

blackwell great minds

# berkeley

margaret atherton



WILEY Blackwell

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**blackwell great minds**

# **berkeley**

Margaret Atherton

**WILEY Blackwell**



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For Toby, without which...



# **preface**

## **Reading Berkeley**

George Berkeley wrote the books we will be concerned with in the early years of the eighteenth century. He wrote for an early eighteenth-century audience and not for a twenty-first-century audience. This means, as historians of philosophy are fond of pointing out, that there will be special challenges to readers of the twenty-first century. We cannot hope to just pick up a work of Berkeley's and read it through with understanding. The books Berkeley had been reading, against which he was measuring his own ideas, are not the same as the books being read now, the very nature of philosophy, what counts as philosophy, was different in the early eighteenth century than is the case today, and even the vocabulary in which Berkeley expressed his ideas is different from the way in which we use similar words today. And of course, the early eighteenth century presented a cultural milieu and political and social demands quite different from our own. All these and more represent significant challenges to the contemporary reader and so will have to be addressed in a book like this one that seeks to help a modern reader to understand historical work.

Berkeley himself, however, seemed to think that his work presented challenges to any reader, even one of his own time, thoroughly immersed in the culture existing when the books were written. In each of his two major works, Berkeley wrote prefaces in which he issued requests to his readers to help them overcome what he saw as difficulties peculiar to the books they will be reading. In the Preface to the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley urged his readers to impartially consider the truth of what he had written. In order to help them in this endeavor, he told his readers:

I make it my request that the reader suspend his judgment, till he has once *at least*, read the whole through with that degree of attention and thought which the subject matter shall seem to deserve.

(PHK, Preface, p. 23)

Berkeley's advice is excellent. It is always a good idea to read a piece of writing through from beginning to end before rushing to judgment. But Berkeley also seems to think that there are special problems attached to reading a piece of philosophy such as the one he has written. Reading philosophy is hard. It is never the case that you can pick up a work of philosophy and read it through hastily and expect to understand it. Berkeley is aware that his work contains claims that are perhaps unusual and so will be very easily misunderstood. The remedy is to go slow, to pay attention to actual conclusions drawn, rather than what might immediately appear to follow, to see where the arguments lead and, in general, to read painstakingly and thoughtfully.

While Berkeley removed this Preface from later editions of the *Principles*, he did not back

off his faith in the efficacy of the advice it contained, for he added a Preface to later editions of *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* giving similar, if more elaborate advice.

It remains, that I desire the reader to withhold his censure of these Dialogues, till he has read them through. Otherwise, he may lay them aside in a mistake of their design, or on account of difficulties or objections which he would find answered in the sequel. A treatise of this nature would require to be once read over coherently, in order to comprehend its design, the proofs, solution of difficulties, and the connexion and disposition of its parts. If it be thought to deserve a second reading; this I imagine, will make the entire scheme very plain: especially, if recourse be had to an Essay I wrote, some years since, upon *vision*, and the Treatise concerning the *Principles of Human Knowledge*. Wherein divers notions are further pursued, or placed in different lights, and other points handled, which naturally tend to confirm and illustrate them.

(3D, Preface, p. 169)

Again, Berkeley is giving excellent advice to any reader. Naturally, no one likes to think that they are misunderstanding or misinterpreting what they read. Berkeley is saying that the procedure you need to follow in order to ensure that this is the case is, first, read the work through from beginning to end, so that you understand its structure, where the various proofs and arguments are heading, so that you can pin down exactly what claims are required, and how objections might be answered. Then when you have an understanding of the structure of the argument, read it through again a second time, so that you can work your way through what confusions remain. Finally, pay attention to other works written by the same author, which will augment your understanding or correct remaining misunderstandings.

Excellent advice, as I have said. Inasmuch as it is advice Berkeley himself provides to his readers, it would seem that any reader of Berkeley, in justice to the author, ought to heed this advice. Such advice, moreover, might be particularly helpful as an antidote to our modern culture, which tends to think in article-length chunks and by means of easily regimented arguments. It can be a little too tempting to pull out easily named pieces of argument and discuss them without attention to the context in which they appear, and many contemporary philosophers writing on Berkeley have fallen prey to this temptation. Berkeley addresses his advice to readers, however, and not to critics or expositors like myself, and it is not obvious how critics and authors of books like this one should follow his advice. It would seem that the most natural way to help readers to read Berkeley's work in the way in which he wished them to do would be to write traditional commentaries, step-by-step discussions of what appears in his texts, elucidating each move that he makes in the service of his overall argument. Surely, this is what he would want us to do? The last part of his advice in *Three Dialogues*, to take into account other books he has written, complicates things for the would-be commentator, however. This is because the theory laid out in both *Principles* and *Three Dialogues* is pretty much the same theory, but the argument structure of each book is quite different. Philosophers writing about Berkeley therefore have a choice of pulling together a single theory, calling upon what is written in each book to explain that theory, in which case they will not be respecting the different argument structures, or they can give pride of place

to each argument in turn, at the cost of repetition. Most philosophers have chosen the first approach, but, in light of the great store Berkeley set in reading his books sequentially from beginning to end and paying attention to the argument, I have chosen the second approach for this book. I have tried to abide by his advice and, in discussing his work, after a preliminary chapter on some issues in *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*<sup>1</sup> to go through, first, the *Principles* and then *Three Dialogues* in commentary form. One advantage to this approach is that I have been able to pay attention to the ways in which the books supplement and not just repeat one another. More importantly however, what I have written here is the result of the task I set myself, to do a slow read through each book, in which I did not write about a paragraph until I was clear in my mind how that paragraph followed from the preceding one, and how it fit into the prevailing goals of the section of writing I was working on. I will leave it to the reader to decide how useful the result is, but I do want to say that, for myself, I found such a slow read to be both interesting and illuminating. Passages I had thought I understood for years revealed themselves to be saying something different. For, while Berkeley recommends two readings, in the case of complex texts like his, there is always something new to discover, no matter how many times you have read them. While I hope others will find interesting and illuminating the interpretation that my slow reading process allowed me to come up with, the goal I am most dedicated to is that of encouraging readers of Berkeley and others to follow his advice for doing good reading. Take it as a whole, take it slow, never jump to conclusions, and always be thoughtful.

## note

<sup>1</sup> Those readers interested in a commentary on the *New Theory* can consult my *Berkeley's Revolution in Vision* (Cornell University Press, 1990).

## **acknowledgments**

I have been privileged to be able to present my ideas about Berkeley to numerous departments and conferences and I am grateful to the audiences at all these places for their helpful responses. I am especially grateful to those Berkeley scholars I have frequently encountered over the years and from whom I have received much that is valuable, particularly Ken Winkler, Martha Bolton, Lisa Downing, George Pappas, Richard Glauser, and Sam Rickless. I am equally grateful to them for their illuminating publications, and to all those, far too numerous to mention, whose publications have taught me a great deal. I have been teaching seminars on Berkeley at UWM for a long time, and I cannot sufficiently express my pleasure at being able to work through Berkeley's texts with so many groups of talented students. Thanks, all. And finally and especially, my gratitude to Bob Schwartz.

# abbreviations

## Berkeley

### **Correspondence**

*The Correspondence of George Berkeley*, edited by Marc A. Hight (Cambridge University Press, 2013)

### **NTV**

*An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*

### **PC**

*Philosophical Commentaries*

### **PHK**

*A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*

### **3D**

*Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*

### **TVV**

*The Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained*

### **Works**

All quotations from *The Works of George Berkeley Bishop of Cloyne*, edited by A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop (Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1948–1957)

## Descartes

### **Optics**

*Dioptrics*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge University Press, 1985)

## Locke

### **ECHU**

*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

## Malebranche

### **ST**

*Search After Truth*, translated by Thomas Lennon (Ohio State University Press, 1980)

# chapter 1

## berkeley's life and work

George Berkeley was born on 12 March 1685 in Ireland, in or near Kilkenny. His father, William, came from an English Staffordshire family, and has been described as a gentleman farmer, and his mother, although this is not certain, may have been an Elizabeth Southerne, daughter of a Dublin brewer. This seems to leave the possibilities for his nationality somewhat open, but there is no doubt that Berkeley did, in fact, identify Ireland as his nation. In his early notebooks, the *Philosophical Commentaries*, he refers to Isaac Newton as being of a “neighbouring nation” and more than once uses the phrase “we Irish.” However, the “we” with whom Berkeley identified was, most likely, a severely limited group, namely, the Protestant upper class who were at that time ruling Ireland and who found the mercantile restrictions imposed by the English Parliament irksome.<sup>1</sup> Much later, writing in *The Querist*, Berkeley illustrates the ambiguous nature of his “we.” There, wanting to establish the common interests of England and Ireland, he asks: “Whether we are not as much *Englishmen* as the children of old Romans, born in Britain, are still Romans?” (Works, VI, 112) Berkeley's understanding of his national identity was that of a member of a particular class in a particular context. Thus, in assessing the background against which Berkeley wrote his various works, it is necessary to recognize the specific context in which he grew up as a member of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland. But it is equally important to recognize the very cosmopolitan life enjoyed by a member of what was a highly cosmopolitan milieu.

Berkeley's life divides itself up neatly into three periods. From his birth in 1685 to 1713, when he moved to London, Berkeley's life is centered in Ireland. In the middle period, 1713–1734, his life is geographically much more varied. Although he did return occasionally to Dublin, for the most part Berkeley either lived in London, or traveled remarkably widely, either on the European continent, or most notably to North America, where he lived for three years in Newport, Rhode Island. For the last period of his life, 1734–1753, Berkeley returned to Ireland, living chiefly at the site of his bishopric, in Cloyne. At the very end of his life, however, he and his family left Ireland to go to Oxford to be near his son, George, who was studying there. It was in Oxford that Berkeley died, and is the place where he is buried. In each of these periods, Berkeley led the life of a Man of Letters, writing and publishing frequently, although, as will be seen, in each of these periods. Berkeley typified a different style in which one could be a Man of Letters in the eighteenth century.

### 1685–1713

Berkeley's education began in Kilkenny, at the Duke of Ormonde's school, later and to this day called Kilkenny College, and termed by A.A. Luce, the “Eton of Ireland.”<sup>2</sup> At the age of 15, he entered Trinity College, Dublin, an institution with which he was to be connected for much of the first part of his life. The curriculum there was quite standard for its time; Luce

says that Berkeley studied mathematics, logic, philosophy, and languages, especially Latin and Greek, and in Berkeley's case, French and Hebrew. The curriculum, if standard, was not as stultifying as William Molyneux, Locke's friend, found it a generation earlier, when philosophy instruction was dominated by Aristotelian commentaries and disputations. Thanks to the efforts of men like Molyneux, works of recent origin such as Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* formed part of the curriculum. Many of those associated with Trinity, starting with Molyneux himself, who represented Trinity in Parliament, Provosts, such as St George Ashe, later bishop of Clogher, and Peter Browne, as well as men like William King, archbishop of Dublin, a former fellow of Trinity and an official visitor for Trinity, were energetic contributors to current debate. Berkeley therefore came of age at a time of rich intellectual activity.

Berkeley took his BA in 1704 and, while waiting for a fellowship vacancy, worked on some mathematical issues, the results of which he published in 1707 as *Arithmetica* and *Miscellanea Mathematica*. He was a successful competitor for a fellowship in 1707 and took his MA a month later. He was ordained deacon in 1709 and priest in 1710. While he undertook various tasks in the college, including librarian, junior dean, Greek lecturer, divinity lecturer, senior proctor, and Hebrew lecturer, he also devoted time to the preparation of the works that have subsequently secured his reputation. We can trace the course of Berkeley's research in connection with these works through notebooks that he kept beginning in 1707.<sup>3</sup> While these notebooks have proved endlessly fascinating to Berkeley scholars, one of the most concrete pieces of information they provide is a good account of the reading Berkeley was doing during this period that he was preparing his major works. One clear fact that emerges was that Berkeley was reading widely during the time he was working with his notebooks. We find some 22 names mentioned between one and three times. These comprise a varied group that include those now classified as philosophers, and also mathematicians and physicists, but, with very few exceptions, limited to works written within the past 50–100 years.<sup>4</sup> Berkeley was not in any serious sense framing his work against a wider historical context but instead restricting his attention to his contemporaries and their immediate predecessors. This general impression is further supported when we turn our attention to those thinkers Berkeley mentioned a significant number of times. By far the greatest number of references are to John Locke. At 71 references, there are four times as many references to Locke than to any other person. The nearest contenders are: Descartes and Cartesianism with 16 references, Isaac Newton also at 16, Malebranche with 15, and Hobbes with 13. What emerges is that the influences on Berkeley were many and even those who were most important to Berkeley were encountered as part of a wider group of thinkers. It would be a mistake to think of Berkeley as reacting to only one thinker, even one as important to him as Locke.

With the aid of this extensive reading, Berkeley produced his three major works. In 1709, he published his first significant work, *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, rapidly followed in 1710 by *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, originally designed as Part I of what was intended to be a much longer work. Instead of completing this project immediately, Berkeley reworked and extended the material in the *Principles* in a book



that he hoped would make his ideas easier to understand and accept, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*.<sup>5</sup> Berkeley took this with him in manuscript when he traveled to London and had it published there in 1713. These three volumes, the ones that will be taking up our attention here, form the basis of Berkeley's philosophical reputation to this day, and consist, first, of an account of the nature of vision, followed by two different versions of Berkeley's characteristic immaterialism.

The sole remaining work from Berkeley's Trinity period was a pamphlet, *Passive Obedience*, published in 1712, based on some sermons preached that year. In *Passive Obedience*, Berkeley argues that the negative duty not to rebel against legitimate authority ought to be regarded as a moral law, inasmuch as such a duty can be shown to have a necessary connection with the universal wellbeing of mankind, the goal we can take God to have established for all our actions. Such a duty should be understood to be exceptionless. Just as God establishes the laws of nature to be exceptionless, since it is of greater benefit that these laws hold universally, even if, in some immediate instance their consequence be damaging, so it is, in the long run, of greater benefit that moral laws be respected without exception, even if a particular application might be judged harmful. This publication, arguing against the Whiggish (and Pro-Hanoverian) position of a limited right to rebellion, earned Berkeley the reputation as a Jacobite, a supporter of the Stewart cause, even though in a slightly later pamphlet, *Advice to Tories Who Have Taken Oaths*, published in 1715, Berkeley used very similar arguments to abjure Tory clergymen to uphold their oath to George I and the Hanoverian succession.

## 1713–1734

The life Berkeley led during his middle years, while lively and full of incident, is of a far less familiar form to readers of today than that of his earlier years. In 1713, Berkeley secured a two-year leave of absence from his university fellowship, in order to visit London, and was able to renew this leave at two-year intervals for the next ten years, a dispensation undreamed of by modern academics. While in London, Berkeley was easily absorbed into contemporary intellectual circles, through the good offices of men to whom he had secured introductions, most notably Jonathan Swift and Richard Steele. Berkeley wrote essays for Steele's new publication, *The Guardian*, and was commissioned to complete a three-volume anthology of writings, *The Ladies Library*, published anonymously as “by a lady.”<sup>6</sup> Berkeley's *Guardian* essays, although relatively brief and on a variety of topics, show that he was, in 1713, already concerned with the dangers of irreligion and free-thinking, a matter which he was to discuss in some depth in *Alciphron*, written at the end of this period.

At the end of 1713, Berkeley embarked on the first of his European travels, this time as chaplain to the Earl of Peterborough, who was traveling to Italy to attend the coronation of the king of Sicily. Berkeley himself seems to have gone no further than Livorno, pausing in Paris where letters written by Berkeley during this period speak of a planned visit to Malebranche. Berkeley was back in England by 1714, but, balked of his initial efforts to gain preferment in the church, in 1716 he set off upon a much longer European journey, this time

as tutor to St George Ashe, the son of the bishop of Clogher. This trip lasted four years, and covered large parts of Italy, including not only the standard tourist centers of Rome, Naples, Venice, and Florence, but also largely untraveled areas, such as Apulia.<sup>7</sup> Berkeley was chiefly occupied with the art and architecture of the region, but his philosophical interests remained sufficiently alive for him to complete on the trip home a short work in Latin on motion, *De Motu*, which he submitted unsuccessfully for a prize offered by the Academie des Science in Paris, and which he published back in London in 1721. *De Motu* (On motion) is an example of a work by Berkeley which is not explicitly immaterialistic, and indeed seems to contradict immaterialism by asserting the existence of bodies. The position for which Berkeley argues, however, that force is not a property of bodies, because bodies are essentially inert and only minds are active, is fully compatible with the theory developed in the *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*. Berkeley shows how “force”, although strictly speaking metaphorical, can nevertheless be applied meaningfully to bodies in physical theories.

Berkeley returned to England to discover it in the throes of an economic crisis brought on by the bursting of the South Sea bubble, that is, on speculation on trade in South America. Berkeley's *An Essay towards Preventing the Ruin of Great Britain*, published in 1721, finds him offering economic advice – he urges a return to a sound financial footing of manufacture and trade, and an end to speculation – but also deploring what he takes to be the low morals exhibited in Great Britain. Berkeley takes himself to be witnessing not merely an economic calamity, but a moral collapse.

It is more than likely that it was this extremely discouraging view that Berkeley was taking towards the prospects of Great Britain that led him to embark upon what was the greatest adventure of his life. Some time in 1722 or 1723, Berkeley conceived a project to be based in the New World – an Anglican University to educate both the sons of colonists and of Native Americans. Berkeley's purpose in both cases was a missionary one. He thought there would never be enough Anglican churches to meet the religious needs of the colonists if all members of the clergy had to be educated in England and Ireland, and he thought that Native Americans would be more easily converted to Christianity if their own children were educated to perform the conversions. While Berkeley himself saw this project as filled with high moral purpose, it is somewhat startling today to read that while he hoped friendly tribes would send their children to his university voluntarily, he also recommended kidnapping the children of enemy tribes.<sup>8</sup> In 1724, Berkeley published *A Proposal for the Better Supplying of Churches*, in which he laid out his plans for his university, to be situated in Bermuda. Berkeley believed the climate in Bermuda to be peculiarly salubrious, and the inhabitants of remarkably good morals. He also judged Bermuda to be well situated between the West Indian and continental plantations and adequately supplied with a fleet to travel conveniently among the various locations. As well, he thought it important that, while the climate was good for growing food, there were no commodities that might tempt the members of the university into trade. Berkeley devoted his time from 1723 to 1728 to lobbying for this project, and, at least initially, things went well. He secured for himself the deanship of Derry, which provided him with a good income without requiring his attendance, and more surprisingly, he was left a legacy by a woman he had never met, Esther Van Homrigh, more

widely known as Jonathan Swift's Vanessa. Berkeley was able to secure a royal charter, substantial sums from private subscriptions, and a promise of 20 000 pounds from the British Parliament.

In 1728, he was persuaded that his plans would not be taken seriously, and the money from Parliament would not be forthcoming until Berkeley himself went to North America. In September, he set sail, accompanied by a small group, including his new wife, Anne Forster, and settled, not in Bermuda, but in one of the largest port cities of North America, Newport, Rhode Island. Berkeley bought a farm and built a house, intended later to supply his college, and lived in Rhode Island for three years, until it became clear that the parliamentary grant was never to be forthcoming. In 1731, Berkeley with his wife, and now a small son, returned to London via Boston, his hopes dashed. Although Berkeley failed in his mission, he was not without impact on higher education in North America. He gave substantial gifts of books to both Harvard and Yale, and gave his farm in Rhode Island to Yale, with the proviso that the income from the farm be used to establish fellowships at Yale. Early holders of these fellowships include men who went on to found and to become presidents of such notable American universities as Dartmouth, Princeton, and Columbia.<sup>9</sup>

Upon his return to England, Berkeley took a house in London and lived there for the remainder of this period, awaiting preferment. Friends in high places in London initially sought to procure for him a lucrative deanship, that of Down, but this met with opposition in Ireland, and instead Berkeley was offered the bishopric of Cloyne, so that, as Berkeley wrote to his old friend Tom Prior, “those who formerly opposed my being Dean of Downe have thereby made me a bishop” (*Correspondence*, 362).

The time spent in London before this elevation was filled by a return to active publishing. Berkeley brought with him from Newport a manuscript, *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher*, written in dialogue form and describing much of the countryside around Newport. In this work, Berkeley mounted a sustained attack on free-thinking which he had been sniping at in his *Guardian* essays and other works. Although soon after its publication *Alciphron* was recommended by no less a person than Queen Caroline, the work today is more often and quite correctly referred to as “unjustly neglected.” As a piece of religious apologetics it might be assumed to be of little philosophical interest and that it is directed against free-thinkers might add to its lack of contemporary appeal, since “free-thinking” has a more positive ring to it today than Berkeley intended. Free-thinking is in fact what the deist, Anthony Collins, called his views and so *Alciphron* is in fact a defense of a robust revealed religion against the deism that claimed that religion should be reduced strictly to what can be demonstrated by rational means. Berkeley took such free-thinking seriously as a social phenomenon with pernicious moral consequences. That he appended *The New Theory of Vision* to the first appearance of *Alciphron* is an indication that he took his earlier philosophical ideas to have important implications for the moral and religious philosophy to be found there. In fact there is much interesting philosophical material in the pages of *Alciphron*, not merely concerning morals and philosophy of religion, but also, for example, about language and science.<sup>10</sup>

Berkeley did not limit himself to revising *The New Theory*. This publication was followed by revised editions of both *Principles of Human Knowledge* and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, published together in 1734. In addition, in 1733 Berkeley also published the work now known as *Theory of Vision Vindicated*.<sup>11</sup> This was a response to a letter in the London *Daily Post-Boy* praising *Alciphron* but attacking the *New Theory*. The last work Berkeley completed before leaving to take up residence in Cloyne was *The Analyst or a Discourse Addressed to an Infidel Mathematician*, in which Berkeley applied themes developed in *Alciphron* to mathematics.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, Berkeley's life and many of his publications in the period since his move to London in 1713 centered on the public arena. It is noteworthy, however, that, finding himself with a period of relative inactivity, Berkeley not only published philosophical works that reflected the missionary concerns that took him to North America, but accompanied these new works with the rethinking and republishing of his old ones. It becomes hard not to conclude that Berkeley considered all of his work to that date, both theoretical and practical, to be of a piece.

## 1734–1753

In the summer of 1734, Berkeley moved with his family to his new bishopric at Cloyne. Cloyne, some 20 miles from Cork, is a small town, but the territory of the bishopric extended over half a million acres. Here Berkeley lived for 18 years, leaving only twice, once for a family holiday in Killarney, and once in 1737, when Berkeley spent the winter in Dublin and took the seat in Parliament to which he was entitled as a bishop. Apart from these few ventures, Berkeley's life revolved around his family and his duties as bishop. It is not remarkable that Berkeley should have been a resident bishop, since non-resident bishops were being widely condemned. What is perhaps more remarkable is that, once having achieved the see at Cloyne, Berkeley did not, as did many of his predecessors, seek a better situation, but, in fact, according to Luce, turned one down when it was offered him, explaining that he was not moved by ambition.

Berkeley's life while at Cloyne must have been a busy one. We know from a letter that his wife, Anne, wrote to their second son, George, that the education of their children was carried out entirely by their father. “You were not for our ease trusted to mercenary hands,” she wrote, “in childhood you were instructed by your father – he, though old and sickly, performed the constant tedious task himself, and would not trust it to another's care.”<sup>13</sup> Berkeley reared four children at Cloyne, three sons and a daughter, although one son, William, died at age 16, to Berkeley's great sorrow.<sup>14</sup> Berkeley did hire music teachers for his children and letters to Prior suggest they studied art as well. Indeed a letter from a visitor to Cloyne gives a picture of a domestic establishment distinguished by a great variety of music and art.

In addition, Berkeley's conception of his ecclesiastical duties was extensive, as he wrote in the Advertisement to the *Querist* that “to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, by promoting an honest industry, will, perhaps, be deemed no improper employment for a clergyman who

still thinks himself a member of the commonwealth” (*Works*, VI, 103). In the service of these endeavors, Berkeley started a spinning school for children, a workhouse for “sturdy vagrants,” and engaged in planting both flax and hemp. In so doing, Berkeley was putting into practice the recommendations of the Dublin Society, of which Thomas Prior and Samuel Madden, who saw *The Querist* through the press, were members. The Dublin Society encouraged the increased use of land for tillage as opposed to grazing, and Prior supplied Berkeley with flax and hemp seed. Anne Berkeley was also occupied with such activities. At the end of a long letter to Sir John James, Berkeley tells him that his wife “is become a farmer of late. In these hard times we employ above a hundred men every day in Agriculture of one kind or another all which my wife directs. This is a charity wch pays for itself” (*Correspondence*, 433). Finally, Berkeley was concerned with matters of health, his own and that of his family, and increasingly, in light of several severe epidemics, in that of his neighbors. It was this growing interest in medicine that formed the basis for Berkeley's final project, the dissemination of tar-water as a panacea.

Despite the demands made on Berkeley as a family man and a bishop, he did not neglect the scholarly side of his life, but instead, his wife tells us, was accustomed to rise early to study and to pray. He produced two especially notable pieces of work during this period, *The Querist* and *Siris*, as well as several contributions to the pamphlet literature. Each of these significant pieces of work is as remarkable for its form as for its content. *The Querist* was originally released in three parts, in 1735, 1736, and 1737, first in Dublin and then in London, and was reprinted in heavily revised editions several times in Berkeley's lifetime, and finally was included, again after revisions, in his *Miscellany* of 1752. It concerns economic issues prevailing in Ireland and consists entirely of rhetorical questions, somewhat loosely arranged. Berkeley's approach stems from the view that Ireland's situation constitutes a special case, to which the mercantilist assumption that a nation's wealth is built on foreign trade does not apply. Berkeley points out that, in the case of Ireland, the export of agricultural goods and the import of luxuries led to the general impoverishment and, still worse, lack of ambition, in the native Irish population. He argues that it is necessary to redefine a nation's wealth, not in terms of gold and silver, but by the wellbeing of the population through full employment. It is the task of the state to provide the conditions of employment, in part through motivating citizens to industry and in part through ensuring an adequate circulation of money. This, in turn, requires rethinking the nature of money, understanding it, not as grounded in metal, but rather as a ticket or counter that gives power to its possessor. The monetary policies of the state, therefore, should be dedicated to ensuring that money can serve as power in proportion to industry. This policy can best be achieved, Berkeley thought, in what is apparently a novel contribution, through the use of paper money, determined by a national bank, and grounded in land. While economic historians like Patrick Kelly argue that Berkeley's views on paper money can be explained entirely in terms of the problem Berkeley was seeking to solve, the creation of a self-subsistent economy for Ireland, philosophers like David Berman read Berkeley's talk of money as a ticket or counter in terms of the theory of signs found in other of his writings.<sup>15</sup>

There are several important lessons to be learned from Berkeley's continued involvement



with *The Querist* throughout the period of his life at Cloyne, as Ellen Leyland has emphasized.<sup>16</sup> The first is that Berkeley did not retreat to the quiet of Cloyne to become a recluse, but instead remained actively involved with the economic and political life of Ireland. His stay in Dublin during the winter of 1737–1738, may well have been to encourage the passage of a bill setting up a national bank, an important element of his recommendations in *The Querist*.<sup>17</sup> The acerbic nature of the pamphlet Berkeley penned, but did not publish, *The Irish Patriot*, caricaturing the arguments against such a bank, may explain why Berkeley never again returned to the public arena to carry out his projects. That he issued significantly revised editions of *The Querist*, republished not just in Dublin, but in London and Glasgow, shows that Berkeley remained deeply committed, theoretically as well as practically, to the issues surrounding the economic health of Ireland. Leyland thinks it is possible as well to trace changes in Berkeley's thinking by means of his various editorial changes. One attitude that remains constant through the various editions of *The Querist* is that Berkeley, unlike many of his countrymen, such as Swift, does not write in opposition to, or vilifying, the English. Instead, he argues that the interests of the two nations are identical, and that Britain will prosper if Ireland does. Leyland thinks we can find Berkeley mellowing in his attitudes towards the Roman Catholic religion. He arrived in Cloyne filled with the same missionary zeal that had sent him to North America, eager to establish charity schools to convert the children of the Irish peasantry. But, by 1749, when Berkeley wrote *A Word to the Wise: or an Exhortation to the Roman Catholic Clergy of Ireland, By a Member of the Established Church*, he is displaying a much more friendly and helpful spirit, also manifest in the changes made to *The Querist*. In later editions, Berkeley asks whether Roman Catholics should not be admitted to universities without requiring them to participate in Protestant worship and if they should not be allowed to buy forfeited lands “as tending to unite their interest with that of the government” (*Works*, VI, 263). While the concerns Berkeley is working through in *The Querist*, particularly as regards the moral demands placed on the state, are consistent with the views he originally expressed in his earlier *An Essay towards preventing the Ruin of Great Britain*, they reflect as well the thought of the economic community in Ireland at the time and Berkeley's own ongoing professional struggle with these matters in his role as bishop. His *A Discourse Addressed to Magistrates and Men in Authority Occasioned by the Enormous License and Irreligion of the Times*, published in 1738, represents his further thinking on what is necessary for the wellbeing of the state. Finally, the dangers of the incipient Jacobite Rebellion of 1745 led Berkeley to publish two open letters, one to Protestant clergy, and one to Roman Catholics.

It is the other substantial work Berkeley wrote during this time, *Siris*, that has perhaps supported the picture of a reclusive and possibly even eccentric scholar, but this book too arose directly from Berkeley's pastoral activities. As bishop, Berkeley was a significant land-owner, and therefore was expected to uphold the many duties of a major land-owner, including serving as a physician to his tenants. As early as 1741, Berkeley was writing to Prior about the beneficial effects of a preparation made from the pitch or rosin of pine trees, and it is this tar-water and its properties that forms the staging area for Berkeley's final work, *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries Concerning the Virtues of Tar-water*,

and *Divers Other Subjects Connected Together and Arising One from Another*, published in 1744. “Siris” is a Greek word for chain: Berkeley chains together thoughts on the benefits of tar-water as a panacea to an elaborate philosophy of nature, revealing its dependence on God. While the relationship between the views expressed in *Siris* and those of Berkeley's earlier and better known volumes remains controversial, and certainly the form of this book is very different from the tightly argued work that Berkeley had produced earlier, it is undeniable that in these pages Berkeley returns to many of the same concerns that he addressed in his youth. As he wrote in *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley is still describing a world that is by “some divine art and force linked in a mutual dependence and intercourse with each other” (3DII 211). *Siris* is a much more loosely organized work than his earlier books and displays on its face the results of vast reading. Berkeley not only refers to a number of ancient texts, but has also read vastly in the contemporary science of his time, including a number of naturalists and chemists. The interconnected world he describes is not the product of a fertile imagination but is grounded in numerous examples of contemporary science, and reveals the application of many of Berkeley's earlier ontological and epistemological views. T.E. Jessop describes *Siris* as “the work of an aging but singularly ripe mind” (*Works*, V, Editor's Introduction, 5) but this does not seem to do justice either to the erudition or the systematic thinking found in *Siris*.<sup>18</sup> Berkeley's final works all concern the medicinal properties of tar-water; they include three published letters addressed to Thomas Prior and a short work, *Farther Thoughts on Tar-Water*, which Berkeley included in the *Miscellany* published shortly before his death in 1752.

Berkeley, accompanied by his wife and daughter, left Cloyne in 1752 for Oxford, where he settled to be near his second son, George, who was studying there. (His oldest son, Henry, had been considered too sickly to be sent away to university, and was presumably at this time back in Ireland.) Not soon after his arrival, on 14 January 1753, Berkeley died in his sitting room in Oxford, as his wife read aloud to him. He is buried there, in Oxford, at Christ Church.

Dying at age 68, Berkeley can be said to have lived out close to his allotted three-score-and-ten years. Certainly he led a full and ample life. It was a professionally varied life, ranging from research fellow to missionary to bishop. Throughout his life Berkeley expressed himself with his pen in numerous publications. From many of these works a theme emerges. Berkeley did not take himself to be living in an Age of Reason, still less an enlightened era. Instead, he was convinced that the times in which he lived constituted a serious threat to the social order, through the irreligion Berkeley took to be endemic. As he put it in *Advice to the Tories Who Have Taken Oaths*: “But in the present age, vice and skepticism join their forces to destroy Christianity. If men were wicked in former times, their wickedness was attended with remorse and suffering. But now they are openly and courageously wicked, being so upon principle, and endeavouring to support themselves by argument, and by the general example of the age” (*Works*, VI, 53). Much of what Berkeley wrote over the course of his life was intended to combat this blatant wickedness. Even though Berkeley's works that are explicitly addressed to social problems are by and large not the works for which he is best known today, it is important to recognize the theme of moral and social improvement as a



motive for everything Berkeley wrote, including *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, and *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*.

