein), they turn into matter (hylê ginetai).

G. of Nyssa, *Hexameron*, PG 44, col 69B-C.

The corporeal creation is thought of in terms of properties which have nothing in common with the divine. And in particular it produces this great difficulty for reason (logos), if one cannot see how the visible comes from the invisible, the solid and resistant from the intangible, the limited from the unlimited, or what is in every way circumscribed by quantitatively conceived proportions from what lacks quantity and magnitude, and so on for everything which we grasp as connected with corporeal nature. But we can say this much on the subject: none of the things we think of as
connected with body is on its own a body—not shape, not colour, not weight, not extension, not size, nor any other of the things we think of as qualities (poiotēs). Each of these is an idea (logos), but their combination/concurrence (syndromê) and union with each other turns into a body (sôma ginetai). So, since the qualities which fill out (sumplèrōmatikos) the body are grasped by the mind and not by sense perception, and the divine is intelligent, what trouble is it for the intelligible (noētos) being to create the concepts (noêmata) whose combination (syndromê) with each other produces corporeal nature for us?


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Take away black, cold, weight, density, the qualities which concern taste, in one word all these which we see in it, and the substance vanishes.

Basil the Great, ‘The Hexaemeron,’ homily 1, §8, p. 56, in De Spiritu Sancto etc.

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There is an opinion about matter which seems not irrelevant to what we are investigating. It is that matter arises from (hypostēnai ek) the intelligible (noētos) and immaterial. For we shall find all matter to be composed of (synestanai ek) qualities (poiotēs), and if it were stripped bare of these on its own, it could in no way be grasped in idea (logos). Yet each type of quality is separated in idea (logos) from the substratum (hupokeimenon), and an idea (logos) is an intelligible not a corporeal way of looking (theôria) at things. Thus, let an animal or a log be presented for us to consider, or anything else which has a corporeal constitution. By a process of mental division we recognize many things connected with the substratum, and the idea (logos) of each of them is not mixed up with the other things we are considering at the same time. For the ideas (logoi) of colour and of weight are different, and so again are those of quantity and of distinctive tactile quality (idiotēs). Thus softness and two-cubit length and the other things predicated are not conflated with each other, nor with the body, in our idea of them (kata ton logon). For the explanatory formula (hermēneutikos horos) envisaged for each of these, is quite individual (idios) according to what it is, and has nothing in common with any of the other qualities which we connect with the substratum. If, then, colour is intelligible and so is resistance and quantity and the other such distinctive (idiomata) properties, and if upon each of these being removed from the substratum, the whole idea (logos) of body would be removed: what follows? If we find the absence of these things causes the dissolution of body, we must suppose their
combination (syndromē) is what generates material nature. For a thing is not a body if it lacks colour, shape, resistance, extension, weight and the other distinctive properties, and each of these properties is not body, but is found to be something else, when taken separately. Conversely, then, when these properties combine (syndramein) they produce material reality. Now, if the conception (katanoēsis) of these distinctive properties is intelligible (noētos), and the divine is intelligible in its nature, it is not strange that these intellectual (noeros) origins for the creations of bodies should arise from an incorporeal nature, with the intelligible nature establishing the intelligible properties, whose combination (syndromē) brings material nature to birth.


Neither Plato nor Aristotle, by matter ὕλη understood corporeal substance, whatever the moderns may understand by that word. To them certainly it signified no positive actual being. Aristotle describes it as made up of negatives, having neither quantity, nor quality, nor essence. And not only the Platonists and Pythagoreans, but also the Peripatetics themselves declare it to be known neither by sense, nor by any direct and just reasoning, but only by some spurious or adulterine method, as hath been observed before. Simon Portius, a famous Peripatetic of the sixteenth century, denies it to be any substance at all, for, said, Nequit per se subsistére, quia sequerétur, id quod non est in actu esse in actu. If Jamblichus may be credited, the Egyptians supposed matter so far from including aught of substance or essence that, according to them, God produced it by a separation from all substance, essence, or being, ἀπὸ οὐσίωτητος ἀποχισθέισης ὑλότητος. That matter is actually nothing, but potentially all things, is the doctrine of Aristotle, Theophrastus, and all the ancient Peripatetics.