## notes

- [1](#) See, for example, D. Donahue, "We Irish," in *We Irish: Essays on Irish Literature and Society* (University of California Press, 1988), 3–18.
- [2](#) A.A. Luce, *The Life of George Berkeley* (Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1949).
- [3](#) These notebooks were first published by Alexander Campbell Fraser in 1871 under the name, *Commonplace Book of Occasional Metaphysical Thoughts* and were republished by A.A. Luce as the *Philosophical Commentaries* (1944). This title reflected a particular thesis of Luce, that the notes were comments on an earlier draft text of Berkeley's, which is no longer widely accepted, but Luce's title unfortunately remains.
- [4](#) For the curious, this list includes: Aristotle (384–322 BCE), Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), Jacques de Billy (1602–1679), Bonaventura Cavalieri (1598–1647), George Cheyne (1671–1743), Gerard de Vries (1648–1705), Michelangelo Fardella (1650–1718), Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499), Edmund Halley (1656–1742), C. Hayes, Christiaan Huygens (1629–1696), J. Kiell (1673–1719), Jean LeClerc (1657–1736), Gottfried von Leibniz (1646–1716), William Molyneux (1656–1698), Henry More (1614–1687), Ignatius Gaston Pardies (1636–1673), Joseph Raphson (c. 1648–1715), John Wallis (1616–1705), AB=William King (1650–1729), and J.S., who from the context is John Sergeant (1623–1707).
- [5](#) Berkeley later accounted for the non-appearance of the remaining projected parts of the *Principles* by explaining that he had lost the manuscript of what he had written of the remaining parts while traveling in Italy and had not been able to summon the energy to rewrite them.
- [6](#) For more on this project, see N. Kendrick, "Berkeley's Bermuda Project and *The Ladies Library*," in *Berkeley Revisited: Moral, Social, and Political Philosophy*, edited by S. Charles (Oxford University Series on the Enlightenment, 2015), 243–258.
- [7](#) For more on this trip, see A. Brayton, *George Berkeley in Apulia* (The Merrymount Press, 1946).
- [8](#) It is undeniable that Berkeley's attitudes towards those of other races than his own was that of a man of his times. Thus we find that Berkeley, described by Alexander Pope as having "every virtue under heaven," owned three African slaves while in Newport, and was much praised for insisting that these slaves be baptized.
- [9](#) See G.P. Conroy, "Berkeley and education in America," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21

(2) (April–June 1960): 211–221.

- [10](#) Many interested readers of *Alciphron* will be limited to a partial edition, *George Berkeley Alciphron in Focus*, edited by David Berman (Routledge, 1993) containing some additional commentary. There is a complete edition of the second edition of *Alciphron*, edited by Laurent Jaffro, Genevieve Brykman, and Claire Schwartz, with a multilingual set of articles (Georg Olms Verlag, 2010) but this edition is hard to find in the United States.
- [11](#) The full title of this work is *The Theory of Vision or Visual Language Shewing the Immediate Presence and Providence of a Deity Vindicated and Explained*. This work was not included in early collections of Berkeley's works, but was republished by H.V.H. Cowell in 1860 (Macmillan and Co.), and has been included ever since.
- [12](#) Berkeley himself never identifies the mathematician in question, but Luce, following Berkeley's first biographer, Stock, declares it to be Edmund Halley.
- [13](#) Luce, *Life*, 181. Contemporary readers may be surprised to realize that the “old and sickly” Berkeley became a bishop at the age of 49 and so would have been in his fifties at the time of which his wife speaks.
- [14](#) There were three other children who died in infancy: a daughter, Lucia, died soon after birth in Rhode Island and is buried in Newport, and two others at Cloyne.
- [15](#) See P. Kelly, “Ireland and the critique of mercantilism in Berkeley’s querist,” *Hermathena* 139 (1985): 101–116 and “Berkeley's economic writings,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, edited by K.P. Winkler (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 339–368, and D. Berman, *George Berkeley: Idealism and the Man* (The Clarendon Press, 1994).
- [16](#) E.D. Leyland, “Bishop Berkeley: The Querist,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, Vol. XLIV, Section C, 15 December 1937, 75–98.
- [17](#) Ellen Leyland directs our attention to a pamphlet that Berkeley published in 1737, *Queries Relating to a National Bank, Extracted from the Querist*, consisting, consisting, as the title says, of portions of *The Querist* that specifically describe and argue for a national bank.
- [18](#) Readers of advanced years may be amused to work out that Berkeley was actually 59 years old when *Siris* was published.

## chapter 2

### *an essay towards a new theory of vision*

Berkeley's first published work, *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709) was prepared simultaneously with his second, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710).<sup>1</sup> This simple fact nevertheless presents an anomaly. *The Principles of Human Knowledge* is the source for the immaterialist metaphysics for which Berkeley is best known. *The New Theory of Vision* not only makes no mention of this immaterialist metaphysics, but is quite a different work. Berkeley lays out his project for the *New Theory* briskly in the opening sentences of that work: "My design is to shew the manner in which we perceive by sight the distance, magnitude, and situation of objects. Also to consider the difference there is betwixt the ideas of sight and touch and whether there be any idea common to both senses" (NTV 1). Berkeley is describing in these sentences a project in what we might think of today as the psychology of perception. Berkeley is going to explain how it is that we are able to see the distances things are from us, their sizes, and their locations with respect to one another. So the first question that has come up among readers of Berkeley is: Why did Berkeley decide to tackle a problem in space perception at the same time that he was preparing his major work of metaphysics? This question is felt particularly acutely by those who also find that the positions Berkeley adopts as he solves his problem about space perception are not even wholly consistent with the metaphysics he was at the same time developing and about which he published only a year later. In the *New Theory*, Berkeley argues that visual objects are in the mind, mind-dependent ideas, but he appears to leave tactile objects outside the mind in mind-independent space. Why did Berkeley find it necessary to put his metaphysical project on hold while he digressed into an inconsistent approach to a problem in psychology?

There are some who think this is not in fact such a serious problem.<sup>2</sup> Many people, after all, are interested in more than one thing at a time. It is perfectly reasonable to suppose that Berkeley became interested in the shortcomings of contemporary accounts of space perception quite independently of his interests in metaphysics. And, it is suggested, since his first work was a work of science, we should expect its conclusions to be independent of his metaphysics. This solution, however, has consistency problems of its own, for Berkeley explicitly tells us in the *Principles* that he wrote the *New Theory* in order to provide an answer to objections that could be raised about the doctrine of the *Principles*. In PHK 43 Berkeley writes that he wrote the *New Theory* in order to dispel the common belief that we see external space containing external bodies. But granting the close relationship between the two works clearly stated here raises still more problems. The objection raised in the *Principles* is a common sense objection: Don't we just see objects at a distance whenever we open our eyes? The *New Theory*, on the other hand, is addressed to theoreticians, what Berkeley sometimes calls "optic writers," all of whom dismiss the common sense objection as untenable because, as Berkeley writes, "It is, I think, agreed by all that distance, of itself

and immediately, cannot be seen” (NTV 2).<sup>3</sup> Everyone agrees that we cannot see objects at distances just by opening our eyes. The position the *New Theory* refutes is not the one that Berkeley identifies as causing problems for the *Principles*. But he still sees the *New Theory* as contributing an important step in the argument of the *Principles*.

That the two works are connected is underlined in a letter Berkeley wrote to Perceval on 1 March 1709/1710, where he suggests that he sees the argument of the two works as seamless. Berkeley is writing about the corrections he made for the second edition of the *New Theory* and concludes:

There still remains one objection with regard to the uselessness of that book: but in a little time I hope to make what is there laid down appear subservient to the ends of morality and religion in a treatise I have now in press, the design of which is to demonstrate the existence and attributes of God, the immortality of the soul, the reconciliation of God's foreknowledge with freedom of men, and by shewing the emptiness and falseness of several parts of the speculative sciences, to reduce men to the study of religion and things useful. How far my endeavor will prove successful, and whether I have been all this time in a dream or no, time will manifest.<sup>4</sup>

The treatise Berkeley mentions in this letter is clearly the *Principles of Human Knowledge* and Berkeley is saying that the *New Theory* is no useless treatise on space perception but is a contribution to the noble ends of the *Principles*.<sup>5</sup> So what we need to understand first, is how Berkeley can claim the *New Theory* provides a solution to a problem that is neither raised nor discussed in its pages, and second, how a work in space perception can contribute to the goals of the *Principles*, morality and religion, which presumably reflect the immaterial metaphysics of the *Principles*. Why did Berkeley regard the *New Theory* as integral to the project of the *Principles*?

The objection, as Berkeley expresses it in the *Principles* is an absolutely common sense objection. Seeing is experienced by us as extraordinarily easy. We just open our eyes and do it. There, laid out before us, are objects displayed at different points in space. We don't experience ourselves as having to do anything in order to see the things scattered about us, and we don't therefore experience these things as having anything to do with us. They are just there to be seen by us. This objection, however, is equally an objection to the position of the optic writers with which Berkeley begins the *New Theory*. Indeed, Thomas Lennon has pointed out that Malebranche also raised this objection as an objection to *his* theory in Malebranche's Sixth Elucidation to his *Search after Truth*.<sup>6</sup> But Malebranche answered the objection with an account that is expressed in terms of the metaphysics Berkeley was going to reject in the *Principles*. Malebranche held that the sensations we enjoy when the external world bumps into our sense organs are just ways of feeling our minds fall into. They tell us nothing about how the world is in itself but merely how, from our individual corporeal perspective, it is experienced. Seeing is complicated by the fact that it is the product of the interaction of the world and our own bodies. What we see reflects that interaction. Malebranche reminds us that, while we can be confident that there are “distances and outnesses,” this is because “there are intelligible spaces in the intelligible world that is our

mind's immediate object.”<sup>7</sup> So far from it's being the case that we just see the objects of the external world, this seeing is an elaborate accomplishment of our visual system, but one which is, nevertheless, a misleading picture of the world, more accurately revealed by our intellect. Both Berkeley and optic writers like Malebranche agree that seeing things like distance is harder than it appears to be. But Malebranche's account of how we are able to see distance has consequences disagreeable to Berkeley.

In his account in the *Principles* of his argument in the *New Theory* we can see Berkeley making the transition from the approach to seeing distance he is going to reject to the one he endorses. In PHK 43, to the question, don't we just see objects at a distance?, the *New Theory*, Berkeley explains, responds, No. Distance is not perceived immediately by sight, or with the aid of something necessarily connected with it, or by anything resembling it, but is suggested by things connected with distance only through experience. If we follow the points listed in the *Principles*, we find that they provide an outline of the section of the *New Theory* on distance perception, and ultimately Berkeley's answer to the common sense objection of the *Principles*.

## Distance Cannot Be Seen of Itself and Immediately

In the *New Theory*, the argument Berkeley gives to make this point, called the “one-point argument,” is borrowed from other writers, most directly from Molyneux, but a version is also found in Malebranche. Berkeley writes:

For distance being a line directed endwise to the eye, it projects only one point in the fund of the eye, which point remains invariably the same, whether the distance be longer or shorter.

(NTV 2)

Although this argument is not made by Descartes, the point it raises stems directly from the approach to sensation introduced by Descartes. Descartes wanted to explain sensation, not in terms of “images flitting through the air,”<sup>8</sup> but by regarding the sensitive body as embedded in the physical world, and hence subject to the same necessary mechanical processes. When this approach is applied to sight, we learn that we see by virtue of changes to the photosensitive retina brought about by impacts of light rays reflected from the objects about us. The light and colors we see are the consequence of the impact of the rays on the retina and we can see only what can alter the retina. The problem with seeing distances arises because, as Malebranche puts it, light from an object moving to different distances along the line of sight will impact the retina in exactly the same way, at the same point. So we see light and color that could be at any distance. The conclusion, as Berkeley stresses, is that the distances we see are not seen immediately. Distance in itself, unlike light and color, is not the immediate effect of light rays impacting the retina. The common sense objection assumes that seeing objects in space is easier than is the case.



# We Don't See Distance by Anything Necessarily Connected with It

Berkeley's repeated formulation, we don't see distance by anything necessarily connected with it, expresses a position he wants to reject. Identifying the exact nature of this position or identifying its proponents is a harder task. Berkeley himself points out previous thinkers have tried to account for space perception both along the lines Berkeley himself endorses, as well as by the kind of theory Berkeley wanted to reject.<sup>9</sup> There is no single person who identifies as a proponent of geometrically based accounts of space perception or who tries to justify such an attempt. Nevertheless it is possible to see what Berkeley is getting at. Accounts of vision stemming from a Cartesian point of view, like those of Malebranche or Descartes himself, certainly see vision as embodying necessary connections in one direction, that is, vision is the result of necessary mechanical geometric processes. When it becomes clear that the capacity to see distances is more complicated than simply receiving impacts on the retina, thinkers cast about for all sorts of processes to supplement these impacts within the mechanical geometric framework. One such explanation rests on the assumption that it is possible to supplement the immediate deliverance of sensation by a geometric calculation that recapitulates the original causal process. We can work out the distance of the object from which the light rays impacting the retina were reflected by working backwards from the state of our eyes as we sense light and color to the location of the object from which the light rays originated. By these means, we are able to judge that an object is near when the optic angle is large, and far away when the angle is small. How exactly someone like Descartes thought of this process is not entirely clear. Sometimes he uses language – “when our two eyes A and B are turned towards point X, the length of the line AB and the size of the angles XAB and XBA enable us to know where the point X is”<sup>10</sup> – which appear to attribute epistemic states to a perceiving person. In other places, however, there is reason to suppose he is speaking no more than metaphorically in attributing pieces of knowledge or calculations to the perceiving process, and Malebranche, speaking of the calculations that allow us to see space, says that God acts in us as we would act if we had complete knowledge. In any case, the idea seems to be that the geometric position in which perceivers necessarily stand with respect to objects at a distance from them is used in the process of constructing a location at which objects are seen to lie, and this what is seen. The visual system is, as it were, building for us a diorama, and it is our experience of this diorama that we take to be just seeing the objects scattered about us. Malebranche, in particular, however, emphasizes that such constructions, relying as they do on changes in our bodies, are necessarily imperfect representations of the actual distances at which objects are located.

Berkeley, in his rejection of this account, picks up on the epistemic language that is sometimes used. He argues that I cannot be said to be calculating distance based on the angles made when I turn my eyes, since I am unaware of both angles and calculations and so cannot use them to make judgments. Berkeley is frequently accused of attacking a straw man in this argument, since none of those he is likely to be addressing took the calculations they describe to be conscious. There are several points, however, that are relevant to

understanding the nature of Berkeley's objection. The first is that, in his later work, *The Theory of Vision Vindicated*, Berkeley makes a distinction that is relevant to this point. There he writes:

To explain how the mind or soul of a man simply sees is one thing, and belongs to philosophy. To consider particles as moving in certain lines, rays of light as refracted or reflected or crossing, or including angles, is quite another thing, and appertaineth to geometry. To account for the sense of vision by the mechanism of the eye is a third thing, which appertaineth to anatomy and experiments. These two latter speculations are of use in practice, to assist the defects and remedy the distempers of sight, agreeably to the natural laws obtaining in the mundane system. But the former theory is that which makes us understand the true nature of vision, considered as a faculty of the soul.

(TVV 43)

The attempt to understand vision as a mechanical, geometric process has resulted in a confusion in which the psychological task, which Berkeley calls philosophical, is run together with the optical geometric and the mechanistic. Descartes' use of epistemic language exploits the necessary connections of the geometric mechanistic level by translating them into calculations at the psychological level. Berkeley thinks that the problem of distance perception is a problem for our minds, not for optics or anatomy. We sense light and colors, but under circumstances in which the light and colors we sense could be at any distance. We are beginning with some things that are agreed to be "in the mind." Descartes' kind of solution, however, puts at our disposal information about angles and lines, information that is no more capable of being registered on the retina than distance is. Neither angles nor the lines from them can be perceived immediately by sight, and so our perception of *them* is just as big a problem as the original problem about distance. A problem that is explicitly a problem for perceivers, their immediate apprehension of distanceless light and color, cannot be solved except in terms of perceivers themselves and what is in their minds. If the problem is that I, a perceiver, perceive objects at different distances, even though I immediately perceive only light and color, then the problem can only be solved by linking the distances I perceive with ideas I actually have or can have (NTV 9). Since I don't have ideas or calculations necessarily connecting the lights and colors I immediately perceive by sight to the distances at which they are located, necessary connections have no role to play in distance perception. Berkeley is rejecting the view that we see objects in space because we have built into us a diorama constructor.

## **Distance Is Only Suggested to Our Thoughts by Certain Visible Ideas and Sensations Attending Vision**

Berkeley's solution is quite straightforward. We are not visual calculators that can work out how far away things must be. We must instead rely on cues, ideas we actually can have, which co-vary with different distances. Berkeley himself proposes, for example, that, although we are not aware of and cannot register angles, we can be aware of the different



ways it feels to turn our eyes as we focus on objects at different distances. While, unlike angles, there is nothing in the nature of the feelings of the muscle movements themselves that would connect to different distances, we can learn to anticipate that an object, the sight of which is accompanied by certain muscular sensations, will be at a particular distance from us. The point that Berkeley stresses about the various unrelated but co-varying cues he mentions, including the “pictorial” cues,<sup>11</sup> such as smallness and faintness or occlusion, that is, that nearer objects block our view of one further away, is that we have to learn how to use them. It is experience alone that can account for distance perception.

## What We Learn from the Man Born Blind

In his precis in the *Principles* of the *New Theory* argument, Berkeley draws a conclusion that lays to rest once and for all the common sense objection. “Insomuch that a man born blind,” he writes, “and afterwards made to see, would not, at first sight, think the things he saw, to be without his mind, or at any distance from him” (PHK 43). This figure of the Man-born-blind-and-made-to-see, originally introduced by William Molyneux in a letter to Locke, is a recurring element throughout the *New Theory*. We meet him for the first time in section 41 of that book, where Berkeley asserts that such a man, upon being made to see, would not see objects as being at a distance. The reason is clear. Berkeley has just shown that we have to learn to see the distances of things. Until we learn to correlate the muscle sensations accompanying visual sensations with distances, those sensations could not suggest anything. We would have no reason to take them to be anywhere, we would just be experiencing them. That is to say, “the objects intromitted by sight would seem to him (as in truth they are) no other than a new set of thoughts or sensations, each whereof is as near to him as the perceptions of pains or pleasure, or the most inward passions of our soul” (NTV 41). The figure of the Man-born-blind allows us to think ourselves back to the state we would have been in before we learned how to anticipate distances by correlating visual sensations with the muscular cues accompanying them. Where we start from is just visual sensations as we experience them. We know we are having ideas or sensations all right, but that is all that is immediately present to us. Which is to say, the supposition of the common sense objection, that we see things at a distance and not in the mind, is all wrong. We immediately perceive light and color by sight, these lights and colors are mind-dependent sensations, which we must subsequently learn to see at distances from us.

## Heterogeneity, Visible Ideas, and Tangible Meanings

Berkeley has completed his answer to the objection that he told us gave rise to his *New Theory*. But this precis by no means concludes the material discussed in the *New Theory*, which continues on for another 118 sections, covering size perception, situation perception, the question of the heterogeneity of ideas of sight and touch, and a demonstration that geometry requires tangible ideas and cannot be accomplished by sight alone. If Berkeley has already laid this objection to rest, what is the purpose of the remainder of the *New Theory*? In

thinking about this question, it is useful to recognize that Berkeley's discussion of the *New Theory* in the *Principles* does not end with his answer to the objection, but continues on through one more section, which addresses the claim that the ideas of sight are heterogeneous, in Berkeley's term. Berkeley addresses in this paragraph the question of the consistency of the *New Theory* and the *Principles* that has plagued his readers. He tells us that the case that he made in the *New Theory* can be expressed in the immaterialist language of the *Principles*, and that what visible ideas suggest are always ideas of touch. But it is important to note that, in this paragraph, Berkeley makes clear that he does not take the claim that by sight we immediately perceive mind-dependent ideas or sensations and not objects at a distance to be the final word about the *New Theory*. Instead, he emphasizes two more lessons. The first is the heterogeneity claim itself, that ideas of sight are of a different kind or species than ideas of touch. Berkeley seems to link this heterogeneity claim with the second lesson of the *New Theory*, that visual ideas are the language of the Author of Nature. As a working hypothesis then, Berkeley takes these two conclusions to be demonstrated by the full argument of the *New Theory*.

Berkeley begins to make the case that ideas of sight are other than ideas of touch at the end of the distance section, where he also clarifies the nature of the process by means of which co-varying muscular cues enable us to see distance. The Man-born-blind, as we know, sees only mind-dependent color sensations, when first made to see. Berkeley wants to address the notion that from the color sensations themselves the Man-born-blind will be able to work out conclusions about mind-independent objects and uses a distinction between the objects of sight and touch to dispel this idea. It will be helpful, in tracing out the connections Berkeley is making, to flesh out the position he is rejecting. The claim after all that color is mind-dependent while extension is not is by no means a common sense notion, but it is widely held by theoreticians such as Malebranche. Malebranche, for example, stressed that strictly speaking, grass is not green, for colors are so many sensations existing in mind. But Malebranche also held that while colors are modifications of mind, extension is not. Rather, when I see a visible object, like the moon, or a tree, intelligible extension is particularized. This way of thinking allows Malebranche to make the claim on which Berkeley concentrates, that color is mind-dependent, but extension, figure, and motion are not. Malebranche also claims that, when I see the moon, I am prone to the false judgment that the moon-I-see exists in the heavens. The moon-I-see looks to be at a particular distance (about 1000 feet away, Malebranche says) and to be of a particular size (typically dime-sized),<sup>12</sup> but bigger on the horizon than at the zenith. These false judgments I can't help making – they are built into the way I see – but if I go on and affirm that the extended body in the heavens is like the moon-I-see, then I am responsible for more false judgments. Understanding and correcting these false judgments requires me to distinguish the extension that exists in the heavens from what I see, and to hold that the latter, through an imperfect resemblance, misrepresents the former. Malebranche's conclusions therefore assume that we can make meaningful comparisons between the ideas of mind-independent intelligible extension and extension as particularized in visible sensation.

Berkeley's case is that the visible sensations by means of which we mediately see distance do

not, as Malebranche supposed, represent through resembling distances or objects at a distance. He agrees with Malebranche that the moon we ordinarily see is nothing like the object we would arrive at should we travel to the moon. But he maintains that we are able to see objects at a distance because the visible sensations and muscular cues suggest to us – his word – tangible ideas that we can anticipate having. As Berkeley puts it:

Looking at an object I perceive a certain visible figure and colour, with some degree of faintness and other circumstances, which from what I have formerly observed, determine me to think that if I advance forward so many paces or miles, I shall be affected with such and such ideas of touch: so that in truth and strictness of speech I neither see distance itself, nor anything that I take to be at a distance.

(NTV 45)

Berkeley is proposing a dramatically novel account of how we see distance in which the distance information we say we end up seeing is not a product of the process of seeing itself. He proposes that our ideas of distance are actually the result of another sense modality than vision, that of touch and kinesthesia. What we need to recognize is that seeing itself provides nothing more than its own immediate objects, light and colors. Light and color do not and never can contain distance information. What they can do, in appropriate circumstances, is to suggest to us the distance information that is available to us through touch, information reliably correlated with visual sensations, but which provides entirely new sensations, nothing like the visual sensations with which they are arbitrarily connected. By recognizing that touch and kinesthesia provide an alternative set of distance ideas, we no longer have to figure out a way to shoe-horn distance information into the visual process itself. And since ideas of sight are entirely other than ideas of touch and represent through suggestion not resemblance, there is no reason to suppose they misrepresent. So, it is the notion that ideas of touch can supplement ideas of sight because they are entirely other than ideas of sight that provides the grounds for Berkeley's alternative account of how visual ideas represent by suggestion.

Berkeley concludes his account of distance perception by giving what might be thought of as a final answer to the common sense *Principles* objection, by relying on a comparison between sight and language (NTV 51). It feels as if we just see objects at a distance because, in seeing, we, as it were, read through the visible cues to the tangible ideas suggested by them, and which are of immediate concern to us, just as, when we hear words in a familiar language, we don't have to think about what the sounds mean, but proceed directly to their meanings. Just as we hear words meaningfully, so we see visual cues with their tangible meanings, and, in this way it feels as though we are just seeing these tangible meanings. Berkeley here exploits a comparison between vision and language to explain or explain away what might otherwise seem puzzling about vision, its apparent ease and directness.

## Size Perception and the “Picture” Picture

The upshot of the distance section is that we do not, as it feels we do, just see objects laid out

before us, nor is it the task of seeing to construct a three-dimensional diorama representing objects in space. It is through touch and not through seeing that we learn the distances at which things are seen to rest. But this result still leaves questions about how we are to understand the task or the product of seeing. What do we just see? Is it that seeing is a matter of discerning, not a diorama, but a picture laid out before us in which pictorial cues teach us what distances to expect? This is a very common way of conceptualizing the task of seeing, and one that has, somewhat more controversially, been ascribed to Berkeley. But Berkeley's treatment of size perception and of situation perception suggests that this "picture" picture of seeing does not do full justice to the differences between sight and touch.

Berkeley begins his account of size perception as if the issues were strictly parallel to those of distance perception. There are those, he says, who think we see size by lines and angles, but this view has already been exposed as untenable. What is missing from Berkeley's own discussion is why anyone would think we see size by lines and angles. Why, after all, don't we just see size? Berkeley could have found accounts, such as this from Malebranche's *Elucidation on Optics*, which explains why there is a problem with size perception best solved by appeals to lines and angles.

But though the image on my retina of a child I see at ten feet from me is equal to the image I have of a giant thirty feet away, I yet see the giant three times larger than the child, because there occurs in my eye something that I can use to discover the difference in their distance, ... Thus, knowing the distance between the child and the giant and having besides this, according to the assumption, a perfect knowledge of optics, which teaches me that the images of objects on the retina must diminish with their distance, I give myself a perception of the giant three times that of the child.

(*Elucidation on Optics*, 27, 734)

Malebranche's account assumes that we do, indeed, see a picture, one that is determined by the retinal image. But this picture is misleading, for it presents the near child and the distant giant as being of the same size. I do not see them however as being of the same size because somewhere inside of me a calculation is performed that allows me to recognize the sizes as functions of their distances. Berkeley rejects this account, and proposes instead that the same sorts of arbitrarily related cues that suggest distance can equally and independently suggest size. But what is striking is that he reconceptualizes the problem of size perception in terms of his distinction between objects of sight and objects of touch. In so doing, he produces a very different version of the problem of size perception.

On Malebranche's account, the picture we see represents the extended mind-independent objects with which the picture is necessarily but misleadingly connected. Berkeley, however, prefers to understand the problem as one of getting from the visible extension we immediately perceive by sight to tangible extensions. Looking at things in this way, Berkeley ends up stressing different aspects of the problem of size perception. There is a problem in identifying the tangible extension suggested by any visible extension because visible extensions are not in his words, "fixed and determined." A visible inch (or a visible moon or a visible tree) could be of any size. As we change and move, visible extensions change too.

The problem is not, as Malebranche would put it, that a size we see can misrepresent a fixed size, but that the changing visible extensions can never be like a fixed tangible size. We should not, therefore, see the problem of seeing size as one of trying to match a visible picture to the object it represents. Instead, perceivers use the changing visible extensions and associated cues in order to foresee those tangible ideas that have been reliably connected with them and so predict the pain and pleasure that may follow (NTV 59). Visible extension, being other than tangible extension, lacks a characteristic that is important to seeing size, because size, insofar as it is interesting to us, is fixed. It is only tangible size that we can have in mind when we talk about the sizes of objects, and any visible extent can be a sign for any tangible extent. Berkeley's reconceptualization of size perception depends upon his distinction between visible and tangible extension.

This account also requires reconceptualizing the role of visual ideas in size perception. Visible ideas are only interesting to us to the extent that they help us to anticipate the fixed tangible size. To serve this function, they need only serve as otherwise arbitrarily connected cues to tangible size. In making this point, Berkeley returns to a comparison with language he had introduced earlier with respect to distance perception:

These ideas being in their own nature equally fitted to bring into our minds the idea of small or great, or no size at all of outward objects: just as the words of any language are in their own nature indifferent to signify this or that or nothing at all.

(NTV 64)

Nothing in the nature of the visible signs themselves allows us to make connections to fixed sizes. Visual signs, therefore, like verbal signs, are in their own nature, not misleading, but meaningless. Berkeley is again putting together two points. The correct understanding of size perception requires us to distinguish visible extension from tangible extension and to recognize that it is only determined tangible extension that is expressed in size judgments. We can best understand the function of visible ideas if we see them not as bearers of faulty size information, but as analogous to words, as signs that are in their own nature quite other than the tangible ideas to which they carry our minds.

Berkeley uses this account and the distinction between objects of sight and touch to criticize an important element in Malebranche's claim that sight is always defective. Malebranche's case is that because the size seen is determined by the body of the perceiver and the relation of that body to other bodies, what is seen is always relative extension and never absolute extension. He writes:

Our eyes furnish us with none of the ideas of things that we discover with microscopes or by reason. Through sight we perceive nothing smaller than a mite. Half a mite is nothing if we accept the testimony of vision. As far as vision is concerned, a mite is only a mathematical point. It cannot be divided without being annihilated. Our sight, then, does not represent extension as it is in itself, but only as it is in relation to our body: and because half a mite has no significant relation to our body, and can neither preserve nor destroy it, our sight hides it from us entirely. But if we had eyes constructed like microscopes, or rather, if we were as small as mites, our judgments about the size of bodies would be quite different.

(ST, I, 6, I, p. 28)

Since seeing always depends upon some body and is relative to it, what is seen by a man as miniscule is huge to a mite, while what is seen as small to a mite is thoroughly invisible to a man. In no case is what is seen an adequate representation of absolute extension, and sight is always defective. Such a view, however, depends upon the supposition that it is the task of sight to provide a picture of absolute extension, and this supposition Berkeley rejects.

Berkeley thinks that Malebranche has misdescribed what happens when we look at a mite just big enough to see and what happens when we look through a microscope. He introduces the concepts of *minimum visibile* and *minimum tangibile*, the least size that can be seen or can be touched. From his account, however, it seems clear that we should not think of these *minima* as bits and pieces of extension. What he tells us is that the *minimum visibile* is the same in every sentient being. We can't compare the size of the mite's *minima* with ours, as Malebranche does, because what *minima* describe are mental capacities – the *minimum visibile* is the smallest amount of color that can be discerned, and this capacity can be described in the same terms whether we are talking about a man or a mite. No one's seeing can be regarded as more or less defective in perceiving *minima*. Nor is it the case that our seeing size is defective because we don't see with the naked eye what we do with a microscope. In both cases, we are having visual ideas, although different ones in the case of the microscope, but our capacity to discern hasn't changed. The only thing that has changed is our ability to coordinate our visual ideas with tangible ones, which capacity of course is vastly diminished when we looked through the microscope. Malebranche's judgment that seeing is defective ignores the role of touch in providing information about fixed or absolute size and misidentifies the role of sight. Seeing provides a sign for, and not a picture of, those tangible ideas.

Berkeley's account of size perception provides steps towards undermining the “picture” picture of visual perception. What we perceive visually is unlike a picture in that the light and color we perceive are fluid and changing. It is only actual pictures, whose paint is fused to the canvas that present fixed sizes. Even in this case, we need to remind ourselves that the patches on the canvas whose extent we can measure are tangible, and are other than the various views we get of pictures as we move about the room or jockey for position in a gallery. Visual extents are far too unstable to be organized into pictures that could then represent or resemble external objects. But it is in his discussion of situation perception that

Berkeley deals what he might have called the “killing blow” to the “picture” picture of vision.

## Situation Perception and the “Picture” Picture

If we suppose that we see something like a picture laid out before us with objects situated in various positions with respect to one another, then there can be no problem of situation perception. When we look at the “picture” we just see that some objects are above others, some to the left of others, and so on. Previous thinkers had identified a problem with situation perception, to be solved by calculating geometrically, because they pointed out that the image on the retina is inverted with respect to what we see. They theorized that the picture of objects organized in space we end up seeing is a result of calculating from the inverted image on the retina back to the locations in space of the objects we see. Berkeley rejects not only the solution to this problem in terms of lines and angles, but the very terms of the problem itself. He nevertheless believes that there is a problem with our perception of situation by sight. As he did in the case of size perception, Berkeley provides his own unique analysis of the problem of situation perception.<sup>13</sup> He shows that there is a problem with seeing the situation of objects, not because of geometric or anatomical problems with vision, but with problems that arise because of the nature of seeing itself and its objects. What is going to be important in this case, as it was for size, is his crucial distinction between the objects of sight and those of touch.

In making his case that there is a problem with situation perception, the figure of the Man-born-blind-and-made-to-see is central. Berkeley first asks us to consider the case of a Man-born-blind who is still blind. Such a person would have no difficulty at all applying situation terms using his sense of feeling. The objects he touches when he moves his arm away from the force of gravity he calls “up” and those he reaches when moving with the force of gravity he calls “down” (NTV 93). The Man-born-blind would not, however, suppose that terms describing spatial orientation have any reference where he could not reach or touch. When made to see, the Man-born-blind would see what all sighted see, but he would not have any grounds for supposing his newfound sensations of light and color to have any spatial organization. We know that he could not take them to be at a distance, and if not at a distance, he would have no expectation of being able to reach out and touch them. The light and color he now sees have nothing in them of situation. But, since we are able to reach out and touch what we see, there is a problem of situation perception. How can we mediate learn to perceive situation by sight?

Figuring out how we can mediate perceive situation is a matter of finding what cues accompanying visual sensations can be correlated with tangible ideas of situation. In this case it turns out that changing visual sensations are accompanied by the muscular sensations of turning the eyes up, down, or to the left or right and can be correlated with the otherwise unrelated tangible ideas of reaching up and touching. So we learn to call visual items up that occur when we move our eyes up and we anticipate being able to touch by reaching up. But without this learning process, the Man-born-blind, who had a perfectly good tangible



understanding of what it is for a man before him to be erect, would not have any grounds for identifying as erect the man on which his eyes fell upon being first made to see.

It is in dealing with this claim, that the Man-born-blind when made to see would not see a man before him as erect, that Berkeley introduces the most novel features of his account of seeing. He imagines an interlocutor saying, what do you mean, he wouldn't see the man as erect? Wouldn't he see that the man's head is furthest from the earth and his feet close to the earth? In his answer, Berkeley reveals a radical rethinking of the nature of vision. He says there is nothing in what the Man-born-blind is seeing at the first instance of sight that would connect in his mind with the tangible ideas he already has of men, heads, feet, earth, etc.

That which I see is only variety of light and colours. That which I feel is hard or soft, hot or cold, rough or smooth. What similitude, what connexion have those ideas with these? Or how is it possible that anyone should see reason to give one and the same name to combinations of ideas so very different before he has experienced their coexistence? We do not find there is any necessary connexion betwixt this or that tangible quality and any colour whatsoever. And we may sometimes perceive colours where there is nothing to be felt. All which doth make it manifest that no man, at first receiving of his sight, would know there was any agreement between this or that particular object of his sight and any object of touch he had been acquainted with: the colours, therefore, of the head would to him no more suggest the idea of head than they would the idea of foot.

(NTV 103)

The Man-born-blind would not only not see the man before him as erect, he would not even see a man. The claim that objects of sight are other than ideas of touch has implications that are broader than the issue of space perception, since Berkeley has just told us that we not only do not immediately perceive by sight objects located at positions in space, but that we do not see objects at all. Visually speaking, we see only variety of light and color.

Berkeley's interlocutor has a further response, that, in answering, allows Berkeley to spell out the implications of his view. The interlocutor asks, even though a Man-born-blind couldn't see a man before him on first being made to see, could he not at least, from the colors he does see, recognize that there is one of one kind of color patch and two of another and by this conclude that he was looking at a head above two feet? Berkeley's response is more radical still. He says that we can't count in this way until we know what it is we are counting. And whether or not something is a unit, to be counted as one, is "entirely a creature of the mind, considering either an idea by itself, or any combination of ideas to which it gives the name, and so makes it pass for an unit" (NTV 109). It is we, and not our vision, who collect ideas together into countable units, in whatever ways are convenient for us. So far from providing us with a picture of a man, vision does nothing more than register light and colors. Light and colors are not, of themselves, representations of anything. What we see acquires a representational structure, and hence can stand for something or mean something, only when the light and colors we see are combined with other qualities into collections of ideas by the work of the mind.

## “The Main Part and Pillar”

The issue that Berkeley said he was also going to consider, that is, “the difference there is betwixt the ideas of sight and touch” have proved crucial to his first project, “the manner wherein we perceive by sight the distances, magnitude and situation of objects” (NTV 1). Indeed, the central nature of the claim that “objects of sight ... are entirely different and heterogenous from objects of feeling” is described in the *Theory of Vision Vindicated* as “the main part and pillar” of the account given in the *New Theory* (TVV 41). This account rests on a distinction between what each sense can perceive immediately, and what can be perceived mediately or “by means of some other idea” (NTV 9). By sight we can immediately perceive only light and colors, and that is all sight is built to do. Neither distance, (fixed) size, or situation are present in the fluid and shifting colors we see. So there need to be other ideas by means of which distance, size, and situation are mediately perceived by sight, ideas which are themselves immediately perceived by some other sense. These other ideas are of two sorts. There are cues which accompany the light and colors we see and which co-vary with the ideas they ultimately suggest and there are tangible ideas of distance, size, and situation which are regularly found to occur together with the light, colors, and their respective cues. Distance, size, and situation are not immediately experienced by sight but they are immediately experienced in the entirely different ideas of touch and kinesthesia. It is the fact of the heterogeneity of ideas of sight and touch that means that we can look to touch as a source of ideas not immediately available to sight. Because the objects of touch are not the same as the objects of sight, touch can supplement the shortcomings of sight.

Berkeley then has the task of convincing his readers of the heterogeneity of sight and touch, that the objects of touch are other than the objects of sight. Most people would have no trouble agreeing that a pink color is a different kind of quality than the scent of a rose or the buzz of a bee. These are what are called proper sensibles, qualities experienced only by one sense or another, and are therefore paradigm cases of what we mean when we talk of distinct and heterogeneous qualities. But most people have very different intuitions about what are called common sensibles. Most people suppose the extension, the shape or figure, and the motion we see is very much like and of the same sort as the extension, shape, or motion we touch. We think we can both see and feel circles, and we can speak of shape illusions because we find the oval shape we see can be compared to the circle we feel. It is this assumption Berkeley seeks to dispel.

Berkeley conducts his rejection of the thesis of common sensibles in two steps. The first rejects the notion of extension-in-abstract. Most people assume, he says, that a visible extension and a tangible extension have something in common, namely an extension that is neither visible nor tangible. They take extension to be something we can frame an idea of independent of any way in which it can be sensed (which can then exist independent of any act of perceiving.) Berkeley gives an account of what he thinks people need to be thinking of when they talk of framing an idea of extension-in-abstract.

We are therefore to understand by extension in abstract an idea of extension, for instance, a line or surface entirely stripped of all other sensible qualities and circumstances that might determine it to any particular existence, it is neither black nor white, nor red, nor hath it any colour at all, or any tangible quality whatsoever, and consequently it is of no finite determinate magnitude: for that which bounds or distinguishes one extension from another is some quality wherein they disagree.

(NTV 122)

Berkeley's case against this notion is simple. Anyone who actually follows these directions and strips the idea of a line or an oval or circle from all of its particularities will not have anything left to be the idea of extension in abstract. Removing any way in which a line or a shape is determined through sense experience leaves us, not with mind-independent extension, but with nothing, hence, no idea at all. Notice, by the way, once we agree that it is impossible to frame an idea of extension in abstract, we have also removed any possibility of tracing or demonstrating necessary connections between ideas of sight and other extended objects.

Berkeley now moves on to consider a different and harder case. He says, let's consider extension as it is sensibly experienced, that is, visible extension and tangible extension. Now the question is, is there any way these two different experiences can be said to be alike? Can we compare visible and tangible extension to the extent that they are extended? We are no longer trying to abstract extension from all ways of perceiving it, but merely asking whether each instance of perceiving extension, however it is perceived, has something in common with other such instances, even when perceived with a different sense modality. Berkeley's response to this entirely reasonable question is to walk us through some thought-experiments.<sup>14</sup> His challenge is, if you think there is something about visible extension that is like tangible extension, then you have to be able to point to it and say what it is. But consider first the Man-born-blind. This experiment helps us to consider the deliverances of sight and touch in isolation from each other. So this Man-born blind when blind has ideas of tangible extension. They are ideas of reaching, moving and touching and feeling. Now we give him sight. He is now aware of a new set of experiences – he is experiencing light and color. The nature of these light and color experiences are as different from reaching and touch as pink is from rose-scented. Berkeley is alleging that there is nothing in these experiences that could lead a Man-born-blind to say there are any similarities among them. Berkeley next points out that everyone in fact would say that light and color are different from, say, rough or smooth. It is only when we speak of visible, that is, colored extension, or tangible, that is, textured extension that we seem to be speaking of similarities. Berkeley however denies that we can meaningfully isolate color or texture from extension in this way. Color is a way of being visibly extended and being visibly extended is a way of being colored. The two are mutually dependent upon one another and it is not therefore possible even in thought to extricate the visible extension from the color. This being the case, if color, a way of being visibly extended, is other than roughness, a way of being tangibly extended, then we cannot claim that visibly extended color is like tangibly extended texture. Again, it is worth noticing that Berkeley in this argument has undercut any claim that objects of sight are connected in any

way to any other object. As he states repeatedly throughout the *New Theory*, there are no grounds for holding that visual ideas stand in a relation of necessary connection or resemblance to anything else, and hence cannot be said to point beyond themselves through necessary connection or resemblance. The way is cleared for an alternative way of understanding how visual ideas do in fact stand for the objects of other senses, an alternative way, moreover, that depends upon the insight that visual ideas are only arbitrarily connected to tangible ideas because they are an entirely different sort of ideas than tangible ideas.

## Vision Is a Language

What Berkeley says of course is that the model by means of which we can understand the function of visual ideas is that of language. He is frequently said to have employed a language analogy, to have compared vision to language, and indeed he does just that through the *New Theory*. But the claim he ultimately makes is stronger: it is that vision *is* a language.

Upon the whole, I think we may fairly conclude that the proper objects of vision constitute an universal language of the Author of Nature, whereby we are instructed how to regulate our actions in order to attain those things that are necessary to the preservation and well-being of our bodies, as also to avoid whatever may be hurtful and destructive of them. It is by their information that we are principally guided in all the transactions of life. And the manner wherein they signify and mark unto us the objects which are at a distance is the same as with that of languages and signs of human appointment, which do not suggest the things signified by any likeness or identity of nature, but only by an habitual connexion that experience has made us to observe between them.

(NTV 147)

The story is that visual ideas are words or signs that signify objects through meanings. The account of the *New Theory* given in the *Principles* has suggested that the way in which vision is a language is bound up or supported by the heterogeneity thesis. What we need to ask is, what does it tell us about vision to learn that it is a language?

We have already learned that a proper understanding of space perception depends upon the heterogeneity thesis, that objects of sight are of a different sort than objects of touch and related only arbitrarily to them. Language is an example of a signifying system whose signs, words, are only arbitrarily related to what they signify. The proposal is that visible ideas work just like words. They signify through arbitrary connections learned in experience. Even though visual ideas, like the visual idea of a square, are called by the same name as the tangible square they stand for, this no more indicates they share anything in common than does the fact that the written word “square” is called by the same name as the object it picks out. In both cases, we are not interested in signs for their own sake, but only for what they stand for. The visual idea is called “square” only because it stands for tangible squares. What makes a visual idea appropriate to represent a tangible square is, Berkeley says, its “fitness” and explicitly not its resemblance to that idea. A visible square has four corners and this makes it fitter to represent a tangible square than a tangible circle but its fitness is identified

by characteristics appropriate to symbol systems, and these characteristics are by no means limited to resemblance. Berkeley points out that an alphabet is only arbitrarily connected to the sounds it indicates, but nevertheless, once sounds are assigned to letters, which combination of letters spells out which word is determined by the system and its demands. If visual ideas are signs in a language, then they are in their own nature meaningless. They become meaningful only when they are embedded in the larger visual language, when we learn their meanings.

Visual ideas can become meaningful because they occur regularly and reliably with tangible ideas, so that we can use these visual ideas to warn us of the much more important tangible ideas that are likely to follow. The visible ideas come in the course of experience to serve as signs for the tangible ideas we have learned to expect. This is to say, a given visible idea acquires a tangible meaning. It is important to remember how strictly Berkeley intends this claim. As he has pointed out earlier (NTV 51) just as we hear words meaningfully, so we see visible ideas meaningfully. Seeing visible ideas with a tangible meaning means that the visible ideas occur inextricably with tangible ideas, provided, of course, not by sense, but by the imagination. The presence of visible ideas suggest to the imagination the tangible ideas that have in the past been experienced and which are therefore anticipated. The capacity to see visible ideas meaningfully is the capacity to predict what the meaningless visible ideas have come to mean, that is, what tangible ideas we can look forward to.

In describing vision in this way as a language, Berkeley is presenting a particular picture of our sensory faculties. On the kind of account developed by Descartes and his followers, while God has given us cognitive faculties that can be counted on to work well when used properly, the same cannot be said for our sensitive faculties. The deliverances of the senses are untrustworthy, and it is only the intellect that is the source of certain knowledge. Berkeley's linguistic account of vision, on the other hand, allows him to present a picture of vision that works well and is trustworthy. Vision does just what it is supposed to do. It provides signs that, as Berkeley reiterated in his *Principles* summary, “admonish us that ideas of touch will be imprinted in our minds at such and such distances of time, and in consequences of such and such actions” (PHK 44). This view of how vision works allows Berkeley to join in Locke's rehabilitation of the senses as sources of knowledge. But perhaps more importantly for Berkeley, it allows him to describe our sensory capacities as not just a gift from God, but as intimately connected to God. As Berkeley puts it in the *Principles*, “Visible ideas are the language whereby the governing spirit, on whom we depend, informs us what tangible ideas he is about to imprint upon us, in case we excite this or that motion in our own bodies” (PHK 44). The view put forward here, that vision is a divine language, is indubitably the source of Berkeley's assurance, in his letter to Perceval, that the *New Theory* was not a useless piece of theorizing, but importantly bound up with the moral and theological lessons of the *Principles*. Berkeley apparently assumed that anyone who read both the *New Theory* and the *Principles* would be in a position to appreciate the usefulness of the *New Theory* for the moral and theological aims of the *Principles*. At the very least, he must have taken it to be the case that the thesis that vision is a divine language is importantly connected to the views put forward in the *Principles*. The *New Theory of Vision* is indeed an

account, valuable to students of the psychology of vision, of how we see distance, size, and situation. But it is also a revisioning of the nature of vision. It seems that Berkeley took this revisioning to be central to understanding the metaphysics of the *Principles*.

## notes

- 1 Many marginal signs in his notebooks, called the *Philosophical Commentaries*, show that soon after Berkeley started filling what is generally acknowledged to be his first notebook, he had already considered two matters key to the development of the argument of the *New Theory*, the figure of the Man-Born-Blind-and-Made-to-See and the issue of the heterogeneity of ideas of sight and touch, and he had also begun to work out the cornerstone of his argument against matter.
- 2 See, for example, B. Belfrage, “The scientific background of Berkeley's idealism,” in *Eriugena, Berkeley and the Idealistic Tradition*, edited by S. Gersh and D. Moran (University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 202–223.
- 3 We know that Berkeley read widely in this area and he several times explicitly referenced Descartes, presumably thinking about his *Optics*. Berkeley's account of the reason why distance is not immediately perceived by sight closely follows that of William Molyneux, in his *Dioptrica Nova*. It is also highly likely that another writer on optics that Berkeley had in mind in developing his criticisms was Malebranche, whom he studied closely.
- 4 *Correspondence*, 35.
- 5 A full account of the noble aims of the *Principles*, often assumed to be about useless metaphysics, must await later chapters.
- 6 T.M. Lennon, “The historical consistency of Berkeley's idealism,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 16 (1): 101–124.
- 7 N. Malebranche, *The Search After Truth with Elucidations of the Search After Truth*, edited and translated by T. Lennon and P. Olscamp (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 572.
- 8 Descartes, *Optics*, Discourse One, AT 84, CSM 153.
- 9 This is, for example, strikingly the case for Descartes' treatment of distance perception in *Optics*, Discourse Six.
- 10 Descartes, *Optics*, Discourse Six, AT 137, CSM 170.
- 11 These pictorial cues also form part of earlier accounts, such as that of Descartes.
- 12 The moon used to be also compared to a sixpence, but this comparison is now obsolete.
- 13 In his discussion of situation perception, Berkeley does consider the issue that led optic writers to solve a problem of situation perception in terms of lines and angles, the fact that

the image on the retina is inverted. Indeed, he gives this matter great prominence, since it also serves as one of his examples of problems solved better on his account than by geometry. Since, as I see it, these three problems – the other two are the Barrow illusion and the moon illusion – are, for Berkeley, illustrative rather than probative, I have in the interests of space omitted these otherwise fascinating problems from my discussion. Those interested in pursuing them can consult for the Barrow illusion, see T. Lennon, “The significance of the Barrovian case,” *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science, Part A* (2007), 36–55. The literature on the moon illusion is vast. Those interested could begin with R. Schwartz, *Vision: Variations on Berkeleian Themes* (Blackwell, 1994); F. Egan, “The moon illusion,” *Philosophy of Science* 65 (1998): 604–623; and B. Kronstallis, “Berkeley and the moon illusion,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 21 (2) (2004): 151–166.

[14](#) The meat of Berkeley's argument is contained in the first few experiments so I will limit myself to a discussion of these.



## chapter 3

### ***principles of human knowledge: the introduction***

Understanding what Berkeley is up to in his Introduction to the *Principles* has not been entirely straightforward. While the Introduction begins, as many such introductions do, with an account of the problematic situation Berkeley plans to remedy, it moves on, fairly briskly, to something quite different – a lengthy and substantial piece of argumentation about abstract ideas. Berkeley's arguments have attracted a good deal of attention, but the account of abstraction has been often treated as if it were an entirely independent piece of writing. Its role within an introduction to the subject matter of the *Principles* has remained puzzling. And yet Berkeley's notes to himself as he worked on the *Principles* reveal that he spent a good deal of time thinking about what was to go into his introduction and that he intended right along to include a discussion of abstraction. One of these notebook entries contain a hint to what Berkeley might have had in mind:

Locke's great oversight seems to be that he did not begin with his Third Book at least that he had not some thought of it at first. Certainly the 21<sup>st</sup> books don't agree with what he says in the 3<sup>rd</sup>.

(PC 717)

Leaving aside Berkeley's intriguing piece of Locke criticism, it is worth wondering whether in his Introduction Berkeley is remedying what he takes to be Locke's mistake. Locke's Book III is about words or language and in particular about the right use and abuse of language. Berkeley begins section 6 of the Introduction, at the place where he is starting to address the issue of abstract ideas, by saying that “it is proper to premise somewhat, by way of introduction, concerning the nature and abuse of language.” Berkeley, we may imagine, supposes that his purposes in the *Principles* will be most appropriately carried out if the reader grasps some important facts and problems about language and that these facts or problems will be revealed in a discussion of abstract ideas. Making use of this suggestion will of course require working out the connection between the attack on abstract ideas and the abuses of language that lead us astray. More particularly, it will be necessary to clarify how correcting abuses of language can provide a necessary background to achieving the goals Berkeley outlines in sections 1–5 of the Introduction. *Our* goal, that is, is to acquire an integrated understanding of the contents of the Introduction.

### **Berkeley's Outline of His Project (PHK Introd. 1–5)**

In the first paragraphs of the Introduction, Berkeley sets up the target he is going to be addressing through a contrast between two groups, ordinary persons of common sense and others. The chief characteristic of the first group is that they are perfectly satisfied with the beliefs they have come by, are happy with the deliverances of their senses, and are untroubled

by doubts. The second group gets into difficulties because they, on the other hand, “depart from sense and instinct to follow the light of a superior principle, to reason, meditate, and reflect on the nature of things” (PHK Introd. 1). The attitudes of the first group leave them immune to doubt but because it does occur to members of the second group to question their senses, soon they are lost in “uncouth paradoxes” until finally they “sit down in a forlorn scepticism.” This first paragraph establishes that the problem Berkeley is going to address is not an ordinary one that anybody might have but one that arises because of the extraordinary activity of a special group of persons.

In the second paragraph, Berkeley diagnoses the difficulty some have talked themselves into. The paradoxes they have uncovered are traced to failures and limitations of our faculties. Such people, Berkeley says, lament that “the faculties we have are few, and those designed by nature for the support and comfort of life, and not to penetrate into the inward essences and constitutions of things” (PHK Introd. 2). At this point, readers might be able to recognize such people, since discussions of the limitations of our faculties is a theme found throughout this period. It is an important issue in Descartes' *Meditations*, and Malebranche's development of this theme in his *Search after Truth*, with its many reasons to distrust our senses, is another case in point, while the claim that we are unable to grasp the inward essences of things is one familiar to readers of Locke. The move from difficulties or uncertainties that arise when we question our senses or our reason to a denigration of our faculties themselves was one Berkeley would have been familiar with from his reading, particularly among those who speculated about our knowledge of “inward essences and constitutions of things.”

It is this move, Berkeley tells us, he is going to question, suggesting that, in his eyes, it is impious to leap to the conclusion that our Maker has endowed us with faulty faculties. It is far more likely, Berkeley proposes, that we ourselves are to blame by misusing our God-given faculties and that, in a memorable phrase, “we have raised a dust and then complain we cannot see” (PHK Introd. 3). Berkeley's project is to investigate where those who end up decrying our faculties have gone wrong. He, instead, will uncover the “faulty reasoning” which has led to these unfortunate attitudes. His goal is to identify those principles he suspects to be false that have led to the belief that our mental faculties are not up to the task of providing knowledge. The implication is that when we have sorted out these false principles and arrived at the correct ones, we will have established that in fact we do have faculties appropriate to allow us to satisfy our thirst for knowledge. Behind the largely negative language used in the Introduction, there is a positive program as well, lurking in the background.

There are some interesting points that emerge from Berkeley's account of his project. The first is obvious, that in these paragraphs Berkeley takes his task in the work to follow to be that of undoing skepticism. Skepticism is front and center as the problem that concerns him. The second is equally obvious. Berkeley sets up a contrast between the “illiterate bulk of mankind” who have common sense and are not prone to skepticism and another group who are responsible for raising skeptical doubts of a troubling sort. This second group is identified as philosophers. The obvious conclusion is that Berkeley is taking philosophers as his target

and the skepticism he is worried about in the *Principles* might be called philosophical skepticism. It is the false principles of philosophers he will expose. There is a third interesting point here. There is a “we” moving through the sections that clearly does not refer to and indeed excludes men of common sense, who are referred to as “they.” It looks as though Berkeley is not just taking philosophers as his target but also including them as his audience. At the very least, he is writing for those who are likely to fall prey to philosophical skepticism. “We,” that is, could refer to “we philosophers” or, given that the men of common sense are also described as “illiterate,” “we” might pick out all those of us who are literate, and therefore who are likely to become the victims of philosophers and their skepticism. But whoever “we” are, “we” are not among those who are never troubled by skepticism. The skeptical beliefs Berkeley seeks to dispel will be beliefs likely to be held by that narrow segment of mankind who might have taken up philosophy.

## **Abstract Ideas (PHK Introd. 6–17)**

The situation that Berkeley seeks to remedy is one created by philosophers. They have come to judge our cognitive faculties as misleading and limited due to the skeptical paradoxes they have uncovered, because, unlike ordinary people, they have subjected these faculties to critical scrutiny. Having established this much, at this point in the Introduction Berkeley raises the matter of abstract ideas. His justification for doing so is the topic Berkeley shares with Locke's Book III: the use and abuse of language. The implication is fairly straightforward. Berkeley thinks philosophers have fallen into skeptical traps because they have falsely supposed they have abstract ideas, which false supposition can be traced to a misuse of language. The line of argument Berkeley wants to make can be easily identified. Once we seek to place the discussion of abstraction within the context of the Introduction, it becomes clear that the account of abstract ideas has a pivotal role to play. Abstract ideas are identified as the source of the skeptical impulses of previous thinkers. At the end of the introduction, moreover, the skeptical problems are to be solved by stripping words from ideas, so as to pay attention to the ideas and not to be misled by words. But difficulties remain. Understanding Berkeley's account of abstract ideas requires us to see how abstract ideas can have the consequences that Berkeley alleges. Tackling this, on the surface, quite reasonable problem instantly raises a more difficult and more central problem: what is the issue Berkeley is addressing with his anti-abstractionism? Concentrating solely on the discussion of abstract ideas has led many to assume that the issue Berkeley is discussing is one of generality. He is claiming, it is thought, that Locke held a mistaken view about what is happening when we apply a term like “triangle” to many triangles. Berkeley, it is said, is putting forward a different, nominalistic account, in which terms do not stand for a single abstract idea of a triangle, but instead stand indifferently for any particular triangle. But whatever may or may not be the virtues of these competing accounts of generality, it is very hard to see why Berkeley should have supposed that Locke's account of generality should be responsible for encouraging skepticism through the ages. Indeed, given that, on this view, Berkeley is doing nothing more than providing an alternative account of the use of general terms, it is difficult to see how this correction, however appropriate, could have the wide-

ranging consequences he claims. The rather striking lack of connection between the issues thought to be addressed and the reasons put forward for addressing them bring home the need to clarify the issue that leads Berkeley to look at abstract ideas. Is he in fact worried about generality or is there something else at stake?<sup>1</sup>

A crucial step in getting Berkeley's overall argument right is to start by identifying the point being made in section 7 of the Introduction. This section does not fit well into a storyline that sees Berkeley as concerned about generality, because the abstraction in question seems to concern a highly particular idea, the perceiving by sight of something colored, extended, and moving, from which we are supposed to be able to identify the idea of the color, the idea of the extension (the shape, etc.), and the idea of the motion. Berkeley begins this paragraph with a move to which he frequently has recourse: he reminds us of something that is "agreed on all hands." In this case, he says everyone agrees that qualities of things don't exist separately one from another, but are all mixed up together in objects. What, then, does this obvious fact, if fact it is, have to do with abstract ideas? In trying to pin down the fact in question, it may be helpful to notice that Berkeley's claim is reminiscent of a sentence in Locke's *Essay*, in which Locke introduces the notion of simple ideas:

Though the qualities that affect our Senses, are in the things themselves, so united and blended, that there is no separation, no distance between them, yet 'tis plain the *Ideas* they produce in the Mind, enter by the Senses simple and unmixed.

(ECHU 2.2.1)

Locke uses the observation that qualities exist in things inextricably blended together as a contrast with the way in which ideas enter our minds through the senses. Our senses as it were sort the ideas they receive into distinct unmixed kinds. But Locke also assumes that, despite this sorting by the senses, some ideas can be produced in the mind by more than one sense. Berkeley follows up his report that it is thought that the mind can "consider each quality singly" with a somewhat different picture of what is perceived by the senses. As Berkeley sets up the situation, "there is perceived by sight an object extended, coloured and moved: this mixed or compound idea the mind resolving into its simple, constituent parts and viewing each by itself, exclusive of the rest, does frame the abstract idea of extension, colour and motion" (PHK Introd. 7). Berkeley appears to have transferred the "obvious" fact that qualities of things exist all mixed up together to the object of perception by sight. Berkeley is suggesting that what enters the mind in perception are not in fact simple ideas, but instead the sight of something blended together, at one and the same time extended, colored, and moved.<sup>2</sup> In the way Berkeley is telling things, the separation into distinct ideas is thought to occur, not in the process of sensation, by the sense organs, but by the mind as an act of abstraction. There are two things to notice therefore about this first kind of abstract ideas Berkeley is describing in section 7. The ideas in question are abstract and not simple because of Berkeley's own distinctive account of the object of perception as itself blended. So, appreciating Berkeley's rejection of this kind of abstract ideas will require an understanding of his view about the nature of the object of perception. Secondly, Berkeley specifically describes what the mind is doing in distinguishing the idea of a color from the ideas of

extension and motion as abstraction, but the process he describes starts from a particular blended object of sight, and sees the mind as identifying the color as distinguished from the shape and the motion, which results presumably in three particular ideas. So the kind of process he is initially concerned with does not involve framing abstract general ideas, but instead is that of singling out or separating particular ideas from their context.<sup>3</sup>

The next two sections indubitably describe general and not particular ideas. It is been held, therefore, that Berkeley is describing a second way of arriving at abstract ideas, one that in these cases result in ideas of general entities.<sup>4</sup> In section 8, Berkeley starts from the ideas isolated in section 7, that is, the ideas of a color, an extension, and a motion. What is alleged, he says, is that, in each case, we can identify an idea of, for example, color in abstract, “by leaving out of the particular colors perceived by sense that which distinguishes them one from another, while retaining that only which is common to all.” We are thought to arrive at ideas of abstract qualities by omitting everything that is particular to one instance or another and the result is then supposed to be a general idea of that quality, one that applies to all instances of the quality because it contains only what is common. The same process is repeated in section 9, but this time we consider things that bear qualities, such as individual persons, but we again omit all qualities that distinguish one person from another, and retain what they all have in common, thus producing the abstract idea of man (or person). The question now is: In this account is Berkeley introducing a new kind of abstraction, different from the separating or singling process described in section 7, but one that results in general ideas?

It is often thought that Berkeley perceived some special difficulty with abstract *general* ideas, that an idea containing all and only what is common to color or man is an idea that is impossible, or inconsistent, because nothing entirely general can exist. (If such entities can't exist, how can we conceive ideas of them?)<sup>5</sup> There is reason to suspect however that generality is not the issue that is most worrying Berkeley. One important consideration is that he has already given, in an abbreviated form, his argument against abstract ideas in the *New Theory* in section 122–125. The issue that motivates the discussion in these passages, however, is not, what are the cognitive resources that allow me to apply the word “line” or the word “triangle” to lines or triangles? It is rather, do I have the cognitive resources to recognize that a visible triangle and a tangible triangle are both triangles because they share a quality in common, extension in abstract? What is crucial to the notion of extension in abstract is that it is neither visible nor tangible. The process that Berkeley is describing again is one of separation. Can I separate a particular visible line from its visible properties, that is, its colors, so as to derive an idea of extension in abstract? The putative process that Berkeley describes in NTV 122 that is supposed to culminate in an idea of extension in abstract begins with a particular idea of sight, a visible line, and is described as proceeding seamlessly, discarding qualities that distinguish the line from all other lines until it achieves an idea of extension in abstract. So it seems reasonable to suppose that Berkeley is describing what he takes to be a single cognitive process. We are held to begin with the idea of a particular object of sight or touch, and by separating off whatever is distinctive, are said to arrive at abstractions, ideas which have nothing particular or distinguishing about them. There are two

consequences that need stressing. The first is that Berkeley is not actually concerned, as he himself says in section 12 of the Introduction, with *general* ideas but only with *abstract* ones. Abstraction, as he is using the term, is the process of separating or singling out some aspects of ideas from others. This means that, when Berkeley rejects the possibility of abstract ideas in the Introduction, section 10 (or NTV 123), it is this process at which he is taking aim.

So far, Berkeley has told us what he thinks other people think they are doing when they lay claim to having abstract ideas. The nub of his argument occurs in section 10, where he denies that he can frame abstract ideas following the procedure he has outlined. He runs through the various kinds of abstract ideas discussed, claiming to be unable to frame abstract ideas such as “man” or “motion” and concludes that while he is perfectly able to separate in thought a hand from an arm, what he can't do is to separate from his idea of a hand all particular colors. He can't he says, “conceive separately those qualities which it is impossible should exist so separated,” as, a colorless arm. Berkeley had introduced his attack in section 10 by announcing that he can find no abstract ideas when he introspects, a failure which has been widely taken to be of dubious value. But as his conclusion makes clear, he takes this not to be an indication of personal failure, but instead to be a matter of what can and cannot be conceived. It is beyond our cognitive powers to conceive a quality as if it could exist in isolation from other qualities with which it is in fact inextricably united. The problem on which Berkeley is putting his finger is one of conceivability.<sup>6</sup> The question, now, of course, is: what justifies Berkeley's strictures about what can and cannot be conceived? Why does Berkeley think the kinds of ideas envisioned by abstractionists are inconceivable? Why does he think we are unable to do what they think they can do? What is it about the kinds of separating they think they can do that leads Berkeley to claim that it can't be done?

In trying to deal with these questions, we need to begin where Berkeley does in section 7 with the deliverances of the senses, where Berkeley claims it is impossible to conceive extension, color, and motion in isolation one from another. The question is, why? (Haven't we just done it?) And there is a prior question: what justifies Berkeley's account of the initial deliverances of the senses as mixed and blended? Why isn't Locke right that we initially perceive simple ideas? This question is all the more pressing since Berkeley himself frequently refers to the immediate objects of sight as light and colors, not light, colors, extension, and motion. This apparent inconsistency is important to resolve because Berkeley is staking a lot on his account of the immediate objects of sense experience.

It is possible I think to get some help on this matter by turning to what is, at first reading, an extremely confusing passage from the *New Theory*, NTV 130, where Berkeley is discussing precisely the case raised by section 7, the possibility of abstracting an idea of extension and an idea of color. He begins by citing the prevailing opinion that he is going to refute, that we perceive more by sight than just light and colors, and quotes Locke as holding this position. Locke's view is that by sight we perceive not only light and colors, but also space, figure, and motion. Berkeley denies Locke's assertion on the following grounds:



And as for figure and extension, I leave it to anyone that shall calmly attend to his own clear and distinct ideas to decide whether he had any idea intromitted immediately and properly by sight save only light and colours: or whether it be possible for him to frame in his mind a distinct abstract idea of visible extension or figure exclusive of all colour: and on the other hand, whether he can conceive colour without visible extension?

(NTV 130)

It seems the position Berkeley takes Locke to hold is that we can perceive color *and* we can perceive figure or motion in the same way that we can perceive blue and we can perceive red. He denies that introspection will discover these ideas as well as those of light and colors. But he further claims that seeing color just is seeing visibly extended color. Color is dependent on visible extension in the sense that color is a way of being visibly extended, and hence color can't be conceived without extension. This claim is not unfamiliar in the sense that it is not unfamiliar to find seventeenth-century thinkers claiming that modes can't be conceived apart from that of which they are modes.<sup>7</sup> Berkeley is however making a further claim here: that visible extension can't be conceived without color, because being visibly extended is a way of being colored. The dependency relation between the idea of color and the idea of visible extension is mutual. Neither one can exist without the other. So you can't erase the color from the perception of visually extended color and have visual extension left. The project of thinking about or conceiving color in isolation from visible extension can't be accomplished. And if this is the case, there is no way we can follow the directions for framing abstract ideas in section 7 and conceive what color would be like in the absence of extension.

Berkeley can be understood to be resting his claim about ideas we will not find within ourselves on a more general view about conceivability. An alleged idea will turn out to be inconceivable if you can't follow the directions for conceiving the idea and come up with an idea with content. In this case you can't peel the color off the visible extension and come up with ideas of each in isolation from the other. Exactly the same intuitions are at work in the two later sections. We are told that the way to frame an idea of extension in abstract is to omit from our idea all the ways of being extended in which extensions differ, with the goal of arriving at what is common to all instances of extension. Berkeley's point is that this goal cannot be attained. The directions for framing the idea cannot be followed, for, when you have removed all ways in which an instance of extension can be distinguished from all other instances of extension, you will have removed all the ways in which it can be extended at all. There will be no common content left. The futility of this process emerges particularly clearly in Berkeley's compressed argument in the *New Theory*, quoted earlier (chapter 2, 28), which concludes:

Now I do not find that I can perceive, imagine, or any wise frame in my mind such an abstract idea as is here spoken of. A line or surface which is neither black, nor white, nor blue, nor yellow, etc., nor long, nor short, nor rough, nor smooth, nor square, nor round, etc., is perfectly incomprehensible.

(NTV 122)

If we do what we are supposed to be doing, and remove all determinants from a given idea, what we will be left with will be, as Berkeley puts it in the Manuscript Introduction, “just nothing.”<sup>8</sup> Exactly the same considerations apply for compound entities as well, of course. If an idea of color from which all particular ways of being colored have been stripped off is inconceivable, then an idea of a man whose skin is of a color from which all determinants of color have been removed is equally inconceivable. The problem with abstraction, on Berkeley's account, is that it presupposes that we can do something with our ideas that Berkeley holds cannot be done. And so far the issue that Berkeley has been concerned with has not been whether general terms refer by standing for general ideas, but instead with a particular picture of how we can and cannot frame ideas.

We have not yet looked at the passage in his argument against abstraction, in which Berkeley apparently set great store, the passage about Locke's triangle, referred to by Berkeley in his Notebooks as a “killing blow” (PC 687). It is this reference that has, no doubt, encouraged people to take Berkeley to be addressing himself chiefly to a theory about the meaning of general words held by Locke. It is certainly true that the description of an abstract idea of a triangle provided by Locke in his *Essay* 4.7.9, gives an account open to lampooning. It reads:

Does it not require some pains and skill to form the *general Idea* of a *Triangle*, ... for it must be neither Oblique, nor Rectangle, neither Equilateral, Equicrural, nor Scalenon; but all and none of these at once. In effect, it is something imperfect, that cannot exist; an *Idea* wherein some parts of several different and inconsistent *Ideas* are put together.

There has been much controversy about what aspects of Locke's triangle Berkeley is singling out for criticism, since it offers numerous grounds for attack. That Berkeley repeated the phrase that emphasizes that the resulting idea is “all or none” of its determinants suggests that he thought that the same analysis he had given earlier applied in this case. What deserves questioning, however, is whether the presence of Locke's triangle at this stage of the argument shows that Berkeley primarily had Locke's theory of meaning in his sights. Locke's triangle presents such an easy target, after all, because it does not occur at a place where Locke was giving a positive account of abstract general ideas and how we make them. Instead, Locke was raising quite a different point and one much more congenial to Berkeley, that there is no reason to suppose that the human reasoning capacity is grounded in inborn general maxims, like “’tis impossible for the same things to be, and not to be.” Earlier in the same passage in which the triangle occurs, Locke argues against this view, on the grounds that “particular *Ideas* are *first* received and distinguished, and so knowledge got about them: and next to them, the less general or specifick.” Locke's triangle is so easily lampooned because it is intended as a lampoon. The point he wants to make is one echoed by Berkeley, when Berkeley writes, “Is it not a hard thing to imagine, that a couple of children cannot prate together of their sugar-plumbs and rattles and the rest of their little trinkets, till they have first tacked together numberless inconsistencies, and so framed in their minds abstract general ideas and annexed them to every common name they make use of” (PHK Introd. 14). Berkeley, in invoking Locke's triangle as a “killing blow,” could be taking Locke to be a partner not an adversary in his attack on abstract general ideas. This is not to say, however,

that Berkeley was prepared to absolve Locke entirely in the matter of abstraction. A passage in a letter to Berkeley's American correspondent, Samuel Johnson, makes this entirely clear.

Abstract general ideas was a notion that Mr. Locke held in common with the Schoolmen, and I think all other philosophers; it runs through his whole book of Human Understanding. He holds an abstract idea of existence; exclusive of perceiving and being perceived. I cannot find I have any such idea, and this is my reason against it.<sup>9</sup>

What is of course of particular interest about this passage is that Berkeley does not cite the abstract idea of a triangle or anything like it when pointing out that Locke, like all other philosophers, is guilty of supposing the possibility of abstract ideas. Instead, he cites Locke's tendency to believe that existence can be abstracted from perceiving or being perceived. This is well worth noting because it underlines that the issue that is foremost in Berkeley's mind when considering abstraction is not meaning but metaphysics – he is linking Locke's use of abstract general ideas to a belief in the possibility of an idea of existence abstracted from perception, that is, to the central issue of the *Principles of Human Knowledge*.

In sum, the upshot of Berkeley's discussion of abstract general ideas is not that we can use ideas of particular triangles to stand indifferently for many triangles, although he does think that recognizing this fact will wean us from the belief that abstract general ideas are required either to communicate or to enlarge our knowledge. Instead, the lesson Berkeley is trying to teach emerges as one that is much more central to his projects. He thinks the process we are alleged to follow in constructing abstract ideas cannot be accomplished. This possibility of abstraction is an issue, as we have seen, that is linked in Berkeley's mind to the project of the *Principles*, and also that of the *New Theory*. It is because people think they can abstract from the ideas of sight and touch that they fail to recognize the heterogeneity of these ideas, and suppose there is some abstract idea of extension held in common. Missing this point can in turn cause us to misunderstand the ways in which ideas of sight can serve as signs for ideas of touch, and lead us to suppose that ideas of sight misrepresent the extension in abstract they fail to resemble. Berkeley could in fact have taken abstraction to be a false principle leading us to misunderstand and to mistrust the nature of our faculties. A belief that we ought to be able to have a kind of idea that we actually cannot have can lead to a forlorn skepticism.

Berkeley, moreover, sums up the section rejecting the possibility of abstract ideas with a remarkably harsh condemnation of the work of those who fall into the trap of presupposing or making use of ideas considered to be abstract. It is not just the “Schoolmen” who make the mistake of relying heavily on abstraction, he thunders, but all who are and have been engaged in the task of seeking new knowledge.

When men consider the great pains, industry, and parts, that have for so many ages been laid out on the cultivation and advancement of the sciences, and that notwithstanding all this, the far greater part of them remain full of darkness and uncertainty, and disputes that are like never to have an end, and even those thought to be supported by the most clear and cogent demonstrations, contain in them paradoxes which are perfectly irreconcilable to the understandings of men, and that taking all together, a small portion of them doth supply any real benefit to mankind, otherwise than being an innocent diversion and amusement. I say, the consideration of all this is apt to throw them into a despondency, and perfect contempt for all study. But this may perhaps cease, upon a view of the false principles that have obtained in the world, amongst all which there is none, methinks, hath a more wide influence over the thought of speculative men, than this of abstract general ideas.

(PHK Introd. 17)

In this remarkable passage, Berkeley issues a wholesale condemnation of all previous attempts at advancing knowledge. The mistake Berkeley has been pointing to, the reliance on abstract general ideas, is a philosophical mistake, but here it is clear Berkeley takes this mistake to have far-reaching consequences, diverting the search for knowledge from what would be useful to know into trivial byways.

## The Abuse of Language (PHK Introd. 18–25)

Having identified the consequences of a mistaken belief in abstract ideas, Berkeley returns to his earlier claim, that it is language that leads us into this error. “The ablest patrons of abstract ideas,” Berkeley reminds us, consider that abstract ideas come into play when we want to use names. This claim calls to mind what Locke says at the beginning of Book III of the *Essay*, that language allows us to use general terms to stand for more than one particular idea. Those names “become general,” Locke writes, “which are made to stand for general ideas” (ECHU 3.1.1). It is interesting to note, however, that Berkeley does not cite this passage, but one that occurs later in the *Essay* at 3.6.39, where Locke has a more complicated point to make. The presence of different words, he says there, like “watch” and “clock” or “man” and “changeling,” lead us to believe falsely that these words stand for different species or kinds of things, that moreover differ essentially one from another. Berkeley picks up on what Locke has identified as the error involved here, that because people mistakenly believe that names have a fixed and determined meaning, that they suppose that the name stands for a single abstract idea, to which particular ideas all conform. Berkeley is not condemning Locke here for holding that words stand for ideas, rather he is joining Locke in condemning those who think that words stand for *determinate* ideas, which, Locke would say, lead us to suppose fixed essences in nature. We are drawn to abstract ideas because we think they allow us to think about kinds of things with fixed boundaries. Berkeley does go on to point out that it is not necessary that every significant use of a word be accompanied by a determinate idea, either in the mind of the speaker or hearer. We frequently use words simply as signs in a chain of reasoning, without supplying in each instance an idea for which the

word stands. And hearers can react to words, such as “Watch out,” without attaching the idea of some specific danger to these words. Berkeley is here pointing out instances in which words can be used while being de-coupled from an accompanying idea.

While Berkeley here acknowledges that words may be used without ideas, the message with which he concludes the Introduction and which leads back to the guiding aim of the *Principles*, is in fact the reverse, that ideas should be used without the obstruction of words. Berkeley resolves:

Since therefore words are so apt to impose on the understanding, whatever ideas I consider, I shall endeavor to take them bare and naked into my view, keeping out of my thoughts, so far as I am able, those names which long and constant use hath so strictly united with them.

(PHK Introd. 21)

Anyone who follows this advice, he thinks, will not be taken in by “verbal disputes,” or be drawn to appeal to abstract ideas, because they will never find any, and, because, as Berkeley points out, “I cannot be deceived into thinking I have an idea I have not” (PHK Introd. 22), I will significantly increase the certainty of the judgments I make. This advice with which Berkeley concludes the introduction is not an insignificant part of his method. In fact, throughout the *Principles*, there are numerous occasions where Berkeley urges his readers to pay attention to their own ideas, just as he does here as he reaches the end of his Introduction:

Whoever therefore designs to read the following sheets, I entreat him to make my words the occasion of his own thinking, and endeavor to attain the same train of thoughts in reading, that I had in writing them. By this means it will be easy for him to discover the truth or falsity of what I say. He will be out of all danger of being deceived by my words, and I do not see how he can be led into an error by considering his own naked, undisguised ideas.

(PHK Introd. 25)

As his readers moved from a study of the Introduction to that of the body of the *Principles*, Berkeley could expect them to carry with them at least two lessons. The first is the importance of the anti-abstractionism he defended in the Introduction to overcome the defects of earlier attempt to advance knowledge. The second is the need to start always with what he has called “bare, naked ideas,” that, unhindered by the confusions brought about by words, will serve as the source or fount of the knowledge we seek to advance.

## notes

- [1](#) There is a further question which has been more often examined: What use does Berkeley make of his anti-abstractionism in the body of the *Principles*? We will take up this matter in due course.

- 2 George Pappas discusses Berkeley's rejection of simple ideas in this context in his *Berkeley's Thought* (Cornell University Press, 2000), 52.
- 3 Martha Bolton in her “Berkeley's objections to abstract ideas” in *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley*, edited by E. Sosa (Reidel, 1987), 61–81, dubs this kind of abstraction “singling.” In a paper in the same volume, “Berkeley's anti-abstractionism” (45–60), I identify what is at stake as “separating,” which I think has a more general application.
- 4 Kenneth Winkler, for example, in a very careful discussion of this question, proposes that section 7 discusses what he calls “incomplete ideas” while sections 8 and 9 are about ideas of abstract general ideas. See K. Winkler, “Berkeley on abstract ideas,” *Archiv fuer Geschichte der Philosophie* 65 (1983): 63–80.
- 5 Evidence in favor of this view is that Berkeley presents an argument very like this in his Draft Introduction to the *Principles* (Vol. II, 125). Evidence against, however, is that Berkeley not only did not include this argument in the published Introduction, but crossed it out in the Draft Introduction.
- 6 For further discussion of these matters, see W. Doney, “Berkeley's argument against abstract ideas,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 8 (1) (1983): 295–308.
- 7 Consider the following from Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*: “For example, shape is unintelligible except as an extended thing, and motion is unintelligible except as motion in an extended space ... By contrast, it is possible to understand extension without shape or motion” (*Principles of Philosophy* I, 53).
- 8 *George Berkeley's Manuscript Introduction*, edited by B. Belfrage (Doxa [Oxford], 1987), 71.
- 9 Berkeley to Johnson, *The Works of George Berkeley*, Vol. II, 293.



## chapter 4

### ***principles of human knowledge: berkeley's summary statement of his position (PHK 1–33)***

In precisely 33 paragraphs that begin his *Principles of Human Knowledge* Berkeley lays out the argument that establishes his position. These paragraphs, therefore, could not be more important to understanding the nature of Berkeley's project, not only in the *Principles*, but also in *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, Berkeley's attempt to re-argue his earlier claims.<sup>1</sup> Berkeley does not expect these paragraphs to settle all questions or doubts a reader might have about his views, but what he is hoping for, presumably, is that his readers will have arrived at a good understanding of what he is up to, the nature of the conclusions he is drawing, and the premises from which these conclusions follow.

These hopes, if not unreasonable, have not always been met by Berkeley's readers. There is, in fact, a rather surprising disarray among readers of Berkeley when it comes to stating or even labeling the nature of the position for which he is arguing. In what has gone before, I have referred to Berkeley's position as “immaterialism.” There are strong reasons for adopting “immaterialism” as the name for Berkeley's theory.<sup>2</sup> For one thing, it is the term that he himself adopts.<sup>3</sup> There are reasons as well, however, for being cautious about using this term to describe Berkeley's philosophical outlook. Immaterialism is commonly understood to stand for the denial of the existence of mind-independent matter. This claim is entirely negative, and perhaps might better be referred to as anti-materialism. If the conclusion or the summary of Berkeley's ideas are taken to be summed up by the word “anti-materialism,” then it would seem as if Berkeley had no positive views to contribute about his subject, the principles of human knowledge.

Another term frequently used in connection with Berkeley is “idealism.”<sup>4</sup> This term too has a lengthy pedigree: Kant referred to Berkeley as a “Dogmatic Idealist.” An obvious complication, however, is that many people, Kant included, have referred to themselves as or have been called idealists. It is far from obvious what exactly is being picked out by this term.<sup>5</sup> The most common account given of Berkeley's idealism says that it consists in the view that sensibles or sensible qualities or sensible objects depend for their existence on being perceived, although some have added to this the thesis that the only substance is spiritual substance.<sup>6</sup> Because of these unclarities in what the term stands for, “Idealism” is also a less than fully helpful label for Berkeley's position. Another consequence of stressing idealism as that which is of primary importance to Berkeley's theory is that he appears to complete his argument for idealism by paragraph 7. This inevitably raises the question: what is Berkeley up to in the remainder of the *Principles*?

This is not to say that these terms do not pick out positions Berkeley in fact endorses. In a very real sense Berkeley is certainly both an anti-materialist and an idealist. So long as our



goal, however, is to understand the nature of Berkeley's project, there are a number of problems with these two theses, and how they relate to one another. Are we to understand one or both of these theses as the conclusion of Berkeley's argument, what he is seeking to establish, and if the former we need to know which is the conclusion and which the premise? Is idealism true because there is no matter, or on the contrary, do we recognize the non-existence of matter because of the truth of idealism? Alternatively, are each of these theses defended as premises for some further nameless conclusion? Finally, if anti-materialism, idealism, or both are the conclusions of Berkeley's argument, then the *Principles* as well as *Three Dialogues* are anomalies within Berkeley's works, for these claims do not occur or are not highlighted elsewhere. But if instead Berkeley is to be read as seeking to establish some further conclusion, then there is the looming problem of identifying that conclusion. Our task now is to try to settle these questions, without prejudgment, by working through the argument of PHK 1–33.

## PHK 1–7: The Statement of Idealism

Sadly, the very first clause of the very first sentence of this introductory statement of Berkeley's argument has raised problems in the eyes of numerous readers. The sentence reads as follows: “It is evident to any one who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions or operation of the mind, or lastly ideas formed by the help of memory and imagination, either compounding, dividing or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways” (PHK 1). If what Berkeley is saying here is supposed to be evident to all, then the claims he is making here ought to be obvious and unsurprising. But instead the sentence with which Berkeley begins the *Principles* has struck many readers as not only not evident, but in fact false. Isn't it the case, they ask, that Berkeley is ruling out without discussion an extremely plausible option, that the objects of our knowledge are not ideas but things? Georges Dicker puts this common reaction very nicely: “But it is also obvious that ordinary people, both in Berkeley's day and in ours would reject [the claim that all objects of human knowledge are ideas] and would hold instead that the objects of human knowledge include material things that are certainly not ideas in our minds.”<sup>7</sup> Isn't it the case that Berkeley is beginning his argument in a highly tendentious manner, by assuming what he ought to be proving?

It is probably true as Dicker assumes, that most people today, philosophers and ordinary people alike, would take the word “object” to refer most naturally to things. But Berkeley has just finished abjuring his readers not to get too hung up on words, but to try to locate the ideas intended by the words in question. And, of course, it would be entirely natural for the author of this advice to follow it up with some obvious truths about ideas. For, after all, there is nothing tendentious either to philosophers or to ordinary people in the assumption that there are ideas. Even if most people do not hold that knowledge is limited to ideas, but is of things, they all do think we have ideas. And those philosophers in particular who have been identified by Berkeley as his target in his introduction, also think, as Berkeley will frequently

point out, that “the things immediately perceived are ideas in the mind.”<sup>8</sup> Philosophers of his day took ideas to be foundational to the genesis of knowledge, and identified ideas, as Locke says, with “whatever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks” or “whatever it is the mind is employed about in thinking” (ECHU 1.1.6). So, what will be evident to anyone exploring the nature of knowledge is just that there are ideas, ideas exist. Berkeley is not saying anything at all about what else does or does not exist.

The same is true of the remainder of this paragraph, which details the nature of these ideas, but nowhere does Berkeley introduce any speculations about that which is not an idea, or any argument to the effect that sensible things or anything else are really ideas. Berkeley himself might have regarded the interesting content of his first sentence to be, not that when we know, we have ideas, but that it is evident there are ideas of three particular sorts. It is often assumed, in declaring this taxonomy evident to all, Berkeley is displaying the effects of living in a post-Lockean world. Locke did indeed claim that we first have ideas when we begin to have sensations, that there are ideas of reflection in addition to ideas of sensation, and that we have complex or compound ideas as well as simple ideas. Nevertheless, to do justice to Berkeley's approach, it is important to try to read his division into three sorts of ideas, not as merely replicating Locke, but as expressing points Berkeley could take to be universally acceptable. In delineating his first category of ideas, Berkeley lists our various sense faculties, sight, touch, smell, taste, and hearing, together with what are generally regarded as their proper objects, light and colors, hard and soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance, odors, tastes, and sounds. It is worth pointing out that, while the names of these proper objects can be used to pick out qualities of mind-independent things, Berkeley is explicit that, in offering this list, he is continuing to talk about ideas. Berkeley makes clear that this is his intention in the first sentence of his list, where he writes: “By sight, I have the ideas of light and colours.” There is no reason to suppose Berkeley has switched topics to the mind-independent qualities that share the same names as sensory ideas.<sup>9</sup> The point he could be thought to be making is that the basic capacity for knowledge requires that knowers be sentient, that they have sense organs that respond to sensory stimulation by sensing. And whenever we are actually sensing, we are sensing something, that is, ideas of sense. So there can be no knowledge at all without ideas of sense.

Berkeley's second category has been regarded as highly unsatisfactory. This particular clause is often assumed to be referring to Locke's ideas of reflection, but since Berkeley subsequently denied that we could have ideas of reflection in Locke's sense, ideas of our minds and mental activities, the clause itself is often taken to be at best cagey, and at worst, problematic. A little attention, however, to the example cited at the end of PHK 1, suggests that Berkeley might have had a more limited set of ideas in mind. After having given an example of the kind of ideas the mind puts together, Berkeley says of these collections of ideas: “which, as they are pleasing or disagreeable, excite the passions of love, hatred, joy, grief and so forth.” This is the only reference to ideas that are neither sensations nor collections of sensations, and so the only possible place in which Berkeley might be talking about his second category of ideas. Here he is not referring to all of Locke's ideas of reflection, but only to what might perhaps be thought of as the passively received objects of

internal stimulation, that is, ways in which we are affected by internal stimulation, most particularly, by pain and pleasure, together with the passions to which they give rise. That we have feelings of pleasure and pain is an important thread of Berkeley's arguments and it should certainly be obvious to all both that these feelings, although passively received like the objects of the five senses, are not proper objects of the five senses and it should be obvious that sentient beings have them.<sup>10</sup> They seem to be good candidates therefore for Berkeley's second group of ideas. Unfortunately, while the passions are certainly what Berkeley highlights here, this observation does not render Berkeley's account of the second category entirely consistent, since there is no gainsaying that he initially includes the "operations" of the mind within this group. Berkeley is therefore signaling that we do have an awareness of the actions of the mind mentioned in this paragraph or the next, although he will later make it explicit that we do not and cannot have ideas of these actions.

The third category of ideas indicates that knowers are not simply passive recipients of ideas, but also have faculties, memory, and imagination, that do things with ideas or act upon them. The most important thing that we are able to do with our ideas thanks to our memory and imagination is to notice when ideas go together and to form them into collections on that basis. Knowers learn by gathering the ideas received by the senses into new ideas. Here, again, in order to make sure the claim retains its obviousness we need to keep in mind that Berkeley is talking about what knowers do in order to come to know about, for example, apples, and not about what it is to be an apple.<sup>11</sup> He is explicit that the result of our collecting and naming operations is that ideas are "to be reputed as one thing" or "are accounted one distinct thing." When Berkeley goes on to describe further collections of ideas as constituting sensible things, the context suggests that this constituting is what Berkeley has just described as "reputing" and "accounting." He is describing how we make ideas. While there is a great deal more to be said on the topic of ideas, so far there is no reason to take Berkeley to be committing himself to anything more than that knowledge requires at least ideas. On this account, he has not, as he is sometimes accused of doing, in this first paragraph run together ideas and qualities or ideas and things.

PHK 2, like PHK 1, is almost entirely without argument, and for this reason should also be read as saying something uncontroversial. This seems relatively easy with respect to its basic ontological claim – there are minds – inasmuch as readers who have already granted there are ideas should have no difficulty in recognizing there are minds as well. Minds, Berkeley points out, are just that which "knows or perceives" ideas. Ideas are originally introduced to help us describe or make precise descriptions of mental activity, they are the something minds know or perceive, or Berkeley adds, will imagine or remember. In asking his readers to grant there are minds, Berkeley is not asking them to buy into any particular theory of mind. The assertion that something exists which can variously be called "mind, spirit, soul, or my self" (terms which can be and have been distinguished one from another) seems safely obvious, and perhaps Berkeley could have regarded as safely obvious to his readers that minds are not the same as ideas, and so could call them distinct from ideas without intending a strict ontological separation of minds and ideas.<sup>12</sup>

Berkeley ends PHK 2, however, with a claim that has proved puzzling, and which he himself apparently regards as controversial, for he provides an argument, if a rather brief one, in PHK 3. Berkeley tells us that by the various terms used for mind, “I do not denote any one of my ideas, but a thing entirely distinct from them, wherein they exist, or which is the same thing, whereby they are perceived, for the existence of an idea consists in its being perceived.” Berkeley includes two different assertions here, first, that a mind is not itself an idea but rather that which perceives ideas,<sup>13</sup> and second, that “the existence of an idea consists in its being perceived.” It is important to notice that this phrase, from PHK 2, is explicitly about *ideas*, it is *ideas* that are identified as dependent beings existing thanks to the mental activity of some mind. It is relatively uncontroversial, one would think, to grant the mind-dependence of ideas. Berkeley's strategy in his argument in PHK 3, however, leads him to vary his language so that by the end of PHK 3, he is talking about “unthinking things.” These shifts in terminology have made the nature of the argument in PHK 3 difficult to track.

Berkeley begins PHK 3 with a list of kinds of ideas he thinks are uncontroversially mind-dependent: “That neither our thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by the imagination, exist without the mind is what everybody will allow.” It is relatively unproblematic to say of most ideas that they exist because of the operations of the mind by means of which they exist. Ideas of these sorts exist when people have them. Berkeley wants to capture this same intuition for “sensations or ideas imprinted on the senses, however blended or combined together.” So long as he is talking about sensations, ideas actually imprinted on the senses, then it is again relatively easy to see why Berkeley can expect agreement, for surely actually existing sensations exist in being perceived. “There was an odour,” he writes, “that is, it was smelled, there was a sound, that is to say, it was heard, a colour or a figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch.” Smelling or hearing is something happening to me in the presence of a rose in full bloom or a ringing bell and involves the sensing, the apprehension, of something, the odor or sound, which exists in me because I am smelling or hearing. Here again Berkeley could expect to be putting forward a non-controversial claim. He could even claim to be capturing what is meant by “exist” when we are talking about actually imprinted sensations. In this passage, however, Berkeley cites these facts about sensation apparently as evidence for a claim about the ideas we have combined together. He says: “The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it or that some other spirit actually does perceive it.” This example is a case of what Berkeley in PHK 1 had described as ideas framed by the mind when various ideas are observed to go together. The *idea* of the table that I have assembled in this way exists whenever I think of it. But Berkeley in PHK 3 uses the term “sensible thing.” I say that the sensible thing, table, exists when (some of) the ideas combined to make the idea “table” are seen and felt by me. If I assert that the sensible thing, table, exists although I am not currently receiving any ideas belonging to the collection that makes up my idea, table, then what I mean is that these ideas could be perceived by me or by someone else, ideas each of which individually are sensations whose existence consists in their being perceived. All of this might be taken to be paraphrases of good common sense *reasons* for saying there is a table before me or in the next room. But it is a far cry from

saying that the presence of ideas contained in my idea of table is evidence for the existence of a table, to saying that the perception of such ideas just is the existence of a sensible thing, the table.<sup>14</sup> And yet it is with this claim that Berkeley apparently ends PHK 3, in a notorious passage: “For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.”

It is worth noting that Berkeley's famous phrase, “*esse* is *percipi*,” which occurs in the passage quoted above, is not, as it is often taken to be, a definition of existence. An often quoted passage from the Notebooks does read “Existere is percipi or percipere” (PC 429) but this phrase does not occur in the published work, nor does the translation, “to be is to be perceived.” The full phrase used in the published work is “their *esse* is *percipi*,” that is, their being, or maybe their to-be-ness, is to be perceived.<sup>15</sup> If the reference of “their” were the sensations like odors and sounds, then the claim would be less remarkable, and indeed would echo the phrase that ends PHK 2. But it isn't. Instead, “their” clearly refers to “unthinking things.” The problem is that there doesn't seem to be any argument within PHK 3 that could justify identifying sensations with all unthinking things. How does Berkeley expect to get from some uncontroversial claims about there being at least minds and ideas to what can only be regarded as a highly controversial claim that there are at most minds and ideas? It must be noted, however, that the sentence about unthinking things is immediately preceded by the sentence about the existence of sensations that begins: “There was an odour, that is, it was smelled, ...” This sentence appears right after and so appears to be evidence for the claim about tables. So the unthinking things should be taken to be primarily sensations, and only secondarily things like tables.

It is undeniable, however, that the subject of PHK 4 is things like tables, not sensations like odors. Indeed, PHK 4 begins with the frank admission that most people do not accept an identification of things like tables with mind-dependent sensations: “It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects have an existence natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding.” This is presumably the view not just of philosophers but of pre-theoretic, common sense. Most people do think the sensible objects they perceive just are independently existing objects, which go on existing whether they are perceived or not. To be clear, such ordinary people do not of course deny that they have ideas when they look at the things around them. When I perceive a house or a mountain, I change, in that I am having ideas that I didn't have before I looked in that direction, but of course the world doesn't change. So I suppose the world to have had a house in it, just as my ideas show it to me, before I had an idea of the house and to continue to have a house in it even after I am having other ideas. The supposition that underlies this outlook is that the ideas I am indubitably perceiving provide glimpses of a world that continues existing in the way I perceive it when it is not being perceived. This view Berkeley identifies as involving a “manifest contradiction.” It is a contradiction to suppose that the ideas with which I begin to know can exist unperceived.



We have already, in PHK 2, been given the basis for this claim, in the assertion that “the existence of an idea consists in its being perceived.” But anyone holding the “strangely prevailing” opinion will presumably want to explain that it is not *ideas* that are taken to continue to exist unperceived but rather the things to which our ideas allow us to gain access that exist unperceived. What Berkeley must explain is why it is that our ideas are not a way of opening up a world that exists independent of those ideas. It is this explanation that he provides in PHK 5, calling upon the principle that he introduced in the Introduction to the *Principles*, that we are unable to frame ideas via abstraction. In this case, the abstract idea we are unable to frame is that of a world as it exists independent of our ideas of it. “For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived?” Berkeley's case against abstraction is that we are not able to peel off aspects of ideas from the context in which we receive them. And, as he mentioned in the letter to Johnson quoted above, a prime example of such an illegitimate abstraction is the supposition that we could peel off an understanding of existence from perceiving or being perceived. We know what it is like to perceive color, but we cannot from this derive an understanding of color independent of the way it exists as perceived. I can't, as it were, erase my perceiving and have mind-independent color left. If, as in the case of the strangely prevailing opinion, we suppose that the color as perceived can be peeled off the perceiving to leave color as it continues to exist unperceived, then we have attempted to frame a contradiction. It is at this point, in PHK 5, that we have an argument for the puzzling claim about the table in PHK 3. In PHK 5, Berkeley writes: “Hence as it is impossible for me to see or feel anything without an actual sensation of that thing, so it is impossible for me to conceive in my thoughts any sensible thing or object distinct from the sensation or perception of it.” Everything that enters into my idea of a table is an actual sensation. I do have an idea of the table as I perceived it but I have no idea of the table existing unperceived. The existence of the table in the next room is not understood by Berkeley as a counterfactual, what would exist but which presently does not. Rather, he is saying that the existence of the table in the next room can only be conceived as the existence of sensible qualities. I have no idea of unthinking things existing unperceived because I have no way to frame such ideas.<sup>16</sup>

From here it is a short step to the triumphal conclusion of PHK 6: nothing in the world, no houses, mountains, rivers, can exist independently from being perceived. As Berkeley writes, “... all the choir of heaven and the furniture of the earth, in a word, all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence, without a mind, that their being is to be perceived or known...” The argument to get to this point is pretty straightforward. We know we have ideas and we know there are minds. We know that the way ideas exist is by being perceived. It is contradictory to suppose that we can isolate or peel off anything from any of our ideas that is unperceived existence. We cannot conceptualize the existence of sensible objects or unthinking things except as ideas perceived. So there can be no mind-independent existence of the world of which we have ideas. Berkeley rounds off the argument in PHK 7: “there is not any other substance than *spirit*, or that which perceives.”

Berkeley does go on to offer an elucidation of what it means to say that spirit is the only substance, but he does not do so right away. Berkeley only continues with that topic in PHK 26, after a gap of 17 paragraphs. Before we begin to look at the contents of these intervening 17 paragraphs, I want to pause for a moment to point out where we have got to in the argument and with what means. Berkeley is prepared at this point to assert the tenets of idealism: sensible things can't exist unperceived and the only substance is spiritual substance. He has not introduced any premises about matter or material substance. One might argue that the non-existence of material substance is a consequence of what Berkeley has so far argued, but he has not needed to appeal to its non-existence in order to make his central claim. The only argument that he has offered rests on the anti-abstraction claim. Berkeley has not, for example, argued that the reason sensible qualities exist only in the mind is because there is no material substance for them to exist in. So where does material substance or matter come in?

## PHK 8–25: The Refutation of Materialism

While Berkeley has apparently in PHK 7 reached a conclusion that affirms his idealism, in the next paragraph, Berkeley raises an objection to the position endorsed there, and introduces the possibility of material substance. “But say you, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them whereof they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind, in an unthinking substance.” It is worth pointing out that the “you” addressed here is a different person than the one holding the strangely prevailing opinion of PHK 4. *That* person held the ordinary view that the ideas I receive upon opening my eyes just are the independently existing things. This new person accepts the conclusion of PHK 6, that we only immediately perceive ideas that cannot exist unperceived, but who also holds another theory, that our ideas can stand for mind-independent things. This new person, then, has views that are consonant with many of the philosophers Berkeley has been reading. Since the time of Descartes, it has been common for philosophers to hold that we immediately perceive our ideas, and that there is an independently subsisting world. And since many philosophers also thought we are in a position to know something of the nature of the independent world and its qualities, they thought that some of our ideas were like that world. Berkeley therefore ascribes to his “you” the position that allows philosophers to conclude that we can have knowledge of a world independent of our ideas, that ideas can be copies of things they stand for. These things, then, exist not in minds but in another substance, mind-independent material substance. Material substance comes into the picture as part of a philosophical position introduced as an objection to idealism.

Berkeley proceeds first by establishing a principle that provides a general reason for rejecting any claim that ideas stand for mind-independent things. He will then use his principle to attack the theoretical underpinnings of the philosophical position under consideration, before going on to raise some more general worries about material substance and its knowability. Berkeley's principle, whose discovery he reported early on in his Notebooks, is often called his Likeness Principle.<sup>17</sup> In response to “you's” assertion that ideas are resemblances of



things, Berkeley says: “I answer, an idea can be like nothing but an idea, a colour or a figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure.” To which many puzzled readers have responded, but why? If a picture or a statue can be like something that is not a picture or statue, such as a person, why can't an idea? The clue to Berkeley's thinking seems to reside in his particular example, a color or a figure can only be like another color or figure, so this seems like a good place to begin.<sup>18</sup> These examples are reminiscent of those discussed by Berkeley in developing his argument for heterogeneity in the *New Theory*, and we can make use of the approach he put forward there. From arguments made in the *New Theory*, it seems Berkeley would be prepared to hold that if a color, to stick to that example, were to be like a non-color, it could only be because there was something the color shared in common with the non-color in respect of which they could be alike.<sup>19</sup> Such a respect of course would have to be other than the color itself. But there is no such aspect that can be abstracted from color. So colors can only be compared with other colors. We can only identify those colors that are alike by comparing particular ideas of color, which in turn can stand for other colors that match it. In the case of colors, then, a color can only be the image or copy of another color. In the *New Theory*, Berkeley used considerations of this sort to establish the heterogeneity of ideas of sight and touch. Here, Berkeley simply generalizes, for any idea, that idea can only be the image or copy of another idea (in fact, of the same sort) because there is no respect of a particular idea by which it could be compared to a non-idea.

As many have noticed, Berkeley's use of the word “again” halfway through PHK 8 indicates the presence of a second argument. This one is directed at the conditions under which we are entitled to say that one thing is like or represented by another. “Again,” Berkeley writes, “I ask whether these supposed originals or external things, of which our ideas are the pictures or representations, be themselves perceivable or no?” If I claim that this snapshot is very like my daughter, Toby, my judgment is based on a comparison of my ideas of the snapshot with ideas of the perceivable Toby. My idea of a color can certainly be like another perceivable color, that is, another idea, but if instead I am being asked to compare a perceivable color to something that is not itself perceivable, that is instead, as Berkeley says, invisible, then the process of discovering a likeness does not seem to be possible.<sup>20</sup> How can we carry out a comparison when only one of the two items to be compared is perceivable by us?

The philosophers who agree with Berkeley that we immediately perceive ideas but who also want to hold that ideas signify mind-independent material substance, do not want to claim that all our ideas resemble qualities of the mind-independent world. Notoriously, they claim that many of our ideas are highly misleading when taken to be copies of that which is mind-independent. It is only some qualities, those most useful for the mechanical philosophy, of whose existence we come to learn by means of ideas. These philosophers have the task of distinguishing and identifying those of our ideas that resemble and signify mind-independent qualities. Berkeley's plan is to use the principle established in PHK 8 to undermine this endeavor. The nub of the argument is contained in PHK 9 and 10, but it is important to take these two paragraphs in order. As I have emphasized before, the kinds of theories Berkeley is here considering come in many different forms, and, in particular, as Phillip D. Cummins has established, each of these paragraphs is addressed to a different target.<sup>21</sup>

The persons addressed in PHK 9 make a distinction between primary and secondary qualities: the secondary qualities are sensible qualities and the primary qualities are listed as “extension, figure, motion, rest, solidity or impenetrability and number.” These people also distinguish between ideas and qualities and maintain that ideas of secondary qualities do not resemble qualities in bodies while ideas of primary qualities are “patterns or images of things which exist without the mind, in an unthinking substance which they call *matter*.” Since these are just the distinctions made by Locke, the people criticized in this paragraph can be identified with Locke and with Lockean followers. The application of the principle laid down in PHK 8 is straightforward. As Locke would allow, we are immediately acquainted with ideas of extension, motion, and the rest, but since an idea is only like another idea, we are unable to make complete the comparison that supports the claim that ideas of extension, motion, and the like are images or copies of qualities of mind-independent reality, since these qualities, if not themselves ideas, are not perceivable. Berkeley would have no objection to using ideas like extension, figure, and moving to frame an idea of body, as Locke does, but only to the further claim that the idea resembles qualities that are non-ideas. The other thing to note about this argument is that it assumes, as Locke does, that we begin with sensible ideas of extension and motion and then go on to claim that qualities in things resemble these ideas.

The persons addressed in PHK 10 hold a different view. They suppose that extension, figure, and so on are qualities of unthinking matter, while the sensible qualities “are sensations existing in the mind alone, that depend on and are occasioned by the different size, texture and motion of the minute parts of matter.” This view is closer to the Cartesian than the Lockean, since Descartes and his followers were more likely to refer to color, heat, and the like as merely sensations. They also took it to be the case that it was possible to frame an intelligible idea of extension, independent of any sensory quality. It is these intelligible ideas that are taken to be like the qualities of material, extended substance. Berkeley's response to this proposal returns to his original anti-abstractionism. It is not in fact possible, he claims, to frame an idea of extension in the absence of any sensible qualities, for, it will be remembered, he has argued that if we remove all the different ways in which we can sensibly experience something as extended, there will be nothing left to be the idea of extension. The conclusion of these two sections is that it is either contradictory or meaningless to claim that an idea or anything like an idea can exist in something non-perceiving or mind-independent. We cannot therefore assume that any of our ideas can stand for or signify a mind-independent existence.

The remaining paragraphs of the discussion of primary and secondary qualities in various ways improve the shining hour. Berkeley reminds us that ideas of extension-in-abstract or motion-in-abstract depend upon a non-existent capacity to conceive of extension or motion independent of any way of being extended (large, small) or of moving (swift, slow) and remarks that such alleged ideas have no more content than the much reviled prime matter of the Aristotelians. He further points out that those who argue that sensible qualities must be mind-dependent because they are perceiver relative must agree that the same considerations apply to ideas of primary qualities, but he also indicates that this argument is weaker than

those he has given earlier, because it permits no stronger conclusion than that we don't know what the color or shape of an external object is, while his own arguments show that no such qualities can exist in an independent object.<sup>22</sup> Berkeley finally in PHK 12 and 13 takes up the case of another of Locke's primary qualities, that of number and unit. His case here is quite different and was initially laid out in a Notebook entry, PC 545, which reads: "Unite no simple idea. I have no Idea merely answering the word one. All Number consists in Relations." Berkeley's case is that unit and number cannot be simple ideas of primary qualities because they are not ideas of qualities at all. They are, as he says in PHK 12, "the creature of the mind," ways in which we relate things to one another. As relations and not qualities, they cannot be examples of primary qualities.

Berkeley has at this point completed his response to the objection he raised, that, even though the ideas we immediately perceive can only exist in a thinking substance, they nevertheless signify things existing in an unthinking material substance. He devotes some time, however, to examining the opinion that forms the basis for this objection, that there is an external world out there of matter or material substance. It is interesting to note that Berkeley's approach to the notion of material substance, here relatively briefly, echoes Locke's remarks in the *Essay* in 2.23.2. There Locke made fun of the notion of substance as merely a fancy way of putting our ignorance about what supports qualities. Berkeley's further point is that since, whatever substance might be said to do, it doesn't support qualities in the way the pillars support a building, there is in fact no useful information provided by the assertion that material substance supports qualities. Berkeley does not, at this stage of the argument, feel it necessary to say much about the deficiencies of the concept of material substance itself.

The more interesting set of considerations come up in PHK 18–20, where Berkeley develops arguments to show that there are in fact no independent reasons for supposing matter or material substance to exist. We cannot apprehend material substance by sense, nor can we reason our way to its existence. Even the lovers of matter admit we can have ideas in the absence of matter, and that there is nothing in the nature of matter that explains the existence of ideas. Here Berkeley's target is clearly Descartes and other Cartesians, such as Malebranche. Neither Descartes nor Malebranche thought that we could learn about the existence of external bodies through our senses, since in sensing we are aware only of states of our own mind. Malebranche in particular argued against Descartes that we are not even in a position to prove by means of reason that an external world exists, but must accept this claim as a result of our faith in God. Berkeley's conclusions from these kinds of considerations is that even if there were nothing problematic about the nature of material substance, as an hypothesis it is both warrantless and without explanatory merit (PHK 20).

Berkeley winds up this section of his argument with a challenge, introduced with great bravado, such bravado that the passage has become known as "The Master Argument."<sup>23</sup> "I am content," Berkeley writes in PHK 22, "to put the whole upon this issue: if you can but conceive it possible for one extended, movable substance, or in general, for any one idea or anything like an idea, to exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it, I shall readily give up the cause." Berkeley has just demonstrated that there is no way to prove the actual existence

of material substance, but he is now, as it were, upping the ante. All you have to do, he says, is to conceive the possibility of the existence of mind-independent substance, and I'll say no more. Before we begin to look at the reasons Berkeley gives to support his confidence that his challenge cannot be met, it is useful to decide exactly what cause it is that Berkeley is preparing to give up. It is generally assumed that the challenge being issued here is quite sweeping and the cause he is willing to give up is, roughly speaking, everything that he has asserted up until now. The language Berkeley uses in his challenge, however, particularly the phrase, "for any one idea or anything like an idea," which echoes PHK 8, suggests that Berkeley has a more limited cause in mind, that of refuting the objection raised in PHK 8 about the possibility of mediate perception of mind-independent substance.<sup>24</sup> If this is the case, then Berkeley is seeking to challenge someone who thinks we immediately perceive only ideas but also holds that these ideas resemble mind-independent matter. Such a person not only asserts the existence of something independent of and unrelated to any mind, but freely offers descriptions of such a substance, calling it extended and moving, for example. Berkeley's challenge is to this person, to come up with a conception of even the possibility that something extended and moving exists unperceived and unrelated to minds.

The argument Berkeley is offering is rather more straightforward than is sometimes imagined. Berkeley gives his interlocutor a ready response: "But say you, surely there is nothing easier than to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and no body by to perceive them" (PHK 23). Berkeley's answer is that this is not conceiving the existence of trees and books as they are in themselves unperceived. All you are doing is conceiving ideas of trees or books as you would have such ideas if you were perceiving them. This is by no means the same as conceiving of trees or books as they are in themselves, or conceiving of that independent nature on which our ideas are thought to depend.<sup>25</sup> Nor does it help of course to conceive of this nature as extended or moving. Whatever content these ideas can have will be of extension and motion as perceived by us. What we can't do is to come up with any way in which extension or motion or any other way of thinking about things might exist independently and other than the way they are perceived by us. There is no way for knowers like ourselves to give any content to the phrase: "*the absolute existence of sensible objects in themselves or without the mind*" (PHK 24).

It is reasonable to think of this last claim, about the unintelligibility or contentlessness of the concept of absolute existence as the conclusion of the argument begun in PHK 8. In response to the objection that our immediately perceived ideas can represent non-ideas, mind-independent reality, Berkeley has argued that, since an idea can be like nothing but an idea, no idea is a copy or image of a non-idea. We have no way of representing qualities of matter as it exists unrelated to any mind. We have, therefore, no ideas, either sensible or intelligible, of the alleged primary qualities of matter, matter as it is in itself. In any case, the concept of material substance is vacuous, lacking any account of how matter fulfills the role of subsistence or support. Moreover, even if there was such a thing, we would be unable to prove its existence, either through the senses or by reason. Finally, we are not even able to conceive the possibility of absolute or mind-independent existence, a concept central to the theory of matter. What is especially striking about the points covered here is how little

attention Berkeley pays in this first presentation of his argument to the concept of matter itself. He provides only a brief sketch of problems inherent in the concept of matter and with our epistemic failings with respect to matter. Even though this is the only area of what Berkeley presents in PHK 1–33 that takes up materialism directly, what he has put into the foreground is a theory of how ideas represent, a theory that is required for any account of matter. But what Berkeley has actually framed his discussion to refute is the claim that our ideas can represent matter, rather than the claim that matter exists.

## **PHK 25–33: Minds and Ideas: Berkeley's Positive Argument**

Once he has completed the negative side of his argument, Berkeley can return to the positive claim of PHK 7, that the only substance is spirit, now enriched by the positive element of PHK 8, that an idea is only like another idea. We are left, one might say, with Berkeley's starting point, minds and ideas, but we have learned some things about them. We have learned to identify minds as the unique substance and we have learned that ideas stand only for other ideas, and not for non-ideas. In the remaining paragraphs of the first section of the *Principles*, Berkeley is going to enlarge on both these insights in order to arrive at accounts, first, of the causes of our ideas, which will require us to specify what we know about minds or spiritual substance, and second, of the way in which ideas lead us to a knowledge of real things. It is in this final portion of his argument that Berkeley will lay out a positive program consonant with the idealism he developed in PHK 1–7.

Berkeley's negative argument has ruled out the widespread account of the cause of our ideas presupposed by the objection raised in PHK 8, namely that they are caused by entities in a mind-independent external world, entities which these ideas are then held to signify. He is left therefore to offer an account of where ideas come from based on one of his two remaining entities, minds and ideas. In PHK 25, Berkeley considers and rejects the claim that ideas are caused by other ideas. His argument is that ideas are inactive, a fact he regards as introspectively obvious. So ideas cannot do anything or cause anything. The conclusion he draws is that, since extension, figure, and motion are ideas, and hence passive, they cannot be the cause of sensations. We are thus in a position to recognize, he says, that any claim that sensations are “the effects of powers resulting from the configuration, number, motion and size of corpuscles, must certainly be false.” It is interesting to note that this is not a claim that corpuscles do not exist because they are not perceived. The corpuscle issue not the same as that of matter. Rather, Berkeley is saying that corpuscles, considered as collections of ideas of extension, figure, and motion, cannot enter into causal explanations because they are causally inert. Berkeley has moved one step beyond the objection raised in PHK 8. Berkeley is adding that, if we take ideas to stand instead for collections of further ideas, then these further ideas cannot be causes.

In PHK 26, Berkeley considers the remaining possibility, that ideas are caused by spirits, and gives a brief argument by elimination. We know, because our ideas are continually changing,

coming into existence, and vanishing, that something must cause them. We have just established that it is not ideas or combinations of ideas that can be a cause, so it must be a substance. We have already ruled out material substance, so it must be spiritual substance. In this form of argument, the negative argument has an important role to play. But Berkeley moves on in the next three paragraphs to offer positive reasons for thinking that ideas are caused by spiritual substance. He first establishes that he is operating with a particular understanding of spiritual substance. Because “a spirit is one simple undivided active being” it is not the sort of thing of which we can have inert ideas. Any attempt to think about the activities of mind, perceiving and willing, in ideational terms will be misleading. But while we cannot have an idea, which is inert, of an active entity like a spirit, we nevertheless experience ourselves as causally active with respect to our own ideas. We therefore have an immediate awareness of what it is for a mind to be active, and we are also aware that a number of ideas, in particular, ideas of sense, are not caused by us. These ideas must have another spirit as their cause. Berkeley does not rest content with asserting that minds or spirits cause ideas because, as it were, this is the only theory left standing, after we have got rid of the theory that sensible ideas are caused by matter. He clearly thinks we have available to us reasons that would permit us to reach the conclusion that sensible ideas are caused by a spirit other than ourselves, even if we had never been taken in by other theories. Making this case, however, has rested on two further claims, that a spirit is a single active being, and that we are aware of the activities of this being, although we have no ideas of it.

Berkeley returns in PHK 30–33 to the topic of ideas and the remaining question left unanswered is what ideas signify or stand for. Berkeley has previously rejected both the view that sensible ideas are mind-independent real things and that they stand for mind-independent real things. So either what we are treated to is just the free play of ideas floating through our minds or our ideas stand for something. It is pretty clear that Berkeley is opting for the second alternative, that our ideas stand for real things, albeit mind-dependent real things. This is precisely what Berkeley asserts in the concluding paragraph, PHK 33: “The ideas imprinted on the senses by the Author of Nature are called *real things*.” He gets there in a very few crucial steps. PHK 30 makes two points. First, sensible ideas are steady, orderly and coherent occurring according to the Laws of Nature. Second, because they are in this fashion orderly, our experience “teaches us that such and such ideas are attended with such and such other ideas, in the ordinary course of things.” Thanks to the law-governed nature of our sensible ideas, we are able to recognize regular patterns existing among our ideas. These are the two premises Berkeley is going to need.

Berkeley has at this point the beginnings of an account of the signifying nature of our ideas. Because ideas occur to us in regular patterns, the presence of some ideas will call to mind the rest of the pattern. Berkeley does indeed go on to make a case like this in the next paragraph, PHK 31. There are no necessary connections among our ideas, rather the connections we make are based on our observation of the settled laws of nature. Berkeley makes a rather particular choice of words here, which demonstrates that he has a quite specific account in mind of how this process works. He says of this regularity, “This gives us a sort of foresight which enable us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life.” The patterns we look for are

governed by expectations we develop in order to figure out what to do next. Sensible ideas don't merely represent co-occurring bundles. Rather, they are future directed and action oriented. They call to mind what we can expect if we do this or that. When we see a fire, we expect to feel heat if we come closer to it, and of course, a real fire is one that does indeed, under these circumstances, provide heat. Our idea of fire therefore is a collection of ideas that includes all those ideas we expect to have in the presence of some of the ideas. Berkeley again returns to the negative argument, reminding us that we have grown accustomed to thinking these predictions work because of a real causal agency we ascribe to the fire. We feel heat, we think, because we are in the presence of the fire that has really caused it. But we should understand that it is the ideas themselves that are the real things, ideas that, because of their regularity, confirm our expectations. So, sensible ideas do indeed stand for real things, but those real things are ideas caused in us in a regular manner that meet our expectations and confirm our predictions.

We embarked upon this account of Berkeley's summary argument in PHK 1–33 by asking what is the best way to understand Berkeley's position? Is he an anti-materialist, an idealist, or is there some other way of understanding the nature of the view he is putting forth? At this point, it is possible to draw some conclusions. He certainly is an anti-materialist, that is, he does express serious doubts about the viability and the utility of the concept of matter. But Berkeley's case is not limited to a denial of matter, indeed, it seems that such a denial has only a limited role to play. He also argues, at greater length, that the ideas we immediately perceive cannot resemble and do not stand for qualities of mind-independent matter. Even this negative argument, although helpful in getting rid of a seductive, but in Berkeley's eyes, ultimately meaningless hypothesis, is not necessary to the development of his positive position. This positive position deserves to be called idealist, since it does incorporate the claim that the existence of sensible things consists in their being perceived, as well as the claim that the only substance is spiritual substance. Berkeley does think that the ontology of human knowledge is limited to minds and ideas. But these theses do not constitute the whole of Berkeley's argument. Berkeley's positive thesis is that ideas can signify, can direct the mind beyond their immediate presence, and that ideas signify real but mind-dependent things. Natural knowledge is a matter of coming to appreciate the arbitrary, that is, non-necessary but orderly connections that exist among our ideas, that give us foresight and warn us of what to expect. We can recognize the reality of things, the real fire that actually warms us, without abandoning their nature as ideas, as mind-dependent. When we correctly identify the principles of human knowledge, then we see the manner in which such knowledge is indeed within our grasp. This final positive thesis is the culmination of Berkeley's argument. So, while anti-materialism is useful to Berkeley and idealism is important, this broader thesis, which might turn out to be what Berkeley meant by “immaterialism” when he introduced the term in *Three Dialogues*, is the one that ought to be identified as Berkeleianism.

When Berkeley's project is understood in this manner, it is possible to appreciate some of the decisions Berkeley took in the presentation of his argument. Take, to begin with, his much maligned decision to begin his work with a discussion of the perils of abstraction. It turns out



that this is just the principle Berkeley needs to call upon to establish his idealism. It is in fact the only argument that he uses in PHK 1–7. Anti-abstractionism also turns out to be central to his argument that ideas cannot resemble mind-independent real things. Berkeley presumably hoped that by working his readers through the thought-experiments of his Introduction, they would have the skills necessary to appreciate the arguments he was shortly to make. In particular, they will allow us to see that, once we admit minds and ideas into our ontology, it is not so easy to get rid of them. We cannot perform the acts of abstraction that would remove the presence of minds and have something left that could be mind-independent reality.

Furthermore, if we take the culmination of Berkeley's argument to be that knowledge based on the orderly and coherent behavior of ideas of sense just is knowledge of real things, then the connections between the *New Theory* and the *Principles*, discussed in the last chapter, become obvious. The conclusion of the *New Theory*, that vision is a language, is in fact a special case of the argument for the *Principles*. Berkeley could hope that readers who read his works in the order in which they were written would be primed by the *New Theory* account of the way in which we successfully perceive space, to be able to accept the more general account of the nature of human knowledge in the *Principles*. In fact, the alleged inconsistencies between the two volumes stem from either over-emphasizing the importance of anti-materialism or of idealism to the argument of the *Principles*. And it is also possible to see why Berkeley thought the *New Theory* was a contribution to the moral and theological aims of the *Principles*. For, when we accept that the only cause of ideas is spirit, then we also accept that the cause of ideas not caused by us is another spirit. Berkeley in the *Principles* points out that the ideas of sense that are not “excited at random” like the ones our imaginations give rise to, “but in a regular train or series” are ideas that “sufficiently testifies the wisdom or benevolence of its Author” (PHK 30). Those of our ideas that occur in regular patterns according to the Laws of Nature are evidence of a spirit, whose wisdom and benevolence are exhibited to us. Thus, Berkeley suggests, an appreciation of the actual nature of our human knowledge should send our minds to God as the only possible cause. This conclusion echoes and is supported by the conclusion of the *New Theory*, that, as Berkeley eventually put it, “vision is the language of the Author of Nature.” So it seems Berkeley could have thought that the *New Theory* not only made the *Principles* more plausible, but also serves as a special case of the evidence that shows us the existence and nature of God. In this way, both the *New Theory* and the *Principles* can be understood to have theological ambitions.

## notes

- <sup>1</sup> A complication that affects the relationship between the *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*, but which need not trouble us for the present, is that Berkeley originally projected several more parts to the *Principles*, which were never published. The *Principles* was originally published as Part I, and this reference to a first part is often included when the title is given, but I will ignore this practice.

- 2 The use of this term, for example is strongly argued for by A.A. Luce, *Berkeley's Immaterialism* (T. Nelson and Sons, 1945).
- 3 It is true that he does not explicitly use this term until close to the end of *Three Dialogues*, where he puts it in the mouth of Hylas, as Roselyne Degremont points out (*Berkeley L'immaterialisme* [Ellipses, 1999]). But versions of the term appear quite early in the Notebooks, first as PC 19, where Berkeley writes: "In the immaterial hypothesis, the wall is white, the fire hot, etc."
- 4 See, for example, D. Berman, *George Berkeley: Idealism and the Man* (Clarendon Press, 1994); G. Dicker, *Berkeley's Idealism* (Oxford University Press, 2011); S. Rickless, *Berkeley's Argument for Idealism* (Oxford University Press, 2013). All these and many others take idealism to be central to Berkeley's views.
- 5 For more, see M.R. Ayers, "Berkeley, ideas and idealism," in *Re-examining Berkeley's Philosophy*, edited by S.H. Daniel (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 11–28..
- 6 See, for example, R.J. Fogelin, *Berkeley and the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Routledge, 2001).
- 7 Dicker, *Berkeley's Idealism*, 68.
- 8 That's from *Three Dialogues* III 262 but Berkeley attributes views like this to philosophers in the *Principles*.
- 9 Rickless, in *Berkeley's Argument for Idealism*, suggests that Berkeley's list of proper objects is in fact a list of sensible *qualities* (a term most often used, as by Locke, for mind-independent qualities of objects) and hence that Berkeley is by this means tacitly suggesting that sensible qualities are ideas. This strikes me as over-reading the passage. There is no reason at this point to take Berkeley to be deviating from his professed aim in this paragraph to give information about kinds of ideas.
- 10 For more discussion of this category of ideas see D. Berlioz, *Berkeley* (Vrin, 2000), 82–83 and D.E. Flage, "Berkeley's ideas of reflection," *Berkeley Newsletter* 17 (2006): 7–13.
- 11 The way of reading this final claim in the first paragraph does require reading the word "constitute" in Berkeley's phrase, "other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and the like sensible things" to refer to the way in which our ideas of such sensible things are put together, rather than describing the ontology of sensible things. While I acknowledge that this might not be the most natural way of understanding the word "constitute," the alternatives, which have Berkeley smuggling in controversial metaphysics, seems to me to be even less plausible.
- 12 It has been pointed out to me by Sophie Cote that Berkeley does have to be ruling out a conception of the mind as a collection of ideas. This fact would suggest that if Berkeley had been toying with such a view, as has been suggested he did in his Notebook entries

PC 580 and 581, he was now taking this approach to be a non-starter or perhaps an understanding of “mind” that would be controversial.

[13](#) Exactly what is meant by “entirely distinct” in this claim will be taken up later.

[14](#) Rickless takes PHK 3 to contain an argument for idealism, which he calls the Semantic Argument. But what this amounts to, as far as I can see, is a stipulation about what, according to Rickless, Berkeley takes the word “exists” to mean. And since there doesn't seem to be any reason for anyone else to take “exists” to mean what Berkeley says it does, without further argument, this Semantic Argument doesn't amount to much. And indeed, Rickless himself doesn't think very much of this argument as an argument, since it requires the assumption that sensible things are ideas and this (to say the least) is not self-evident. So I would prefer not to take PHK 3 to be containing a free-standing but bad argument.

[15](#) The point is discussed by J.R. Roberts in *A Metaphysics for the Mob: The Philosophy of George Berkeley* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 4–5.

[16](#) Rickless criticizes an earlier version of the argument I just gave on the grounds that it is circular. But this is because he thinks that Berkeley, from PHK 1 on, is talking about sensible qualities, things that do exist mind-independently, and I do not take this to be the case. Berkeley, as I have been arguing, takes the source of our knowledge to be ideas, and not sensible qualities, and it is only from our ideas that we could arrive at a knowledge of mind-independent sensible qualities. It is the assumption that the presence of ideas can underwrite the move to mind-independent qualities that Berkeley regards as an illegitimate abstraction. It can only be arrived at by peeling off from sensible ideas everything true of them by virtue of their being perceived so as to arrive at the qualities as it exists unperceived.

[17](#) See, for example, PC 46, PC 51. On this topic, see C.M. Turbayne, “The influence of Berkeley's science on his metaphysics,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 16 (4) (1956): 476–487.

[18](#) This course of action is recommended by P.D. Cummins, “Berkeley's likeness principle,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 4 (1966): 63–69, who develops a different interpretation than the one given here.

[19](#) See, in particular, NTV 128.

[20](#) Both Kenneth Winkler and Todd Ryan point out and develop interpretations based on the fact that this second argument of PHK 8 appears to be an enthymematic version of an argument that appears in the Notebooks, PC 378, where Berkeley argues:

16 Two things cannot be said to be like or unlike till they have been compar'd

17 Comparing is the viewing two ideas together & marking wt they agree in and wt they disagree in

18 The mind can compare nothing but its own ideas 17

19 Nothing like an idea can be in an unperceiving thing 11 16 19

See K. Winkler, *Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Clarendon Press, 1989), 141–149; T. Ryan, “A new account of Berkeley's likeness principle,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14 (4) (2006): 561–580.

[21](#) Sections 9 and 10 of “Berkeley's *Principles*: Some comments,” *Berkeley Newsletter* 9 (1986): 1–5.

[22](#) There are several complications with this last remark. Margaret Wilson has pointed out that it is not at all clear who could be a target of this relativity argument. A similar argument is found in Bayle, again without a clear target (“Did Berkeley completely misunderstand the basis of the primary–secondary quality distinction in Locke?” in *Berkeley: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, edited by C.M. Turbayne [University of Minnesota Press, 1982], 108–126). Secondly, it is worth wondering why, after having summarily dismissed relativity arguments here in the *Principles*, Berkeley made so much of them in *Three Dialogues*. We will return to this later.

[23](#) Following A. Gallois, “Berkeley's master argument,” *Philosophical Review* 85 (1974): 55–69.

[24](#) It is worth reminding ourselves that it is not *Berkeley* who dubbed this passage “The Master Argument.”

[25](#) This interpretation is very nicely expressed by Michael Ayers in his “Introduction” to his edition of Berkeley's *Philosophical Works* (Everyman, 1993), xxiii.

## chapter 5

### ***principles of human knowledge: berkeley's replies to objections (PHK 34–84)***

Berkeley is meticulous in the *Principles* to inform his readers when he has concluded one section of the book and is moving on to another. Thus the first section of PHK 34 reads: “Before we proceed any farther, it is necessary to spend some time answering objections which may probably be made against the principles hitherto laid down.” It would appear that Berkeley takes himself to have laid down a statement of his position by the end of PHK 33. The rest of the book, considerably larger than the first section, looks like a series of mopping up operations, or a kind of appendix to his actual argument. We also know, however, that Berkeley thought his argument was likely to be misunderstood by a reader who did not read the work through to the end. So what we need to think about going forward is what Berkeley thought was the contribution of these later sections to the overall construction of the work.

Since replying to objections is a familiar philosophical practice, there is nothing very surprising about the presence of such replies here in the *Principles*. It is useful, however, to remind ourselves of something obvious. What we have in these sections is not a transcript of a random set of objections raised by audience members in a question-and-answer session. Nor did Berkeley, so far as we know, solicit objections in the manner of Descartes. The author of the objections is Berkeley and he decided which objections to answer and in what order they would appear. It is worth asking, therefore, whether Berkeley had some goal in mind in laying out the objections he answered in the order in which he takes them up.

Once we observe that the intention behind the objections is Berkeley's, another interesting consideration emerges. Berkeley says that the objections he will consider are the ones “which may probably be made,” but any attention to the literature on Berkeley's argument in the *Principles* suggests he is wide of the mark. Numerous objections have been raised concerning, for example, the “Master Argument,” the “Likeness Principle,” and what is often considered to be the highly inadequate argument for “*esse is percipi*,” but these matters are not addressed in Berkeley's Replies to Objections section, and readers seeking more information about them have had to turn to restatements of Berkeley's arguments in *Three Dialogues*. If what Berkeley was trying to do was to answer *any* objection that might have occurred to *any* reader, then his attempt must be considered a failure. But perhaps instead it is those raising the standard objections who are missing the mark, and Berkeley had something else in mind in framing this section as he did. Whatever plan Berkeley was thinking about in selecting and ordering his objections, it has not been obvious to many of his readers and it will be well worth our while to try and identify what this plan might be. I will be pursuing the hypothesis that in fact there is an argument structure that can be uncovered linking the various objections.

## First Objection (PHK 34–40)

The first objection Berkeley takes up concerns what it is to be a real thing and follows right on from the conclusion of the preceding paragraph, that “ideas imprinted on the senses by the Author of Nature are called *real things*” (PHK 33). This objection has in fact occurred to many people: if the so-called real things are nothing but ideas, then hasn't Berkeley turned real things like the sun, the moon, houses, and rivers, into nothing but “so many chimeras and illusions”? Berkeley's first move here is to point out he has already provided an answer in recent paragraphs. He cites PHK 29, which points out that we recognize that ideas of sense are not caused by ourselves; PHK 30, that tells us that these ideas of sense can be readily distinguished from the ideas of the imagination we do cause because they are not random, but regular, following the laws of nature; and finally, PHK 33, in which we learn that this criterion of lawfulness supports the claim that the ideas of sense, being “strong, orderly, and coherent” are deservedly called real things. The reality of such ideas is grounded in an order of nature, that allows us to sow in the seed-time in order to reap in the harvest, and otherwise to act for our benefit because of the predictability afforded us by these ideas.

Berkeley develops this line in the paragraphs that follow. He makes two points. The first is that the target of his argument is a position held only by philosophers, who identify reality with matter or material substance. Berkeley points out that on his criterion, an idea of a thing that is extended, solid, and heavy will be the idea of a real thing. These are qualities that occur in a regular manner so that we can expect that anything that is extended and solid will also be heavy. It is only the idea of a mind-independent support of qualities that is ruled out. Matter so defined is the entity Berkeley is interested in whose reality is denied by his criterion. The second point is similar to one Berkeley has Philonous make in *Three Dialogues*. (3DIII 244), that he is not turning things into ideas, “fictions of the mind” as he says here and as the objection being considered supposes, but rather ideas into things. Berkeley has, of course, begun the *Principles* with the supposition, not that there are things, but that there are ideas. We are to recognize the ideational nature of things. Berkeley's criterion for reality rules in everything that we are accustomed to call real things. That their reality is in fact identified through the nature and behavior of ideas should make us more and not less confident in their reality, since it is this criterion that is in fact supported by the testimony of the senses. Berkeley has been stressing, throughout this reply, that it is not just the having of a sensible idea, the presence of such an idea in our mind, which constitutes the existence of a real thing. Rather it is those ideas that we can recognize as following the laws of nature that are real things and not flights of the imagination. It is this claim that is going to be crucial in what follows.

## Second Objection (PHK 41)

The second objection is very brief and, as Berkeley points out, can be answered in exactly the same way as the first objection, being in fact a special case of that objection. The objector asks if dreaming or imagining being burnt by a fire isn't different from being actually burnt.

Raising this objection does allow Berkeley to make a point which he clearly finds useful and which he exploited at greater length in *Three Dialogues*. Anyone will agree that there is a big difference between being in pain and merely thinking about pain, but this is not a difference that indicates that only thinking about pain is mind-dependent. The pain that is real is equally perceived and equally mind-dependent. This example shows that we can and we do distinguish the real from the imaginary without for a moment supposing that we are sorting what is in the mind from that which is without the mind.

## Third Objection (PHK 42–44)

In raising the third objection about the perception of objects at a distance, Berkeley is providing himself with the opportunity to afford the reader of the *Principles* with material he had established in the *New Theory*. As I pointed out before, in the chapter on the *New Theory*, the way in which Berkeley raises the objection here in the *Principles* does not entirely reflect the way in which he had carried out his discussion of distance perception in the *New Theory*. Here in the *Principles* the objector apparently assumes that we “just see” distance, that the mere use of our eyes shows us objects located at different distances in space. In the *New Theory*, however, Berkeley does not specifically consider the point of view of such a person, but begins with the assumptions of the theoreticians, who agree that distance is not immediately perceived by sight. The reply to the objection found here in the *Principles*, that we see distance in dreams without supposing that we are seeing something without the mind, is also a point never made in the *New Theory*. It is an objection, however, and a reply that follows nicely from the issue raised in the second objection. It's all very well, one might imagine that objector complaining, to say that real pain doesn't exist without the mind, but what about objects out there in space? Don't we just see them there without the mind? The reply that Berkeley makes about dreams, then, picks up on the objection that dreaming about fire is different from real fire. In this case, Berkeley is pointing out that we can just as easily take ourselves to be seeing distance in dreams, but the objector has already supposed the objects of dreams to exist in the mind. The reply Berkeley made in Objection 2 enabled him to move the focus of discussion picked up in Objection 3 from the notion of real things to that of existence in the mind.

At this point Berkeley feels free to give a précis of his account in the *New Theory* of how we do see distance, running briskly through the main points. We neither see distance immediately, nor by means of necessary connections but rather we see distance when visible ideas are connected through experience with distance by means of a process of suggestion, which Berkeley explicitly links with language. He explains here that visible ideas “by a connexion taught us by experience, come to signify and suggest [distance] to us, after the same manner that words of any language suggest the ideas they are made to stand for” (PHK 43). Finally, inasmuch as seeing distance is something we must learn to do, Berkeley points out that a man born blind who is made to see would not take the visible ideas he is suddenly presented with to be at a distance from him, as the original objector supposed, but rather to be merely in his mind. The thought-experiment of the man born blind, moreover, allows us to



recognize that in our own case too visible ideas exist only in our minds.

We are now in a position to take on board the point that undergirds the claim that vision is a language, namely, that ideas of sight and touch are entirely heterogeneous. Being of different kinds, it is impossible to reach conclusions about ideas of touch from ideas of sight, either by perceiving likenesses between them or by reasoning. Like words or other signs, visible ideas can suggest or lead us to expect entirely different tangible ideas. Berkeley is anxious at this point that his readers should understand that his claims in the *New Theory* can be understood or be rewritten to be about tangible *ideas*. While this care suggests that Berkeley thought the account of space perception in the *New Theory* relied on a richer ontology than the one he was arguing for in the *Principles*, many have argued that a careful reading of the points made about heterogeneity in the *New Theory* reveal the extent to which Berkeley is already relying on the ontology of ideas alone, so that the instruction to rewrite the *New Theory* in terms of tangible ideas should come as no surprise.<sup>1</sup>

It is a little more surprising that Berkeley goes on to say that the conclusion that vision is a language is not only fully demonstrated in the *New Theory*, but also “in the foregoing parts of this treatise,” that is, in what Berkeley has already written in the *Principles*. It is noteworthy, however, that the process of learning by experience to see distance being described here depends upon and reflects the fact that our ideas, in this case of sight and of distance, occur in a manner described in PHK 30 as “in a regular train or series.” At this point, the regular connections of ideas according to the Laws of Nature that we have met in the *Principles* can be understood in terms of the language claims put forward in the *New Theory*.<sup>2</sup> It is the regular, indeed, lawful connections between the heterogeneous ideas of sight and touch that allow us to experience the ideas of sight as having distance meanings, that is, as meaning the ideas of distance we experience tangibly. Similarly, we might be said to identify real things when orderly experiences are made meaningful. The examples he gives in this and surrounding passages of the *Principles*, however, are not of the heterogeneous ideas of sight and touch, but of ordinary things like food, sleep, and fire. But by returning at this point to the account of distance perception from the *New Theory*, Berkeley might be imagined to be enriching his current account in several ways. First, he is certainly proposing that when, by the orderliness of ideas, we come to recognize real things, this can be understood, as in the case of distance, to be a matter of some ideas suggesting to us other ideas so that, as in a language, the presence of the first set of ideas leads us to or comes to mean further sets of ideas. Seeing orangey and flickering will be seen as meaning “fire,” that is, as including further ideas that regularly accompany orangey and flickering. The foresight that enables us to direct our actions to our benefit derives from the fact that, when ideas are orderly, then from some ideas we expect others. The presence of ideas of fire suggests heat, just as the presence of visual distance cues suggests how far away the heat will be and, in both cases, we take ourselves to be seeing something hot and at a distance. Additionally, by introducing the heterogeneity of ideas at this time, Berkeley is providing a richer account of the ideas that come to be collected together, so as to include the proper ideas of sight and touch as well as ideas like sowing and reaping. He is opening the way for us to consider regularities among many different levels of ideas. Finally, and most importantly, he is making it plausible to

consider the way in which we understand the regularities identified by the Laws of Nature to function, like a language, as a sign system.

## Fourth Objection (PHK 45–48)

At this point, we have learned from the initial replies to objections that it is appropriate to identify sensible ideas as real things because sensible ideas are forceful and orderly, following the Laws of Nature, and hence meaningful to us in the manner of a language. The next objection Berkeley takes up follows naturally from this point. If ideas are things, even real things, doesn't it follow that things go out of existence whenever I shut my eyes, only to come back into existence when I open them again? Don't we need something mind-independent like matter to constitute the continued existence of things? Berkeley's reply to this objection is interesting, if puzzling. The first thing he does is to apparently bite the bullet. He refers back to early sections of the *Principles*, PHK 3 and 4, where he first makes the claim that the way ideas exist is by being perceived. We are all agreed he says now that it is impossible that an idea should actually exist and not be perceived. So at this point it looks like Berkeley is prepared to agree that an idea that is not actually perceived doesn't exist and so has been annihilated.

Berkeley then moves on to consider the alternative position, that things can be understood to go on existing without annihilation if they are grounded in or identified with mind-independent matter. He makes two points in response. The first is that the appeal to mind-independent matter doesn't solve the annihilation problem since everyone who wants to appeal to matter recognizes that visible qualities like light and colors would also vanish if I shut my eyes. Given what Berkeley takes to be the current understanding of matter, in fact its proponents could not even suppose that distinct things continue to exist, since once matter is rid of all sensible properties, then such proponents must maintain, according to Berkeley, that what we have left is “infinitely extended, and consequently void of all shape or figure” (PHK 47). Shutting my eyes will therefore also annihilate anything that can be identified as that tree or this chair. The proponents of matter are if anything in an even worse boat than the objection supposed to hold of Berkeley.

In these first paragraphs of his reply, Berkeley therefore endorses, it would seem even enthusiastically endorses, the terms of the objection, but, he now claims, he is not open to the objection itself. It does not follow, he says, from his principles that things are annihilated and recreated when I open and shut my eyes. This is because, he tells us: “Wherever bodies are said to have no existence without the mind, I would not be understood to mean this or that particular mind, but all minds whatsoever” (PHK 48). What seems crucial here is Berkeley's assertion that “without the mind” means “without all minds.” This is a locution that crops up again and again in Berkeley's works, but what he means by it is not entirely clear. There are several possibilities. He might mean that when I shut my eyes, and hence no longer have an idea of the tree, someone else might be looking at the tree, and so the tree continues to exist. This is not, however, a particularly happy way of looking at what Berkeley is getting at, not just because it still seems to leave the tree open to a gappy existence if no sentient creature is

looking at it, but also because the view that the tree's continued existence is the result, so to speak, of trading it among different perceivers is not a very obvious way to think about existence. Another possibility is that what Berkeley is referring to obliquely here is his idea, expressed elsewhere, that the infinite mind of God continually perceives the tree, so that the tree will continue to exist even when I have ceased to have a sensible idea of the tree. Since Berkeley does say things like this later, this proposal is certainly plausible.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy however that, while Berkeley has certainly earlier called attention to the fact that our orderly ideas depend upon the Author of Nature (as in PHK 30), he does not here explicitly call upon God to solve his problem. There is still another possibility that should be put on the table. This is that what Berkeley is defining in this passage is not “continued existence” but “without the mind.” He is telling us that “without the mind” means “to exist totally mind-independently, having no relation to any mind whatsoever.” This is in fact the kind of existence Berkeley maintains is incoherently supposed to be true of matter. In this case, he might be saying that, contrariwise, the real existence of things can only be understood in mind-dependent terms, as when we say that the ideas constituting a real thing are those that are orderly, that a real tree is one that has a characteristic look and a characteristic feel. The real existence of a tree on this account does not require me or anyone else to keep a beady eye on it, but that the tree be identified with an orderly sequence of ideas over time, that is, what we mean by “tree.” The plausibility of this way of understanding what Berkeley is saying here is enhanced when we notice that it follows from the points he has most recently been making, about the orderliness of our ideas. That we each of us learn the same meaning of “tree” from ideas which are orderly because they occur according to the same laws of nature will explain why we all take trees to have a continued existence.<sup>4</sup>

## **Fifth Objection (PHK 49)**

This objection is again a relatively brief one, following directly from the conclusion of the previous objection, to say that bodies or their qualities exist only in the mind is to say they don't exist out of all minds. The objection focuses on the notion of existence in the mind, and asks, if extension and figure exist only in the mind, does this mean that the mind is extended and figured? Berkeley's answer has proved problematic to many readers.<sup>5</sup> He says that qualities like extension and figure are not in the mind “by way of mode or attribute” but instead “only as they are perceived by” the mind. The basic point Berkeley wants to make here is clear enough. To be in the mind doesn't mean to be a quality characterizing the mind. The difficulty here is that Berkeley has previously identified minds as the only sort of substance there is, but he seems now to be rejecting an important piece of substance/mode ontology, in suggesting that ideas, which we have been told are mind-dependent entities, are nevertheless not modes of mind. But if they are not modes of mind, then in what sense are they dependent on something from which they are apparently ontologically distinct?

In this passage, it is worth noting that Berkeley is looking both at what it means to say that an idea like extension is “in” or belongs to a mind, and what it means to say that an idea like extension is “in” or belongs to a body. In neither case are we talking about an accident of a

substance. Berkeley says that extension belongs to mind because it exists when perceived, it is a manner of being perceived by a mind. It is not an accident of mind, but instead exists because of something a mind does. It is worth noting that Berkeley takes this way of looking at things to be clearly understood in some cases, such as red or blue.<sup>6</sup> He is obviously not thinking about Scholastic philosophy here, but about his contemporaries, and he supposes that everyone understands the sense in which a sensation like red or blue belongs to the mind – it exists in the mind as sensed or perceived.

Similarly, when we predicate a quality like extension of a particular thing, like a die, we are not supposing there is something independent of all the attributes of the die, to which the attributes are pinned. Berkeley has already given arguments to reject such a view. What he does here is to fold in the matter of what is going on when we call the die “hard” with his earlier remarks about language in the *New Theory* objection. In this case, Berkeley says, when we list a number of attributes as belonging to a die, we are giving the meaning of the word “die.” Berkeley here is specifically connecting up the series of ideas we take to form the collection, “die,” with the meaning of the word with which we describe the collection. It is worth noting, that, in this connection, there is no reason to take the ideas that make up the meaning of “die” to be ones currently being perceived, since all of the ideas that make up the meaning are of course mind-dependent. I might be, right now, perceiving some of the ideas that make up the meaning of “die,” but in this case, when I say that I perceive a die, what I am perceiving are signs that suggest to me the meaning, the collection of ideas that means “die.”

## Sixth Objection (PHK 50)

The sixth objection moves on from considerations of what it is to exist in the mind to look at the implications of denying existence without the mind. This objection is to some extent introductory. It asks: If we deny the existence of matter and motion,<sup>7</sup> are we not undermining the success of corpuscularianism to explain natural phenomena? The new topic being introduced here has to do with whether it is going to be possible to give an account of nature, such as that undertaken by corpuscularians, on Berkeley's principles. The focus of his various objections from here on in will be on Berkeley's response to materialism, but materialism as it is incorporated into the theories of contemporary natural philosophers. In the present paragraph, Berkeley first throws down a gauntlet: There is no natural phenomenon explained by appeal to matter that can't be explained equally well without appealing to matter.

Berkeley cannot be said to have provided a justification for this sweeping claim in this paragraph. In fact, it is not even clear what a justification would require at this point. Is Berkeley saying that we can explain everything the corpuscularian scientist can explain without recourse to corpuscles at all, limiting himself to observable macroscopic entities only, or is he saying that corpuscularian science can be expressed without recourse to mind-independent matter? A full justification is only supplied in subsequent arguments Berkeley offers in further replies to objections. What he does do here is to put forward what might be thought to be a new and surprising description of what it takes to explain the phenomena. “To

explain the *phenomena*,” he says, “is all one as to shew, why upon such and such occasions we are affected with such and such ideas.” It will again take further discussion in other replies before Berkeley can be said to have given plausible reasons for this account. Now, he simply points out that descriptions of matter given in terms of ideas like shape and motion cannot be considered to form the basis of causal accounts, since, as has been shown, he says, in PHK 25, ideas are inert and cannot cause anything. Berkeley is returning to the conclusion stated in PHK 25. From the inertness of our ideas “it plainly follows that extension, figure, and motion cannot be the cause of our sensations. To say therefore that these are the effects of powers resulting from the configuration, number, motion, and size of corpuscles, must certainly be false.” Berkeley will now be meeting objections that proponents of corpuscularian science might raise against this consequence of his theory for an account of causality.

## Seventh Objection (PHK 51–53)

Berkeley moves on to confront objections surrounding his theory of causality, starting with the obvious objection that to deny causality to material bodies flies in the face of common practice. He frames the objection in terms of practices that involve language. Wouldn't it seem laughable, the objection runs, to say, not that fire heats, but that a spirit does so? In answering this objection, Berkeley returns to a theme first mentioned in the Introduction to the *Principles*. A lot of our language is misleading, since it first came into use under the sway of false theories. But, once we have grasped that the theories are indeed false, as we have done in the case of the Copernican theory, then it does no harm to continue to speak of sunrises and sunsets. What is important, Berkeley says, is not the ideas conjured up by the literal meaning of the words we use, but that they “excite in us proper sentiments, or dispositions to act in such a manner as is necessary for our well being” (PHK 52). This remark is of course reminiscent of Berkeley's claim in the Introduction that the proper use of words is not just to conjure up ideas but to provoke us to act in a useful fashion. In this case, it is true that we ignore the literal meaning of sunrise when we make charts of the times of sunrise in a particular area, so as to be able to judge when we will be experiencing periods of light and dark, but this is not of course to say that the correction we tacitly make does not itself involve ideas. Berkeley's famous advice he gives here that “we ought to *think with the learned, and speak with the vulgar*” (PHK 51) clearly shows that the right use of language requires ideas. Berkeley concludes by pointing out that whatever the vulgar might say, at least some other philosophers, both Scholastics and moderns, have denied that bodies can be causes, and suggests that they therefore have no need to assert the existence of these inert and hence unnecessary bodies.

## Eighth Objection (PHK 54–57)<sup>8</sup>

The eighth objection takes the issue raised in the previous objection one step further. It is not just, after all, that everyone tends to speak as if there is some mind-independent material

nature of bodies, everyone actually believes that there is. How can Berkeley claim that so many are fundamentally wrong in their beliefs? In the first part of his answer to this objection, Berkeley questions the assumption that underlies it. If it is in fact contradictory to claim that matter exists mind-independently, then no one can really believe such a claim, since no one can really believe a contradiction. In the next part of the reply, that begins “but secondly,” Berkeley argues that even if the assumption were true, and everyone did believe coherently in mind-independent matter, this still would not be a reason to suppose that such a belief is true. He points out that there are lots of false beliefs that were at one time held by most people, such as that the earth doesn't move, so that universal assent is no reason to accept any belief as true.

In the next couple of paragraphs, Berkeley does something more complicated. He shows that people who suppose that mind-independent matter exists do not all of them believe the same things, there is no one belief that everyone holds about the existence of the mind-independent. Berkeley gives an account of the development of beliefs on this issue, starting with what ordinary people take to be the case, followed by refinements introduced by philosophers. Berkeley relies frequently on such a distinction between ordinary and philosophical beliefs, most notably in the passage at the end of *Three Dialogues* (3DIII 262) where he proposes that his own views reconcile those of common sense with those of the philosophers. Here, in his reply, Berkeley is laying out developmental connections between two views by asking what reasons people might have for believing in mind-independent things. We all recognize that we ourselves are not the cause of our ideas,<sup>9</sup> and so suppose that our “ideas or objects of perception had an existence independent of and without the mind, without ever dreaming that a contradiction was involved in those words” (PHK 56). We all of us pre-theoretically or pre-philosophically take ourselves, when we perceive something red, round, and bouncy, to be perceiving, indeed, but to be perceiving red, round, and bouncy as it exists and continues to exist in the world. It is red, round, and bouncy in the world, we think, that causes the ideas we perceive when we look at the red, round, and bouncy portion of the world. Ordinary people therefore believe in the independent existence of a red, round, and bouncy world. Philosophers recognize a flaw in this set of assumptions, namely that “the immediate objects of perception do not exist without the mind,” and so reject the belief of ordinary people. But, still recognizing that they are not the cause of their ideas, they make another mistake, that of supposing “that there are certain objects really existing without the mind, or having a subsistence distinct from being perceived, of which our ideas are only images, or resemblances, imprinted by these objects on the mind.” Philosophers come to believe in the existence of two sorts of entities, on the one hand, of ideas in minds, and on the other, of mind-independent things, which must exist in order to be the cause of the ideas in our minds we don't cause.

The mistake the philosophers are driven to making, according to Berkeley, lies in misunderstanding the nature of the cause of our ideas. The issue, as he is now framing it, is that of choosing between two causal accounts, that of the philosophers, and Berkeley's own, which rests causal efficacy in a mind, in this case, the mind of God. In locating the cause of ideas in mind-independent things, philosophers must fail to recognize the contradictory



nature of both the belief that there could be non-ideas that are nevertheless like ideas, and that such entities could have causal powers. They overlook what is for Berkeley the obvious cause of ideas, the mind of God, for several reasons. First, Berkeley thinks, they fail to recognize this possibility because the mind of God is not a clearly delineated entity. Berkeley also offers another, more interesting reason. Because the laws of nature are uniform and exceptionless, we treat them as natural and fail to recognize the possibility of a supernatural origin. Berkeley is again reminding us of the importance of the laws of nature to his overall account. The more obvious lesson of this objection, however, is that Berkeley, who, it will be remembered, had from the beginning identified philosophers as his target, has now picked out a characteristic philosophical position. Philosophers, unlike ordinary people, understand that knowledge stems from ideas, but, misled by a faulty causal theory, they take ideas to be the effects of a mind-independent world, which these ideas represent.

## **Tenth Objection (PHK 58–59)**

This objection returns to the problem of the unperceived existence of some ideas, but now in the context of the natural philosophy that has formed the framework of the current set of objections. This objection asks whether Berkeley is entitled to endorse the Copernican theory, to which he has made reference in recent replies, if no one has actually perceived the motion of the earth. Since motion is an idea, how can Berkeley claim that unperceived motion exists? It is worth noting, first of all, that in his reply to the objection, Berkeley nowhere proposes that God is perceiving the motion of the earth, nor does he suggest that some other spirit might be doing so. He gives an answer that to some has suggested that he is endorsing some version of phenomenalism<sup>10</sup>: “... the question, whether the earth moves or no, amounts in reality to no more than this, to wit, whether we have reason to conclude from what hath been observed by astronomers, that if we were placed in such and such circumstances; or such a position and distance, both from the earth and sun, we should perceive the former to move among the choir of the planets” (PHK 58). In this passage it certainly appears as if Berkeley is saying that we can attribute real motion to the earth based on what are merely possible perceptions, perceptions we would have if the impossible happened and we ourselves were placed in the heavens. Given Berkeley's insistence earlier that the existence of an idea, like, one would think, the motion of the earth, consists in its being actually perceived, Berkeley's defense of astronomy here, if it is understood in terms of possible perceptions, seems untenable.

It is important to note, however, that Berkeley does specifically include an account of what the astronomers must do in order to be able to speak of the motion of the earth. Their conclusions, he says, are based on “the established rules of Nature which we have no reason to mistrust, is reasonably collected from the phenomena” (PHK 56). Berkeley is here, as he has been throughout, stressing the importance of the regularities among our ideas encapsulated in the Laws of Nature. And he has earlier in these replies to objections called attention to the way in which such regularities allow us to enlarge our ideas inasmuch as ideas presently being perceived suggest to us or include further ideas not actually present, in

the manner of a language. Ideas so enlarged are still actual not possible ideas.<sup>11</sup> In this particular case, the laws of nature allow us to go beyond immediate perceptions of motion to attribute motion to the earth. Berkeley is describing a twofold process. We start by making observations of phenomena, which observations in this case presumably include actual immediate ideas of motion. From these observations, we “collect” in Berkeley’s usage, that is to say, perhaps, infer, the Laws of Nature. If the Laws of Nature include the Laws of Motion, then the idea of motion expressed in these laws is the idea of motion observed in the phenomena. The regularities observed in the phenomena allow us to enlarge or extend our ideas beyond those immediately perceived. On the basis now of these general laws, we can ascribe motion to the earth. But the laws and hence the motion we ascribe to the earth are meaningful in the context of the regularities we initially observed among phenomena. The idea of motion has not shifted its meaning to become an idea of the motion of the earth as it would exist out of all minds even though it is the idea of a motion not currently observed by any mind. Berkeley’s reference to “what we should perceive” is not an account of possible motions waiting to exist if we should relocate to the heavens, but merely a reminder that the process by which we ultimately ascribe motion to an unobservable earth still retains the idea of motion-as-observed, because it is a consequence of the laws of motion, themselves generalized from observed motion.

Berkeley sums up the lesson he is drawing from this particular objection by returning to a point he made in the initial statement of his argument: The regularities we observe among our experiences are valuable to us because they give us foresight, or, as Berkeley puts it here, “sure and well-grounded predictions, concerning the ideas we shall be affected with, pursuant to a great train of actions, and be enabled to pass a right judgment of what would have appeared to us, in case we were placed in circumstances very different from those we are in at present” (PHK 59). The rules of thumb deriving from the regularities among our ideas that enable us to look forward when sowing in the spring to reaping in the harvest are in fact a special case of what we do whenever we enlarge our knowledge of the natural world. “Herein consists,” Berkeley says, “the knowledge of Nature.” That is, we explain the phenomena when our grasp on the laws of nature allow us to make “sure and well-grounded predictions” and hence, as Berkeley put it in PHK 50, “To show why upon such and such occasions we are affected with such and such ideas.” Our ability to predict what ideas we will be affected by is grounded in a corresponding ability to identify the laws of nature, rather than, for example, taking the ideas to derive from an unattainable essence.

## **Eleventh Objection (PHK 60–66)**

This objection is the last in the series that looks at the rival claims of corpuscularian science, and, in important ways, contributes a conclusion to this series. It constitutes Berkeley’s final account of why it is that, on his principles, he can explain whatever phenomena corpuscularianism has claimed to explain. If we see this objection as the culmination of a series, moreover, it becomes clear that the objection raised here is not being answered *de novo*, but in the context of what Berkeley has been establishing through his discussions of the

claims of mechanical, material, or corpuscularian science.

This final objection asks, why do plants and animals have inner parts or organization since Berkeley has repeatedly said that such mechanisms, being inert, can't do anything and are therefore useless to produce outward effects? A plant could just as easily grow and blossom without inner parts as with them. There are several things to notice here. The first is that the central issue is, why should things in nature have these inner parts or structures, since on Berkeley's account, they are causally without function? In addressing this objection, Berkeley nowhere disputes the claim that plants and animals have an inner organization in addition to the outward frame that meets the eye. There is no suggestion that our idea of a tulip is limited to the petals and leaves we can directly observe when we look at a tulip in a garden. Berkeley is being asked to *justify* the presence of these inner parts, he is not, via the objection, questioning their existence. The objection also makes no reference to the size of the inner organization of parts or animals, so that Berkeley could have had in mind only those inner parts of a plant or an animal that are big enough to see, or he could also have been intending to include the corpuscles that make up the machines of corpuscularian science, which are often supposed to be too small to see. There are considerations, however, that suggest that Berkeley might be willing to include among the entities referred to in this objection those that are too small to see but to which corpuscularians appeal. The first is, as Daniel Garber points out in his paper on this section of the *Principles*,<sup>12</sup> Berkeley uses language that is strongly reminiscent of that of corpuscularian scientists when he refers to “all the clockwork of Nature, great part whereof is so wonderfully fine and subtle, as scarce to be discerned by the best microscope” (PHK 60). There can be no doubt that Berkeley intended to be talking about very fine-grained mechanisms indeed. A further indication that Berkeley had corpuscularian science in mind comes up somewhat obliquely in the following sentence, where Berkeley writes: “In short, it will be asked, how upon our principles any tolerable account can be given, or any final cause assigned of an innumerable multitude of bodies and machines, framed with the most exquisite art, which in the common philosophy have very apposite uses assigned to them, and serve to explain abundance of phenomena” (PHK 60). The sentence, and in particular its final phrase about explaining the phenomena, suggests that Berkeley is harking back to his earlier promise in PHK 50 to show how he can explain all the phenomena previously accounted for by corpuscularians. Be that as it may, what is important to stress here is that the issue Berkeley is addressing in this objection is the causal efficacy of inner parts of things, and not their observability. The matter of our being able to talk meaningfully about entities that we are not in a position to observe was taken up and explained in the previous objection, Objection 10, and so Berkeley could reasonably have supposed that the account he gave there, in terms of predictions made in accordance with the Laws of Nature, would also hold of entities too small to see.<sup>13</sup>

Also, as he has done before, having dismissed the objection, Berkeley makes use of its presuppositions to extend and refine his own account. Corpuscularians cannot claim that inner parts or machines are necessary to explain the phenomena, but, as Berkeley puts it now in PHK 62, in fact such inner parts are necessary “to the producing of things in a constant, regular way, according to the Laws of Nature.” In developing his position here Berkeley

refers back to the place where he first made such a claim in PHK 31, where he told us: “That food nourishes, sleep refreshes, and fire warms us, that to sow in the seed-time is to reap in the harvest, and, in general, that to obtain such or such ends, such or such means are conducive, all this we know, not by discovering any necessary connexion between our ideas, but only by the observation of the settled Laws of Nature.” Berkeley is adding here to this account of how the constant and regular production of things enables us to operate by means of rules of thumb the more elaborate account of the Laws of Nature he has been putting together over the course of the last few objections. We are now in a position to recognize that there may be a more detailed explanation available to us to account for why when we put a tulip bulb into the ground at one time, we can expect blooming tulips at another, an explanation that goes beyond the macroscopic properties of bulb and tulip. Such an explanation may well involve microscopic particles, but we will not have to assume that such microscopic particles are necessary as machinery that allows the bulb to transform into a tulip. We can link the observable properties of the bulb at one time with the blooming tulip at another via a sequence of ideas that exemplify the laws of nature, in the way in which Berkeley has previously described, when he explained how we come by our ideas of a moving earth. Explaining the phenomena via the application of the laws of nature takes us beyond the immediately available ideas of bulb and bloom to include other regularly connected ideas. The application of these laws of nature allow us not only to understand and so to explain natural phenomena but also to control them. God could, of course, make a tulip bulb or the dial-plate of a watch which would result in the same effects we observe without the presence of the inner parts, but this result would be far less useful to watchmakers or tulip growers, who exploit the uniformity of the laws of nature to produce and create new kinds of watches or tulips. That God makes tulips and allows us to make watches according to laws of nature does not of course limit God to acting according to the laws of nature. He can make miracles. But nevertheless that He makes natural things like tulips according to the laws of nature is to our benefit. Berkeley invites us to consider that it is the “harmony and contrivance” of the work God has performed in nature that is a far better testimony to God’s “wisdom and beneficence” (PHK 63) than any occasional if startling miracle could ever be. Berkeley is at this point in his argument introducing God into his account, but the role he assigns to God is, it would seem, the creation and maintenance of the Laws of Nature.

Berkeley now restates the objection raised in PHK 60 in his preferred terminology: “ideas are not anyhow and at random produced, there being a certain order and connexion between them, like to that of cause and effect” (PHK 64). If this intricate order between ideas is actually causally ineffective, why did God make the world in such a way? The answer to this question, so framed, is the culmination of the account Berkeley has been developing: “the connexion of ideas does not imply the relation of *cause* and *effect*, but only of a mark or *sign* with the thing *signified*” (PHK 65). We are to understand this relation of sign to signifier in terms of the model that Berkeley originally introduced in *The New Theory of Vision* and reintroduced in the *Principles*, and which he has been exploiting throughout this set of objections, that of language. Berkeley explains: “the reason why ideas are formed into machines, that is, artificial and regular combinations, is the same with that for combining letters into words. That a few original ideas may be made to signify a great number of effects

and actions, it is necessary they be variously combined together: and to the end their use be permanent and universal, these combinations must be made by *rule*, and with *wise contrivance*” (PHK 65). Berkeley has reformulated an account of the order of nature from a causal account into one in terms of signs and signifiers, ideas and their meanings. On such an account, the order of nature is explicitly *for us*, it is an order that exists through the understanding of creatures and requires, as Berkeley says, the “wisdom and beneficence” of the creator. It is this account that Berkeley is proposing can do everything that a corpuscularian account can do. It should be clear that he means this in a very strong sense. It is not even that he is claiming that the things the corpuscularian can explain can be explained by other means, without reference to corpuscles. There is no reason to suppose that Berkeley doesn't think that the claims of the corpuscularians, including claims about entities too small to see, can't be rewritten in terms of signs to signifiers as identified through the laws of nature. In fact, since references to unperceived entities are to be justified through appeal to the laws of nature which are themselves justified through observable phenomena, there is much less room for some kind of corpuscular skepticism, for claims that we are not in a position to identify the corpuscular sub-structure of things.<sup>14</sup> Berkeley concludes his discussion of this objection by claiming that just so long as natural philosophers take their task to be that of understanding God's signs they will be able to render natural phenomena to be as he says “very naturally explained” without the difficulties natural philosophers have talked themselves into.

## Twelfth Objection (PHK 67–81)

While Berkeley has at this point reached a positive conclusion about the proper way in which natural philosophers ought to study nature, he does have some mop-up moves to make in his set of replies to objections. The twelfth objection asks whether it might not still be possible to find a role for matter, even after we have come to understand that there can be no such thing as the philosophers' extended, solid, inert substance existing without the mind. It is interesting that Berkeley locates this material in what I have called a mop-up operation. Berkeley thinks and has provided throughout this set of objections, not just reasons why materialism fails, but reasons why his own positive account succeeds. These positive reasons are independent of and do not rest on a refutation of the existence of matter. In this reply Berkeley piles up some negative arguments about matter – it is one of several such passages that occur in his texts that run through a number of examples of what might be meant by “matter.” In each case, Berkeley shows that the meaning adduced is either contradictory or meaningless.<sup>15</sup> He has these various attempts culminate in an account of what “matter” might mean that is synonymous with what anyone might mean by “nothing.” In the course of this particular set of arguments Berkeley does provide an interesting account of why he thinks people end up deeply committed to a meaningless notion, which to some extent echoes a similar account he gave in PHK 56. Originally he says, it was a general opinion that sensible qualities existed mind-independently and so it seemed natural to suppose a something, a substance, in which they existed. Having recognized that many sensible qualities were in fact

mind-dependent, some sought to single out a few qualities, such as figure and motion, the so-called primary qualities, which were still supposed to have a mind-independent existence and so to constitute or to require a substantial support. But the need for such a support evaporates once we recognize that no sensible quality can exist mind-independently. There are a couple of interesting points about this passage. The first is that Berkeley here appears to think that this brief summary of the state of play will be enough to remind his readers of the nature of the case he is making, while in the first of *Three Dialogues* Berkeley decides to walk his reader laboriously through the steps that lead to this conclusion. The second thing worth noticing is that in this passage, as in the one at PHK 56, Berkeley thinks there is something right about the philosophers' response to the opinions generally held. The philosophers, unlike the vulgar, do pick up on the mind-dependent nature of at least some sensible qualities. Berkeley's own position then is designed specifically to address the mistakes of the philosophers and to provide a better theory.

## Objections from Religion (PHK 82–84)

In a final mop-up operation, Berkeley addresses the worry that the account he has given might conflict with scripture, inasmuch as in the Bible we read of sun, trees, rocks, and many other such things. But since, Berkeley reminds us, he is not denying the existence of any real thing, there can be no conflict between references to real things like trees and stones in the Bible and anything that he has propounded. The notions of the philosophers, in particular that of matter, are never found in scripture. Berkeley has already explained how to tell the difference between “real” and “imaginary” and there is no implication that the entities for example described in miracles are anything other than real. The objection has the feel of an afterthought, perhaps displaying an uneasiness on Berkeley's part that he might be thought to be holding unorthodox theological opinions, but it does also return the reader to the place where the replies to objections began, with the issue of real things.

## Conclusions

At this point, I think it is fair to say that Berkeley, via his various replies to objections, has completed an extended argument. The argument is an elaborate defense and explication of the case that he has ended up making at the end of the first section of the *Principles*, PHK 25–33. It is interesting to note, that, while Berkeley, in his replies to objections, refers frequently to passages in the earlier section laying out his argument, they are almost always to passages from this last section. Only once does he refer back to an earlier section, PHK 3, when he wants to remind us that no idea can exist unperceived. The objections, therefore, that Berkeley proposed to meet are to the position with which this first section culminates, that ideas that are regular and orderly, governed by the laws of nature, are real things, the study of which constitute natural philosophy, the study of nature. Berkeley therefore has begun his set of objections with the goal of clarifying his claim that ideas of sense are real things and of identifying the target to which he was to object as that of matter. We are to understand that the debate will be between two accounts of reality: one, Berkeley's, which



takes reality to be constituted by and to be explicable in terms of the mind-dependent, and that of the philosophers, who take reality to be located in and explained by the mind-independent, understood in terms of the philosopher's term, matter.

Berkeley has proceeded by spelling out what he means by existence in the mind, the kind of existence he favors. The result of the elucidations that he gives here is that we are to understand existence in the mind to amount to more than just the momentary occurrence of an idea in a mind, but, to the extent that such existence relies on notions like orderliness to distinguish between the real and the imaginary, existence in the mind can be extended by means of the way in which momentary ideas are extended to include those ideas that are suggested because of orderly, lawful connections. What exists in the mind are meaningful ideas. Berkeley is then able to clarify what is meant by existence out of the mind, the kind of existence he does not favor. It does not mean, he tells us, existence out of one or another mind, but of all minds. He is contrasting existence in the mind with thoroughly mind-independent existence, such as is held to be the case for material substance. In the way in which Berkeley develops the concepts he is employing, it is clear that he is targeting precisely those he has singled out in the Introduction to the *Principles*, the natural philosophers who have drawn us into “uncouth paradoxes, difficulties, and inconsistencies” (PHK Introd. 1).

Berkeley has set up the remainder of the replies to objections to provide a series of contrasts between the corpuscularian science of the materialists and a new program for natural philosophers who will instead uncover and seek to understand the “signs instituted by the Author of Nature” (PHK 66) instead of indulging in a misguided search for material causes. What I think this excursion into the nature of Berkeley's replies to objections uncovers is that an argument for a positive program is revealed addressed primarily to natural philosophers. It is entirely possible to explain the phenomena, without recourse to an appeal to mind-independent matter, that we can, as do the materialists, speak of entities that are very small or very far away without having to assume that they exist in some special mind-independent way, and that the reality of these entities, like all others, is a consequence of the Laws of Nature, which govern, not causal connections, but relations of signs to signification. Under these circumstances, such natural philosophers will discover that they can read meaningfully and perspicuously the Book of Nature, just as they can, to return to Berkeley's last reply, the Book of Scripture. There is a sense, then, in which Berkeley's Replies to Objections ought to be understood as something other than replies to objections. They are not random ways of slapping down counter-examples, but take the form of an argument enlarging the positive ideas with which his earlier précis of his theory concluded. He is employing this format as a device not just to defend but to extend his account of his own theory, which, just as deservedly as his theory of vision, deserves to be called a New Theory, perhaps, of Phenomena, or of Nature.

## notes

[1](#) See T. Lennon, “The historical consistency of Berkeley's idealism,” *British Journal for the*



*History of Philosophy* (January 2008): 101–124.

- 2 It is true that specifically in *Alciphron* (IV 12) Berkeley limits the term “language” to visual ideas, claiming that ideas of other sense modalities are signs, but don't constitute a language. Berkeley does not make this particular distinction in the *Principles*, and it seems to me that if we are to make sense of the phrase, “in the foregoing parts of this treatise,” the remarks about language in the discussion of the *New Theory* must be extended to other signs more broadly.
- 3 Further exploration of what this view would amount to can await a discussion of those occasions when Berkeley makes it more explicitly.
- 4 For more on the Continuity Objection, see S. Bordner, “If we stop thinking about Berkeley's problem of continuity, will it still exist?,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55 (2) (April 2017): 237–260, discussed later in this book.
- 5 For a clear statement of these reservations, see T. Bettcher, *Berkeley's Philosophy of Spirit: Consciousness, Ontology and the Elusive Subject* (Continuum Press, 2007).
- 6 He seems to suppose this is the case, even though Malebranche is sometimes willing to talk in this way.
- 7 Perhaps Berkeley should have said, matter *in* motion, since he does not after all deny that we have ideas of motion, both tangible and visible.
- 8 The commentator is faced with a dilemma here caused by an unclarity in Berkeley's numbering system. PHK 54 begins “In the eighth place” so we are clearly starting upon the eighth objection. The next place, however, where Berkeley mentions what number we are at is PHK 58, where he begins, “Tenthly.” There is no ninth objection identified as such. PHK 55, however begins, “But secondly.” This raises the possibility that Berkeley intended PHK 55–57 to be an independent ninth objection. In *Berkeley's Principles Expanded and Explained* (Routledge, 2016), S. Stableford and T. Goldschmidt have taken Berkeley to begin a new thought in PHK 56, which would then be the ninth objection. I have made an executive decision, however, to treat PHK 54–57 as a single objection since I think the same issue is at stake throughout, but I am afraid that any decision on how to proceed in counting objections is going to be arbitrary.
- 9 A point Berkeley has of course made in PHK 25.
- 10 This is a proposal Kenneth Winkler has made in *Berkeley: An Interpretation* (Clarendon Press, 1989).
- 11 It will be remembered that Berkeley in the *New Theory* says that distance is perceived by sight, just not immediately (NTV 11).
- 12 “Locke, Berkeley, and corpuscular scepticism,” in *Berkeley: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, edited by C. Turbayne (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 174–196.

[13](#) I am therefore agreeing with Garber that the entities being discussed in Objection 11 might well include imperceptibly small corpuscles, but I am disagreeing with him that Berkeley needs to refer to the perceptual activity of God to justify this claim. The Reply to Objection 10 provides what Berkeley thinks he needs.

[14](#) Berkeley will be enlarging on this point in the final section of the *Principles*.

[15](#) Compare, for example, a very similar set of considerations that appear in *Three Dialogues* II.

## chapter 6

### ***principles of human knowledge: the consequences of the principles (PHK 85–156)***

In PHK 85, Berkeley signals that he is no longer going to be considering possible objections and will move on to something else. This “something else” takes up his attention in the third part of the *Principles*, running from PHK 85 to the end of the book. Its contents appear at first glance to be something of a mixed bag. Berkeley includes his reflections on contemporary natural philosophy, with particular attention to Newton, makes some remarks about mathematics, and concludes by talking briefly about spirits, and finally about God. While some of this material, especially on spirit, is taken up and enlarged in *Three Dialogues*, the discussion of natural philosophy and mathematics does not appear at all there, giving rise, perhaps, to the impression that it is only tangential to Berkeley's main line of argument. Inasmuch as Berkeley has just concluded his last section by arguing that it is possible to do natural philosophy with his own reduced ontology and without reference to matter, it seems far more likely that his discussion of natural philosophy here in the final section has an important role to play. We must again address the question, what is the nature of the argument Berkeley is developing in this final section?

Having raised this question, it is obvious that Berkeley himself is perfectly explicit about the role this final portion is playing in the overall structure of the argument. The first sentence of PHK 85 reads (in part): “Having done with objections,... we proceed in the next place to take a view of our tenets in their consequences.” Berkeley intends a discussion of the consequences of his theory to allow us to “take a view,” appreciate perhaps, the tenets or principles of his theory. We can expect that an examination of these consequences of his theory will help to highlight what Berkeley takes to be central and of chief importance to his work. We will want to know then, what does Berkeley take his discussion of consequences to reveal? And, of course, from which principles do his consequences follow?

Berkeley lays out his project again quite plainly. He is going to be examining the consequences of his principles with respect to the two ontological categories he has identified, ideas and spirits. His focus, moreover, lies in exploring the consequences of his principles for the success of our *knowledge* of ideas and spirits, that is, the two different kinds of things we know.<sup>1</sup> Up until now, Berkeley has been concentrating on matters of ontology – he has been looking at how we are to understand the existence and nature of what exists. He is now going to draw out the consequences of what he has established for an assessment of the nature of human knowledge, allowing him to raise at this point what was to become the framing issue of *Three Dialogues*: who is the greater skeptic, a proponent of Berkeley's views or one who is convinced of the existence of mind-independent reality. Berkeley pursues this general issue of the relationship of our understanding of the nature of ideas for the success of our knowledge in several sections, PHK 86–100, before turning to some specific instances of

knowledge of ideas.

## General Consequences for Knowledge of Ideas (PHK 86–100)

Berkeley begins his discussion of the consequences of his principles negatively, by identifying a rival principle, one that has adverse consequences for human knowledge. This rival principle is in fact “the twofold existence principle of ideas of sense,” originally introduced in PHK 56, as part of an explanation of how philosophers account for the presence of ideas in us we do not cause. We know therefore that Berkeley will be comparing the consequences of his principles with another philosophical theory, one that distinguishes between ideas and the mind-independent causes they represent. The consequence of this rival theory, Berkeley will maintain, is skepticism, because this theory holds that reality is located in a mind-independent external existence and that real knowledge consists in the conformity of our ideas with such entities. If real knowledge is thought to be knowledge that conforms to mind-independent real things, then we will never be in a position to judge that ideas that are perceived conform to things that are not perceived. Not only will we be unable to know whether this confirmation relation obtains, but we will also never be able to know anything about the nature of the things unperceived. On this view, Berkeley writes, “[w]e see only the appearances and not the real qualities of things. What may be the extension, figure or motion of any thing really or absolutely, or in itself, it is impossible for us to know, but only the proportion or relation they bear to our senses” (PHK 87). And since our ideas of extension, figure, and motion are constantly changing, none of these ideas can be judged to conform to an absolute or unchanging reality. Still worse, the twofold existence principle leaves us not only ignorant of the nature of what are thought to be real things, but leaves us equally ignorant of their very existence. This is because the principle assigns a different sort of existence, external or absolute existence to real things, which is distinguished from the existence of ideas with which we are immediately acquainted.

Berkeley is going to show that the way out of this skeptical morass is to abandon the twofold existence principle in favor of his principle that “the very existence of an unthinking thing consists in *being perceived*” (PHK 88). Berkeley will argue that on this principle we have in fact perfect knowledge of ideas and of their existence. This project is established in PHK 87, which begins: “Colour, figure, motion, extension and the like, considered as so many *sensations* in the mind, are perfectly known, there being nothing in them which is not perceived.” Our knowledge of sensations is perfect, or perhaps complete, because having a sensation doesn't take us beyond the sensation to anything else, inasmuch as a sensation doesn't contain anything beside itself. It is when we regard a sensation as a mere appearance of something else, a real thing, that we are led into skepticism, since “[t]hings remaining the same, our ideas vary, and which of them, or even whether any of them at all represent the true quality really existing in the thing, it is out of our reach to determine” (PHK 87). The variable nature of sensations precludes their standing directly for any alleged stable real quality. In elucidating the source of the skepticism philosophers arrive at by their twofold

existence principle, Berkeley at this point is focusing on ideas that are sensations. Interestingly, however, with the exception of color, his examples of sensations are what are often referred to as primary qualities, that is sensations of extension, figure, and motion. These are the ideas with which philosophers, committed to a twofold existence principle, have been involved.

Berkeley also wants to argue that, unlike those who endorse the twofold existence principle, on his principle we also have perfect knowledge of the existence of unthinking things. Berkeley says that absolute existence is meaningless whereas “I can as well doubt of my own being, as of the being of those things which I actually perceive by sense: it being a manifest contradiction, that any sensible object should be immediately perceived by sight or touch, and at the same time have no existence in Nature, since the very existence of an unthinking being consists in being perceived” (PHK 88). Berkeley is stressing that the existence of what he here calls an “unthinking thing” is perfectly known since the way in which such a thing exists is by being perceived, and, of course, if something is perceived by me, then I know it is perceived, just as, apparently, I know I am perceiving. We have perfect knowledge of the existence as well as the nature of what is perceived.<sup>2</sup>

Berkeley concludes his discussion of skepticism by arguing we become confused when, because we use general terms like “thing” or “being,” we fail to take on board that we know different kinds of things in different kinds of ways. Spirits, he reminds us, are “*active indivisible substances*” while ideas are “*inert, fleeting dependent beings*” (PHK 89). Because we are talking about different kinds of existence, we should expect that they are known in different ways, and, in particular, we shouldn't expect to know spirits by having ideas of them. The fact is, Berkeley states plainly, that I know my own spirit “by inward feeling” and I infer the existence of other spirits by reason.

In a passage added to the 1734 edition, Berkeley concludes by mentioning another category that is known, like spirits, but not by way of idea. “In like manner,” he writes, “we know and have a notion of relations between things or ideas, which relations are distinct from the ideas of things related, inasmuch as the latter may be perceived by us without our perceiving the former” (PHK 89). So, let me suppose I am perceiving a large blue square and a small red circle. Blue, square, red, and circle describe “inert, fleeting dependent beings.” In this case I know because I am having ideas. But I also know that the square is larger than the circle and is to the right of it, although in this case there are no inert fleeting dependent beings imprinted on my senses. This knowledge is of something else, relations, which I might observe in the presence of two or more ideas. Berkeley's claim here is that ideas are only one category of what is known, and that, in addition to spirits that are known but not by ideas, we should include a third category, relations. Berkeley is not proposing in this paragraph an additional entity, a relation, inasmuch as PHK 8 remains explicit that there are only two kinds of beings, ideas and spirits. Relations are clearly parasitic on ideas, since you need at least two ideas to form a relation, but the mere imprinting of two ideas is not sufficient to knowing a relation. A mind must observe the relation between the ideas. So, the existence of this particular way of knowing depends upon an act of mind. It is not surprising, then, that, in this added passage, Berkeley says that we have notions and not ideas of relations, just as we have

of spirits. Berkeley doesn't explicitly mention relations often, but it will turn out that knowing relations will be important to many of the cases he discusses in this section. Indeed, inasmuch as coexistence and succession, the most obvious ways in which ideas are formed into collections, are relations, it will be useful to keep in mind the contribution that relations can make to knowledge and to the enlargement of knowledge.

In PHK 97, Berkeley moves on to a second source of error, abstract ideas. Berkeley is again proceeding comparatively: other theories will be shown to lead to mistakes or confusions that his own will avoid. As Berkeley says here, he has already thoroughly exposed the errors of abstractionism in the Introduction to the *Principles*, and, in at least one of the discussions here of examples of abstraction, the discussion of extension in PHK 99, he does little more than recapitulate the kind of account he has given earlier, in the Introduction and elsewhere. The material on extension then is fairly familiar, but Berkeley also takes up two other cases that he has not previously discussed. The general problem, as Berkeley sets it up in PHK 97, is that when philosophers think they must abstract in order to make things intelligible, they end up introducing confusions into matters that were hitherto perfectly well understood. “Bid your servant,” Berkeley points out, “meet you at such and such a *time*, in such a *place*, and he shall never stay to deliberate on the meanings of these words” (PHK 97). Ordinary people understand what to do when faced with terms like time, place, and motion, but metaphysicians render these notions incomprehensible. This too is a familiar point from the Introduction, but it is useful to note that Berkeley is here for the first time introducing a set of concepts, time, place, and motion, that he has not discussed at length previously, but which are relevant to the subject matter Berkeley is going to take up very soon, when he looks specifically at natural philosophy.

At this point in his argument, Berkeley chooses to direct his attention to just one of these new concepts, time. In PHK 98, he begins by outlining what he takes to be the troublesome concept of time. We are led into confusions when we suppose we have “a simple idea of time, abstracted from the succession of ideas in my mind, which flows uniformly, and is participated in by all beings.” This idea of time Berkeley wants to reject takes it to be the idea of a container, or perhaps a river, whose passage can be objectively measured and in which everything can be located, so that you and I and Socrates are in this same time. Such a concept, Berkeley thinks, gives rise to many difficulties, most particularly, that time is infinitely divisible, or, as Berkeley says, “leads me to entertain odd thoughts of my existence: since that doctrine lays one under an absolute necessity of thinking, either that he passes away innumerable ages without thought, or else that he is annihilated every moment of his life: both which seem equally absurd” (PHK 98). Berkeley's idea seems to be that such a concept of time leads us to suppose, on the one hand, that we exist in an infinitely divisible stream of time, so that between every two moments of which we are aware there is an infinite number of smaller moments, of which we are unaware, and in which we exist without thinking, which is impossible. Alternatively, we might think of time as an infinite series of discrete moments, in which case, we begin anew each new moment in our lives. The consequence of imagining there is such an abstract idea of time is nonsense.

The actual fact Berkeley thinks we need to recognize is that time just is the succession of

ideas in a mind, as Berkeley stresses in a letter to Johnson: “a succession of ideas I take to *constitute* time, and not to be only the sensible measure thereof” (*Correspondence*, 319). One obvious benefit of which Berkeley boasts is that if time is the succession of ideas in a mind, then minds always think, since it will not be possible to separate the existence of a mind from its thinking. There is another consequence of Berkeley's approach to time that he does not mention here, but is worth pointing out. As Berkeley describes his account of time, we are not in time, as if it were a thing, but rather, as a succession of ideas, time is in us. This does not mean, however, that we have an idea of time, time is not in us as a particular idea. Time is in fact constructed by us as a relation, a succession, among ideas. Small wonder then that we get into trouble when we think we have abstracted an idea from what is not an idea at all.<sup>3</sup>

If we take stock of where Berkeley has taken us at this point, just before he is going to start talking about specific areas of knowledge, his claim is that we can trace complications for human knowledge from two confusions about the nature of ideas, that sensible objects have a mind-independent existence as well as a mind-dependent existence, and that we are able to conceive the nature and existence of these mind-independent objects through a process of abstraction. The first confusion leads to skepticism and encourages atheism, and the second to inconsistencies and puzzles arising from attempts to conceive the inconceivable. If we ask, *at this stage*, what are the important tenets from which these consequences for human knowledge follow, it seems quite clear that they are, first, the anti-abstractionism that is laid out in the Introduction to the *Principles*, and second, the set of claims that emerge in the very earliest sections of that work, the idealist claims that the *esse* of unthinking things is *percipi*, and that an idea can only be like another idea, and the anti-materialist claim that the only substance is spirit. These are all principles that Berkeley has established by PHK 8 of the *Principles*. It is also worth noting that the kind of knowledge Berkeley is talking about here is knowledge gained through having ideas, quite often described as sensations. As we move on to look at the consequences Berkeley wants to draw for some special and more complex bodies of knowledge, first natural philosophy and then mathematics, the question to keep in mind is: Do these matters, all deriving from the very early stages of Berkeley's account of his theory, remain the central tenets from which Berkeley will draw his consequences for knowledge of natural philosophy and of mathematics? Is it the case that Berkeley thinks his theoretical work that has consequences for knowledge is over at such an early stage?

## The Consequences for Knowledge of Natural Philosophy (PHK 101–134)

Berkeley tells us he is going to preface his account of “the two great provinces of speculative science, conversant about ideas of sense and their relations” (PHK 101) with some general remarks about natural philosophy.<sup>4</sup> His topic is still the consequences for knowledge of ideas, but he is now moving on from considering the mistakes made by other philosophers to focus on natural philosophy (before moving on to mathematics). About natural philosophers, Berkeley wants it to be known that they are the worst offenders when it comes to encouraging skepticism. This is because they have added what amounts to a new principle to



a general mistrust of the senses engendered by the twofold existence principle. They adopt a further belief: “that everything includes within itself the cause of its properties, which is the source whence its discernible qualities flow, and whereon they depend” (PHK 102). It is the addition made by natural philosophers of a belief in the existence of an inward essence that has as a consequence that we humans are not fitted to understand nature, because at least some natural philosophers<sup>5</sup> hold that this real essence “is beyond the power of human understanding to fathom or comprehend” (PHK 101). Berkeley's view is that, on his principles, what the natural philosophers take to be unknowable is on the contrary, “perfectly known.”

In PHK 102, Berkeley enlarges on the skepticism induced by the belief in inward essences. We not only take the “inward essence” just mentioned to be the source of the observable properties of things, but also assume that this inward essence itself possesses mechanical properties, such as figure and motion. We are led in the wrong direction in this investigation because we have failed to recognize that such mechanical properties, being inert, can't be causes. At this point in his argument, Berkeley reminds us of a positive claim about the nature of causation: only spirits can be causes. To support this claim, he references a later section in the initial argument found in PHK 1–33, namely PHK 25. PHK 25 occupies an interesting location in the argument of PHK 1–33. In the preceding section, Berkeley concludes his argument against the view that ideas can represent a mind-independent reality, summing up what he is maintaining in the conclusive result of the Master Argument, that it is not possible even to conceive the mind-independent existence of sensible objects. PHK 25, it will be recalled, starts a new thought, that since ideas have no activity discernible in them, it is not possible that ideas can be the cause of anything. This section then introduces a positive line of argument identifying the true nature of causality and reality, completing the argument of PHK 1–33. So it is at least plausible that Berkeley will seek to ground some positive consequences of knowledge of natural philosophy on the principles or tenets that emerge, not at the beginning, but at the end of PHK 1–33.

As he moves through his discussion of natural philosophy, Berkeley turns to the concept that has recently achieved importance through Newton's work, that of attraction (and which has of course been found problematic by those committed to explanations in terms of shaped, moving bodies). Berkeley is dismissive of attempts to use attraction itself an explanatory concept, since, as he points out, to say a falling body is attracted to the earth or particles of steel are attracted to each other does no more than name the effect needing explanation and says nothing about the means by which such an effect is produced. This is not to say, however, Berkeley holds, that the concept of attraction is without value, for it allows us to recognize similarities between familiar events, like falling bodies, and others more puzzling, so that we can identify a number of otherwise disparate events as being of the same sort. The concept of attraction tells us nothing about the mechanisms underlying what we label attraction, but it does allow us to treat different events as falling under the same general law.

In this example, Berkeley performs a pivot from identifying explanations in terms of causal mechanisms, inward essences, to one of subsuming events under laws. Berkeley enlarges on this observation in a central passage, PHK 105, in which he emphasizes that the special

knowledge of natural philosophers does not consist in a knowledge of the causes of natural phenomena, because the only thing that can cause is the will of a spirit, which is, presumably, outside their realm of expertise. What natural philosophers have that others don't is "a greater largeness of comprehension, whereby analogies, harmonies, and agreements are discovered in the works of Nature, and particular effects explained" (PHK 105). Natural philosophers go wrong when they think what they ought to have is knowledge of a material basis or cause of phenomena to be found in an inward essence. They go right when they recognize the sort of knowledge they do have, knowledge of general rules by which phenomena can be explained because such rules "extend our prospect beyond what is present and near to us, and enable us to make very probably conjectures, touching things that may have happened at very great distances of time and place, as well as to predict things to come; which sort of endeavour towards omniscience, is much affected by the mind" (PHK 105). Locating the ground for knowledge in essences leads to skepticism, locating it in general laws leads to something much better, an "endeavour towards omniscience." Berkeley has moved on now to identify the particular way in which natural philosophers can and do have knowledge of nature.

In laying out this account of the knowledge natural philosophers actually have, Berkeley references an earlier passage, PHK 62. PHK 62 forms part of the important reply to the objection that asks why bodies have minute parts, since, according to Berkeley, they play no causal role. In PHK 62, Berkeley explains exactly what role these minute parts do have, they are a feature of the uniformity of nature that allows us to understand that we explain phenomena by recognizing they fall under general laws. The passage in PHK 62 provides the link that allows Berkeley to explain how the knowledge of natural philosophers resembles and differs from the knowledge possessed by ordinary people. In the daily course of events, we all have knowledge of real things surrounding us thanks to our ability to make predictions grounded on the resemblance patterns established by the Laws of Nature. PHK 62 opened this way of knowing beyond that based on the immediately observable, by calling attention to the possibilities of extending knowledge of reality by means of general laws based on uniform features of our experience. In this way, we are able to come to understand otherwise puzzling phenomena and to introduce into our explanations entities that are, from our perspective, only in principle perceivable. In PHK 105, Berkeley exploits this new account of explanatory knowledge to identify the special knowledge of the natural philosopher, who doesn't have knowledge of different *kinds* of entities than those we learn about by means of our senses, like essences, nor of different *kinds* of connections among entities, like necessary connections. Natural philosophers don't come by their knowledge by special means. The connections among ideas they rely on are arbitrary, just like any of the ideas we come to expect to go together and to follow upon one another. But natural philosophers do possess a "greater largeness of comprehension," by means of which they are able to draw out hitherto unnoticed similarities among ideas, thereby producing an account of laws of greater generality and uniformity. Berkeley has introduced here a normative conclusion into our understanding of human knowledge: a natural philosopher has better knowledge of reality to the extent that phenomena are subsumed under wider, universal, although not necessary laws.

In stressing that the model of knowledge that he favors does not insist on necessary

connections between the elements in the laws of nature, Berkeley returns to the concept of attraction with which his discussion began. Part of the difficulties that have arisen with respect to attraction is that it is assumed that if attraction is governed by law, then it must be essential to all bodies. This assumption, in turn, is problematic, because, as Berkeley sees it, there seem to be many counter-examples, such as, he supposes, the fixed stars, or the elasticity of the air, which are not subject to attraction. But this confusion arises because, first, the *cause* of attraction is assumed to rest in the nature of bodies, instead of in the will of a spirit, and second, it is assumed falsely that the general laws provided for our use must be necessarily exceptionless. Berkeley concludes, while warning about the dangers of overgeneralization, to which he thinks those enamored of necessary connections are prone, with language expressive of his typical approach: “Those men who frame general rules from the *phenomena*, and afterwards derive the *phenomena* from these rules, seem to consider signs rather than causes” (PHK 108). Berkeley here is returning to language that he introduced in PHK 65, that the ideas we perceive function as signs, connecting, not through necessary, but through arbitrary connections, to what they signify. Natural philosophers, just like anyone else, in their dealings with nature are learning to understand what is before them, by coming to identify signs with the meanings associated with them.

## **Newton on Absolute Space and Motion (PHK 110–117)**

After having given his own positive account of knowledge in natural philosophy, Berkeley turns to an area in which we find natural philosophers introducing confusions thanks to a reliance on abstract ideas, in this case, of space and time. Berkeley's treatment of absolute space and motion in the *Principles* is, in several ways, anomalous. When he first introduced the topic in PHK 110, it is clear, even though expressed obliquely, that he is going to be discussing the work of a single author, namely Isaac Newton's “justly admired treatise.” He continues in one very long section, PHK 111, to lay out what amounts to a paraphrase (or translation) of scattered sentences from Newton's Scholium to Definition VIII, that contains Newton's much discussed account of time, space, place, and motion. This is unusual because Berkeley does not, in general, give such close attention to what some one or other author has said, preferring on the whole to speak of philosophers in the plural.<sup>6</sup> It seems that Berkeley must have had some special reason for looking at Newton in such close detail.

That Berkeley took such pains to reject what Newton was saying have led some to suppose he was just an anti-Newtonian, as opposed to Newton as he was to all other mechanical philosophers. An exchange of letters between Berkeley and the American Samuel Johnson, however, makes plain that this is not the case. Johnson raises with Berkeley the question whether the theory he has developed is compatible with Newton's, saying that his own admiration for Newton leads him to hope that Berkeley is not an opponent of Newton's. In his reply, Berkeley has this to say:

The true use and end of Natural Philosophy is to explain the phenomena of nature; which is done by discovering the laws of nature, and reducing particular appearances to them. This is Sir Isaac Newton's method; and such method or design is not in the least inconsistent with the principles I lay down. This mechanical philosophy doth not assign or suppose any one natural efficient cause in the strict sense; nor is it, as to its use, concerned about matter; nor is matter connected therewith; nor doth it infer the being of matter ... As for absolute space and motion, which are also supposed without any necessity or use, I refer you to what I have already published ...

(*Correspondence*, 302)

From this letter we can conclude that Berkeley was including Newton among the natural philosophers of whom he spoke approvingly in PHK 105. His only objection is to the use of the concepts of absolute space and motion, which he says, are not required for the successful science he recommends.

That Berkeley would find appeals to absolute space and motion unattractive should come as no surprise. Berkeley has told us that any alleged idea framed by abstracting from sensible ideas is a source of confusion. Those who have read Berkeley's earlier work, *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, will also know that Berkeley would have found uncongenial an account of absolute space as an insensible, immovable container of bodies. For Berkeley has an elaborate theory, found in the *New Theory*, in which space is shown to be constructed from relations among bodies, or, to be more precise, ideas of bodies. Space, for Berkeley, as he had shown just a little earlier in the *Principles* with respect to time, is not something that contains us or our bodies, but is contained in us through the relations we perceive. For Berkeley, absolute space, like all abstract ideas, is inconceivable, and space is not known by way of idea at all, but by way of relation. What is anomalous, or puzzling, about Berkeley's discussion of space in *this* portion of the *Principles* is that he does not spell out the kinds of reasons I have just mentioned in any detail, but merely gestures at them in a concluding section, PHK 116, referring to pure space as "a most abstract idea." This has left some readers of the *Principles* confused about what Berkeley found objectionable about absolute space, often supposing his rejection of absolute space stemmed from a positivist-style dislike of the unobservable, or that it fails to conform to common sense. This lack of mention of what ought to be pretty good reasons for rejecting an abstract idea of absolute space raises a further question. Given that in general Berkeley takes the identification of an idea as abstract as a sufficient reason for rejecting a theory relying on it, why does he in this case spend so much time developing an elaborate argument against the appeal to absolute space?

There are a final set of puzzles about what is typically taken to be the centerpiece of Berkeley's account of absolute space and time, his reaction to Newton's bucket experiment. The refutation of the experiment Berkeley actually gives cannot be considered anything other than perfunctory. He has not set up what he has to say about the bucket experiment in a remotely helpful manner. In fact, what he does say assumes a readership already thoroughly familiar with the terms of the experiment. Berkeley actually confines his remarks about the bucket to two brief sentences at the end of PHK 114. The brevity of what Berkeley says has

presented a challenge to those readers of Berkeley who are primarily interested in why Berkeley takes these brief remarks to dismiss an important aspect of Newton's position with respect to absolute space. It raises another question as well: Have Berkeley's readers been mistaken in taking the primary focus of his section on space and motion to be the bucket experiment?<sup>7</sup>

In order to situate this issue, it will be useful to provide what Berkeley does not, a summary of what Newton is doing in the bucket experiment.<sup>8</sup> Newton provides the bucket experiment in order to show how to distinguish relative from absolute motion by their effects, since, of course, absolute motion is not perceivable. The experiment concerns observations Newton says can be made with respect to a bucket hanging by a long rope. The rope is twisted tightly, and the bucket filled with water. What you will see, Newton tells us, is a bucket beginning to rotate with respect to its surroundings while the water, in motion with respect to the sides of the bucket, remains flat (due to inertia). But soon we see the water rising up the sides of the bucket forming a concave shape. The water itself is accelerating, as a result of a force impressed upon it by the bucket, until eventually the water and the bucket are moving at the same rate. What do these observations show? At the beginning of the experiment, the water was in circular motion relative to the bucket. But as the water accelerated and the rotation of the water relative to the bucket decreased, what Newton regards as the true circular motion of the water increased until the water was relatively at rest with respect to the bucket. Therefore, what the experiment shows is that the eventual true circular motion of the water, unlike its initial relative circular motion, is independent of the bodies surrounding it.

What now does Berkeley have to say? He begins his discussion by focusing on Newton's distinctions between absolute and relative space, place, and motion. In PHK 111, after dismissing the case of time, about which he says he has already said enough<sup>9</sup> Berkeley goes on to provide an elaborate account of what we can find in Newton's *Principia* on this topic. Absolute space, we are told, according to Newton, "being imperceivable to sense, remains in itself similar and immovable" while relative space is moveable and "defined by its situation in respect of sensible bodies." Place is a part of space occupied by bodies and can be absolute or relative, and absolute motion is the change of a body with respect to absolute place, while relative motion is the same with respect to relative place. Berkeley thinks it is important to stress about these distinctions that Newton regards relative motion alone as inadequate to identify true motions because relative motion is always ambiguous, since the same body can be at rest relative to one place but moving with respect to another. (Berkeley will shortly take up the familiar example of a man on a ship who may be at rest with respect to the ship but moving with respect to the shore.) The way out of this difficulty, Berkeley reports, according to Newton, is to arrive at a way of distinguishing absolute motion from relative motion so that we can identify true, non-ambiguous motion. Berkeley is calling attention to a specific function that according to Newton needs to be played by absolute motion.

Berkeley concludes his summary of Newton's views by giving five criteria by means of which Newton answers the operative question, how can you distinguish true motion from relative or apparent motion? In PHK 111, Berkeley lists five properties of true motion that

are again taken quite straightforwardly from passages in the *Principia*, of which the fifth is the one relevant to the bucket experiment: “Fifthly, in circular motion barely relative, there is no centrifugal force, which nevertheless in that which is true or absolute, is proportional to the quantity of motion.” From PHK 111, we can gather that Berkeley is focusing on Newton's claim that a notion of space and motion that is not relative to the senses is required to provide an unambiguous idea of true motion, and what Berkeley takes to be important to his own discussion are Newton's list of the properties of true motion. The challenge therefore for someone like Berkeley who is unwilling to accept any idea abstracted from the senses, will be whether it is possible to arrive at a notion of true motion, as Newton has defined it by means of his five properties, but which is not an abstract or absolute notion. What he will be looking for is an account of space and motion that is both relative and true.

Berkeley of course takes his stand on the position that all motion is relative motion. The reason he gives is quite general and does not require buying into either Berkeley's anti-abstractionism or his constructivist account of space. Any conception of motion includes the idea of a change in a body in a direction over some distance and so must therefore also include the idea of another body constituting the situation and distance over which and in the direction of which the first body is moving. What Berkeley needs to do, it has emerged, is to establish that it is possible to identify relative motions that are also true motions, and not ambiguously in motion relative to some bodies, and at rest relative to others. In service of this project, Berkeley adds two refinements to the general conception of motion as the change in the distance and situation of one body with respect to another. One possible source of ambiguity in a relative conception of motion is that when one body is thought to be moving with respect to another, the second body is also changed with respect to its distance and situation from the first. But, Berkeley points out, we do not always in common usage take both bodies to be moving. In support of this ordinary way of thinking, Berkeley offers the familiar example of a person walking along a street. What we would commonly say is that even though both the person and the street are changing positions relative to each other, only the person is really moving, because only the person (the immaterial agent) is the source of the force or action behind the change, the motions of the corporeal feet with respect to the street. If we add this condition to our concept of motion that the body moving is the one to which force is applied, then it is possible to recognize that “as a man may think of something that does not think, so a body may be moved to or from another body, which is not itself in motion” (PHK 113).<sup>10</sup>

This condition alone does not entirely solve the problem of disambiguating true motion, because it is still the case that a body can be either at rest or in motion depending upon the place that is considered stationary with relation to which the moving body is moving. Here is where Berkeley illustrates the point with the familiar example of the man in the ship, at rest relative to the ship but moving relative to the shore. What Berkeley tells us is that, for our ordinary purposes, the earth is good enough, we take anything that is moving in relation to a stationary earth to be in true motion (when a force is impressed on it). But this isn't what philosophers do, because they recognize that the earth itself is in motion. Instead, Berkeley says, “they seem to conceive the corporeal world as finite, and the utmost unmoved walls or

shell thereof to be the place, whereby they estimate true motions” (PHK 114). What is interesting about this claim here is that Berkeley himself is not trying to solve the problem of true motion, but merely supposing that this is in fact what philosophers are doing when they speak of what is actually inconceivable, absolute motion. Berkeley concludes his discussion by alleging that all the properties he has quoted from Newton belonging to true motion will be found to belong to relative motion that meets the conditions he has laid down, motion that changes its situation as a result of an impressed force in relation to an imaginary fixed frame, the outer shell of the universe.

Berkeley apparently thinks that the conclusion he has drawn is sufficiently obvious that he does not undertake a complete demonstration of the claim that relative motion as he defines it exhibits all of Newton's properties of true motion. But, and this is where the bucket argument finally comes in, he apparently also supposes that there might be some difficulty raised about what Berkeley has identified as Newton's fifth condition. Berkeley therefore adds two sentences to his account of true motion, taking up the matter of relative circular motion:

As to what is said of the centrifugal force, that it doth not at all belong to circular relative motion; I do not see how this follows from the experiment which is brought to prove it. See *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica in Schol. Def VIII*. For the water in the vessel, at that time wherein it is said to have the greatest relative circular motion hath, I think, no motion at all: as is plain from the foregoing section.

(PHK 114)

The foregoing section is PHK 113 where Berkeley points out that we call bodies moving only if they have a force impressed on them, a condition about which Berkeley reminds us in the following section, PHK 115. How does this help? Newton has said that when the bucket is released, the water is at its greatest circular motion relative to the bucket but, at the end of the experiment, the water has revealed the effects of acceleration and is at rest relative to the bucket. Berkeley's point is that when the bucket is first released, there is no force impressed upon the water, and so then the water in the bucket is still at rest. When the water exhibits its deformation, we know that there is now a force impressed on the water, and so there is no reason not to say that the water is now in relative circular motion, with respect to some appropriate frame, the room, the earth, or even the shell of the universe. What had misled Newton, Berkeley believes, was the failure to recognize that the water in the bucket when first released was only in apparent and not relative motion. Therefore, the experiment cannot be said to distinguish, by their effects, relative and true motion.

From PHK 110 on, Berkeley has tackled Newton's case for the concepts of absolute space and motion from the presuppositions he could imagine were shared by most natural philosophers interested in the problem of motion. He has hoped to provide a demonstration of the claim he later made in the Letter to Johnson, that the successful methods of Newton's philosophy can be employed without using concepts like absolute motion. He concludes his discussion of natural philosophy by speaking more distinctly in his own voice. “And perhaps,” he writes, “if we inquire more narrowly, we shall find we cannot even frame an idea of *pure space*, exclusive of all body. This I confess seems impossible, as being a most



abstract idea” (PHK 116). Having reassured his readers that, on a correct understanding of motion, we don't need to assume absolute space to identify true motion, Berkeley proceeds to pull the rug out from under the idea of pure space. The idea of space, he suggests, is just the idea of motion that is not resisted, and when a motion encounters resistance, we say there is body, rather than empty space, in that place. We can't actually conceive of space without motion and body. Berkeley goes on to conclude that freeing natural philosophy from the concept of pure space is a very good thing, since, in addition to the flaw of being meaningless, the concept itself raises serious theological problems when we attempt to conceive God's relation to pure space. Theologians are reduced to choosing whether space is an entity distinct from God that shares many of God's attributes or whether God just is space. In his conclusion to his discussion of space, Berkeley is able to return to what has been a point he has frequently been anxious to make, that supposing we can operate with concepts that are actually inconceivable is a source of numerous difficulties of the kind that can result in skepticism or atheism.

We can perhaps say a little more about why Berkeley conducted himself at the end of his discussion of natural philosophy in the way that he did. From the very brevity of parts of his argument, it would seem that Berkeley took his audience to be thoroughly familiar with Newton's work. And it also seems that Berkeley did not see himself as offering a direct challenge to Newton, or putting forward an alternative theory to Newton's. The message he was trying to send to his readers was that Newton's methods without any significant alteration, as Berkeley saw it, constituted the way to knowledge of natural phenomena. Berkeley had a particular interest in Newton because he thinks there is so much Newton got right. He has no inclination therefore to dismiss appeals within Newton's text to absolute space and motion out of hand, as inconceivable and dangerous nonsense, but rather to show that there is no significant loss when these notions are re-interpreted in a way that reflects how Berkeley thinks we actually understand them. The important point Berkeley wanted to make is concluded in that part of PHK 114 where he completes his account of what it is that natural philosophers are really relying on when they identify true motion. Seen in this light, the refutation of the bucket experiment is not the main event. The few sentences which Berkeley includes about the bucket are more like a mop-up operation, getting rid of a worry that some readers might have had. Berkeley is not trying to show that Newton's version of natural science leads to skepticism, but rather that a Newtonian version of natural philosophy, properly understood in line with Berkeley's ontology, is the way out of skepticism.

## **Consequences for Our Knowledge of Mathematics (PHK 118–134)**

The second area of knowledge to which Berkeley turns his attention is mathematics. As Berkeley mentioned to Johnson, mathematics was a subject that had interested him from his earliest days, and the first works he completed in 1707, *Arithmetica* and *Miscellanea Mathematica*, concerned mathematical topics. Even more to the point, perhaps, mathematics would appear to those of Berkeley's time as far from tangential to the study of nature,

stemming from Galileo's well-known remark that the language of the Book of Nature is mathematics, and including Descartes' equally well-known claim in the *Principles of Philosophy*, that “[t]he only principle which I accept, or require, in physics, are those of geometry and pure mathematics” (PP II, 64, CSM, I, 247). Mathematics had long been considered foundational to the study of nature. Inasmuch as Berkeley has quite different ideas about the language of nature, he would regard mathematics, with its claim to certainty, as important to his project. As has been his practice throughout this final section, he is going to be showing that the acquisition of knowledge of mathematics has been hindered by the tacit supposition of abstract general ideas, and a belief in external absolute existence.

Berkeley begins his discussion with arithmetic, which he takes to be a poster child for the way in which a reliance on abstract ideas can lead an enterprise astray. Number, he points out, is understood as a collection of units and unity has already been exposed in PHK 13 as an abstract idea, which therefore, as has been shown in the Introduction, is no idea at all. If we turn back to PHK 13, and the dismissal of unity as an abstract idea, we find that the context in which this dismissal occurs is a discussion of various alleged primary qualities, including number. The preceding PHK 12 points out: “that number is entirely a creature of the mind, even though the other qualities be allowed to exist without, will be evident to whoever considers, that the same thing bears a different denomination of number, as the mind considers it with different respects. Thus, the same extension is one, or three or thirty-six, according as the mind considers it with reference to a yard, a foot, or an inch.” So understood, Berkeley holds, there is no way that number could have an absolute existence, we always have to ask, number of what are you numbering? The point Berkeley is making here is that numbers are not qualities of things at all, hence not primary qualities. Numbers depend upon particular mental operations. They are ways in which people relate things to each other, according to whatever categories they think best. So a unit, abstracted from things that are being related numerically, is inconceivable, is a nothing. The study of arithmetic is the study of numbered things, but, since numbers are not ideas, it is not the study of abstract ideas, or, indeed, of ideas at all. And, of course, if arithmetic is not a study of ideas, then its epistemic benefits, its certainty, can't be founded on necessary connections among ideas.

If arithmetic is not the study of connections among ideas, then what is it? Berkeley provides an answer to this question through a quasi-historical account of the development of our current numerical system. Berkeley imagines that people began keeping track of counting tasks by making a single stroke for every object counted, so that each stroke represents a unit of something that can be reckoned up. Then, as time goes on, we imagine, people simplified their task by inventing symbols for larger collections of units, as in, presumably, Roman numerals. But we now use the vastly superior system, derived Berkeley says from Arabia and India, indeed, the one we still use today. What is it that makes our current system so much better? What makes it so much easier to recognize a date expressed in Arabic numerals from one in Roman numerals? To begin with, Berkeley says, it uses very simple means, nine numerals and zero, which take on different meanings depending upon their place in a sequence of numerals. We can recognize the relationship between sequences of numerals very easily so that we know at a glance that 1707 happened earlier than 1709, and using these

simple means we can generate any numerical relationship. I might, for example, put forward the following sequence of numbers: 2-5-6-8-6-2. Because of my understanding of the order of the numerals and the order of their places, Berkeley says, I can attach a word to this sequence, two hundred and fifty six thousand, eight hundred and sixty two, which then can pick out an exact amount of some set of denumerable objects, which, by the words, I can recognize as considerably smaller than that picked out by 356 862 and slightly larger than that picked out by 256 861. Berkeley explains the benefits of such a system in a note from his notebooks:

I am better inform'd & shall know more by telling me there are 10000 men than by shewing me them all drawn up. I shall better be able to judge of the Bargain you'd have me make when you tell me how much (i.e. that name of the) mony lies on the Table than by offering & shewing it without naming. In short I regard not the Idea the looks but the names. Hence may appear the Nature of Numbers.

(PC 761)

Berkeley is emphasizing that when we understand arithmetic to be concerned with a symbol system that delivers meaningful words, rather than as a way of comparing ideas, then we can see that we have a way of grasping numerical relations that is, as he says, “perfectly known.” The system of Arabic notation is a method in which every numerical relation can be determined and completely expressed. Understanding arithmetic as grounded in a kind of symbol system where signs are connected to meanings referring to particular things provides a reason to see the kind of certain knowledge we possess in this case.

With the aid of this system, we can perform arithmetic operations without having to dwell on the meaning of each sequence of numerals, but the result of any calculation will be understood, thanks to the word that can be read off the numerical sign and applied to particular things. In another note, Berkeley says: “These [that is, Arithmetic and Algebra] are sciences purely Verbal, & entirely useless but for Practice in Societys of Men. No speculative knowledge, no comparing of Ideas in them” (PC 768). When we recognize that arithmetic is in fact a system of signs, that receives its meanings ultimately from particular things in the world, then, Berkeley argues, we must conclude that there is no intrinsic knowledge expressed by the system itself. As he says, “In *arithmetic* therefore we regard not the *things* but the *signs*, which nevertheless are not regarded for their own sake, but because they direct us how to act with relation to things, and dispose rightly of them” (PHK 122). The system is as it is because it is an efficient and effective way of realizing its purpose, capturing and recording the numerical relations of things with a view to how we are going to act about them. The way the system is put together is such as to allow us to best achieve our purposes, and therefore reflects these practical goals, rather than the nature of things themselves. Arithmetic is a manmade, artificial system, and while it is extremely useful in allowing us to cope with nature, it is not the language in which the Book of Nature is written.

Berkeley now turns his attention to geometry, and to extension, which, he says, is the subject matter of geometry, as number is the subject matter of arithmetic. It would appear, then, that whatever problems exist for geometers that might have led them astray, will be quite different

from those of arithmetic, since extension, unlike number, is not a creature of the mind, but is known to us by sensible ideas. Nevertheless, it will turn out that there are certain convergences, as Berkeley develops a picture of geometry that is, like arithmetic, a kind of system of signs.

Berkeley diagnoses the chief difficulty in dealing with extension to arise from the notion of infinite divisibility. Since a central characteristic of extension is that it is divisible, it has appeared to many philosophers that it must be infinitely divisible, that anything that is an extent, no matter how small, must be divisible, and so its parts must be divisible and so on. From this belief arise, Berkeley says, “amusing geometrical paradoxes” (PHK 123) which render the study of geometry unnecessarily arcane. Berkeley's first step is to cut through the paradoxes, by showing that “no finite extension contains innumerable parts” and so put an end to arcane nonsense.

Berkeley's proof, given in PHK 124, is brisk. We start from what he takes to be an already demonstrated fact: “Every particular finite extension, which may possibly be an object of thought, is an idea existing only in the mind.” We start, that is, from Berkeley's existence principle. From this principle it is clear that every part of a finite extension is also an idea, and hence, also perceived. So, if I cannot perceive innumerable parts of a finite line, then there are no innumerable parts. And, in fact, I can't perceive innumerable parts, or, as Berkeley says, I can't distinguish them. As he puts it in the *New Theory*, there is a lowest bound, or minimum sensible, beyond which I can no longer distinguish smaller parts. Therefore, since I can't distinguish an infinite number of parts in a finite line, such parts don't exist. It is in fact a contradiction to claim that a finite line contains infinite parts, the only parts of a finite line that can exist are ones that are perceived, and we cannot perceive an infinite number of infinitely smaller parts. This is precisely that sort of paradox that emerges when we take a finite line to have an absolute external existence, rather than, what is the case, just an existence in the mind, as it is perceived.

Berkeley attributes the error philosophers have fallen into to a belief in abstract ideas, linking the issue of external existence with that of abstraction. He writes: “He whose understanding is prepossessed with the doctrine of abstract general ideas, may be persuaded that (whatever be thought of ideas of sense), extension in *abstract* is infinitely divisible. And one who thinks the objects of sense exist without the mind, will perhaps in virtue thereof be brought to admit, that a line but an inch long may contain innumerable parts really existing, though too small to be discerned” (PHK 125). But what needs to be recognized is that while geometry does indeed take as its object universal or general ideas, it is not concerned with abstract ideas. This point, Berkeley reminds us, has already been established in the Introduction to the *Principles*, in Section 15. In that section, Berkeley explained, using the example of a triangle, that in a geometric demonstration, I do not use the idea of a triangle that is “neither equilateral nor scalenon nor equicrural” but instead I consider an idea of a particular triangle, which stands for all triangles, “and is in that sense universal.” In the present case, Berkeley is using as his example a finite line, say an inch long, but which in my demonstration I am using to stand for a line of any length at all. He diagnoses the problem philosophers fall into as one of mistaking a property of what a particular finite inch line signifies, that is, a line of

any length whatsoever, for a property of the *sign*, the finite inch line, and so they leap to the conclusion that the inch line *itself* includes an infinite number of parts. It should be noted that Berkeley is not recommending that I consider my inch line *as if* it contained an infinite number of parts. This is always a mistake. He is saying that since the inch line is being used as a sign, what it signifies is not itself, but any line whatsoever. He points out that “we cannot conceive an inch itself as consisting of, or being divisible into a thousand parts, but only some other line which is far greater than an inch, and is represented by it” (PHK 128). Attributing those thousand parts to the inch line is confusing something true of what the line represents with the sign, of which it is not true at all. For this reason, Berkeley says, when we talk about the infinite divisibility of a line, we are really talking about a line infinitely great. No line can be divided into an infinite number of parts, but for any line that contains, say, one million parts, there will be another line that contains one more part.

The problem of infinite divisibility that philosophers and mathematicians fall into turns out to be a problem of mistaking the kind of sign-system we are dealing with in geometry. We take the object of our inquiry when we draw a line or construct a triangle as a part of a demonstration to be the expression of an abstract idea, and the demonstration therefore to be about necessary connections among ideas. But this is to get what is happening in the demonstration quite wrong, as Berkeley makes plain in his discussion of geometry in the *New Theory*. The finite inch line on my page that I consult is in fact a visible line, which can take up a varying set of extents in my visible field. What the line stands for is tangible lines which, being fixed, are the objects of geometry. In fact, the line I look at stands indifferently, as we have been saying, for any (tangible) line. In the *New Theory*, Berkeley makes this comparison: “It is therefore plain that visible figures are of the same use in geometry that words are: and the one may as well be accounted the object of that science as the other, neither of them being otherwise concerned therein than as they represent or suggest to the mind the particular tangible figures connected with them” (NTV 152). As is the case with arithmetic, we understand the kind of knowledge we gain in geometry when we understand it as a symbol system, a set of meaningful signs. The full passage in the *New Theory* from which I quoted makes a distinction that is relevant here. The signs, the numerals, in arithmetic, gain meaning when they are read as words that stand for particular quantities. Arithmetic is an artificial language. But in geometry, the signs that are used as words themselves stand for sensible ideas, particular extents perceived, and so it is an expression of a natural language. The properties of the signs and what they signify is not of human contrivance.<sup>[11](#)</sup>

The section we have been discussing, on the consequences of Berkeley's principles for our knowledge of ideas, is by far the largest of the final part of the *Principles*. The general message is clear. Berkeley wants to argue that, by avoiding mistakes made by other philosophers, he is able to avoid the skepticism to which they are prone and instead to offer an account of human knowledge in which it can be shown that we are not lacking in the capacity to know, but in fact can have perfect knowledge. He also tells us more than once how it is that other philosophers go wrong. They endorse a twofold existence principle and they suppose themselves able to frame abstract ideas on which they base their knowledge.

Because of Berkeley's own principles, he does not adopt these mistaken beliefs and so is able to avoid skepticism.

So much in outline constitutes the consequences Berkeley wants to draw for our knowledge of ideas or unthinking things. I want to return now to a question I raised at the end of the discussion of Berkeley's general account of knowledge of ideas. In this general account of where philosophers go wrong, the principles of his that Berkeley relies on in showing the error of the ways of others were those he had introduced at the very beginning of the *Principles*, such as the *esse is percipi* principle, the likeness principle and the anti-abstraction principle of the Introduction. These principles sufficed to allow Berkeley to reject the twofold existence principles and the use of abstract ideas. I asked then, are these all the principles Berkeley will need when he argues for the success of his principles with respect to knowledge of natural philosophy? At this point, the answer to that question is, no. Berkeley in his discussion of natural philosophy has highlighted further principles.

The first thing to be noted is that Berkeley identified a third mistaken belief that leads natural philosophers to skepticism, that everything in nature has an inward essence from which its properties flow and on which they depend. This ontological belief leads to skepticism because natural philosophers assume as a consequence that a complete or perfect knowledge of nature would be grounded in a knowledge of these essences, and would reveal how their properties are necessarily connected to their essences. Since many natural philosophers recognized that such knowledge is impossible to achieve, the result is a confession of human ignorance. In his account of why, on his terms, human knowledge of nature is possible, Berkeley relies on two further principles. The first is that the knowledge on which we rely in order to explain natural phenomena is knowledge of the Laws of Nature. The second is that the Laws of Nature are the expression of the arbitrary connections of signs to that which they signify. Berkeley has been leading up to an increasingly detailed picture of these principles in each section of his work, culminating in the discussion of natural philosophy and mathematics.

As should be clear, Berkeley's account of knowledge of natural philosophy and mathematics is not at all tangential to his main purpose, but constitutes the completion of his story of the consequences of his principles for human knowledge. Berkeley is not limiting his account of knowledge of nature simply to having ideas, although his examination of what it is like to have an idea and what we know when we have one is of course important. Knowledge of nature, however, in addition to having ideas requires working with relations among ideas. Paying attention to these relations reveal a stability, not grounded in essences, but in the predictive Laws of Nature, that allow us to know what to do, to identify the pattern of properties that constitute the nature of things, and ultimately to acquire the "greater largeness of comprehension" that allows us to extend our knowledge to what is not immediately perceivable, including the very small and the very far away typified by the natural philosopher. The knowledge embodied by these Laws of Nature is not a reflection of what must happen, and indeed is not causal knowledge at all. It is instead the kind of knowledge we have when we know what signs signify. The account of natural philosophy, as exemplified by Newton, and of mathematics is a spelling out of the kind of knowledge



humans have when it is redescribed as the kind of meaningful relations among ideas we have when understanding a language, or system of signs.

## **Consequences for Knowledge of Spirits (PHK 135–156)**

In PHK 135, Berkeley, as is his practice, signals that we are beginning a new topic, in this case, that of spirits, his second ontological category. And again, as before, what interests him at this point is the consequences of his principles for our knowledge of spirits. Berkeley is far from offering a theory of mind or spirit at this juncture, but he is going to be making some points about the nature of our knowledge of spirits. The lesson that Berkeley is concerned to draw is that, unlike the case of ideas or unthinking things, in the case of spirits, the problem is not that we think we know more than we actually do, but that the knowledge we do have is better than we think it is. Berkeley wants to make two points, the one negative, the other positive. The negative point seeks to explain why it is often assumed that there are difficulties in gaining knowledge of spirits, while the positive claim is that, in fact, we are fully capable of having knowledge of spirits.

Berkeley's negative argument is relatively straightforward. He claims that the reason people have thought there are difficulties in coming to know spirits is that they find they don't have ideas of spirits, and when they try to apply the ideas they have of unthinking things to spirits, the results are confused and unsatisfactory. This is because as Berkeley says, citing PHK 27, where spirits are first described, spirits are not the kinds of things about which we can have ideas. PHK 27 tells us this is because ideas are passive, whereas spirits are active agents. To have an idea of a spirit would require that something passive and inert could be like and hence represent something active, and this is, of course, impossible. So any attempt to represent spirits by means of ideas, as when we try to conceive of the will as being like a ball in motion, is a case of misrepresentation.

Berkeley makes a second point in PHK 135, not found in the earlier PHK 27. He says that spirits have been identified as the only substance supporting ideas, and it is absurd to suppose that which supports ideas is itself an idea. Berkeley reiterated this point in PHK 139 in terms that bring out why this is absurd. To say a spirit supports ideas is to say that the way in which an idea is able to exist is through being perceived by a spirit. The conditions under which an idea exists requires perceiving by a spirit, and perceiving and thinking just is what it is to be a spirit. So there is no way in which the perceiving by means of which ideas exist could itself be an idea that would require another perceiving to exist. It follows that we have to say that ideas are one thing, known through being perceived, and spirits are something else, known entirely differently.

That we lack ideas of spirit is not a reason to say we can't have knowledge of spirit, but Berkeley wants to make a positive claim, that we do know spirit, but not by way of idea. While Berkeley is strongly insistent on this point, the way in which he goes about describing it has not always been found entirely satisfactory. When Berkeley originally discusses this issue in PHK 27, he says, once we recognize that it is impossible to have a passive idea of

something active, we will accept that spirit “cannot be of itself perceived, but only by the effects which it produces.” Here, it certainly sounds as if Berkeley thinks we don't have any direct acquaintance either with the existence or the nature of spirit. We infer its existence as the best explanation for the effects, the existence of the ideas we do directly experience. If this is the knowledge of spirits Berkeley insists we have, it is quite attenuated.

It is important to note that Berkeley clarified the nature of his claim in PHK 27 in a sentence added in later editions to the end of this section. This sentence reads: “Though it must be owned at the same time, that we have some notion of soul, spirit and the operations of the mind, such as willing, loving, hating, inasmuch as we know or understand the meaning of those words.” There are two additional elements present in this sentence, that, while we don't have ideas of spirit, we do have notions, and that evidence for the notions that constitute our knowledge of spirit is that we understand the meanings of the words we use to describe spirits. Both elements recur in the passage under discussion about our knowledge of spirits. The helpfulness of either one of these claims has been found dubious. That we can be said to have knowledge of our minds and their doings because we know what the words mean that we use to describe them seems to need a little more in the way of explanation. How is it that we know what the words in question mean and that they accurately describe minds when the one thing we know is that they have no ideas attached to them? Berkeley does of course propose that we use the word “notion” to stand for what we have with respect to spirits, but the most that we seem to know about notions is that they are not ideas but enough like them that, in ordinary speech, “idea” and “notion” are used interchangeably. But if a notion is just a special bit of mental property that enables me to understand words describing spirits, just as an idea is a special bit of mental property that enables me to understand words describing unthinking things, then it doesn't seem as if our understanding of the unique kind of knowledge we are alleged to have of spirit has been advanced very far.

Berkeley does make two further points in this section, one unfortunately removed from all editions after the first, and one added to all editions after the first. In the first point, in PHK 139, Berkeley is defending his claim that terms like soul, spirit, and substance are not meaningless, by pointing out that such terms do pick out a real thing, saying, “What I am myself, that which I describe by the term *I*, is the same with what is meant by *soul*, or *spiritual substance*.” In the first edition, he adds, “But if I should say that I was nothing, or that I was an idea or notion, nothing could be more evidently absurd than either of these propositions.” What is at least suggested or maybe just hinted at here is that we do have a first-person acquaintance with at least one soul or spiritual substance that can underpin an assurance that such things exist. This observation could therefore support a view contained in the addition to PHK 27, that I have better than inferential knowledge of spirits, because in my own case, I know my own existence and that I am one.

The second suggestive point occurs towards the end of a longish passage added to PHK 142, justifying the use of the term, “notion.” Berkeley says: “It is also to be remarked, that all relations including an act of the mind, we cannot so properly be said to have an idea, but rather a notion of the relations or habitudes between things.” This passage first harks back to an earlier passage, PHK 89, where Berkeley indicates that our knowledge extends beyond

ideas, and includes relations, of which we cannot be said to have ideas. So at least one thing that is happening is that we are being reminded that ideas do not constitute the sum total of things that we know and in fact might constitute a smaller percentage than we usually imagine. The second interesting point made in this passage is that all relations include an act of the mind. This point could remind us that we have been encountering quite a number of things that we are said to know which, being relations, are not known by way of ideas. Perhaps an even more important point in this context is that we might be being reminded not just that a lot of things we know fall outside that realm of ideas, but, being operations of the mind, and so, depending upon minds, fall into the spirit side of Berkeley's ontology.

There is, moreover, an additional gift to be found in the passage in PHK 89. In talking about spirits, Berkeley states baldly that “we comprehend our own existence by inward feeling or reflexion” and goes on to say that “we may be said to have some knowledge or notion of our own minds, spirits, and active beings, where in a strict sense we have not ideas.” This passage is unequivocal. We do not know about our own minds inferentially, but directly, experientially. The words we use to describe our minds and their operations are meaningful because we have immediate feelings of our mind's operating. Since Berkeley could have expected his readers to have made themselves familiar with the contents of PHK 89 before they read the section on knowledge of spirits, we can assume that he supposed his readers would bring what they read there to the later material. So we can take what Berkeley says in PHK 139, if it is a hint, it is a pretty strong one, sending the reader back to the earlier statement that I know myself by inward feeling.

## **Consequences for Knowledge of God (PHK 145–156)**

Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge* has the dual goals of refuting both skepticism and atheism. He has now, at the very end of this final section of the *Principles*, demonstrated that the skepticism put forward by previous philosophers can be refuted and his own superior account of how natural philosophers do in fact acquire knowledge of nature can be substituted. Similarly, he has refuted the skepticism with respect to knowledge of spirits that supposes that, lacking ideas, we lack knowledge of spirits, and has put forward the position that we each know our own spirit directly. Now all that remains is to refute skepticism with respect to knowledge of God and Berkeley will have taken care of atheism as well as skepticism. But Berkeley goes a little further than this. He argues that because of the knowledge we have of the works of Nature (a term he uses in PHK 146) and of our knowledge of ourselves, we know that God exists and we know His nature. Berkeley's refutation of skepticism together with his positive account of our knowledge of nature constitutes his evidence for his proof that we have knowledge of God.

Since God is a spirit, it is essential to the case he wants to make that we can have knowledge of spirits. So far, however, he has only identified the grounding for knowledge that I can have of the spirit that is myself. While this information can inform me of what it is to be a spirit, inward first-person feeling is not a way in which we know God. In PHK 89, Berkeley just says that we know the existence of other spirits by reason, but in PHK 145, he provides a

brief description of the evidence on which this reasoning is based. Berkeley says that I know other spirits by “the ideas by them excited in us,” ideas that allow me to recognize the presence of “certain particular agents like myself” (PHK 145). It is important to notice that Berkeley is identifying a narrow range of ideas here, those that are excited in me by something that I recognize as an agent. It is because I receive ideas in me that could only be the product of an active, causal agent that I draw the conclusion that there are other spirits in the world in addition to myself. Berkeley does not, it should be noted, say anything at all here about what it is about these ideas that convinces me that I am in the presence of an agent. His only point is that I become convinced of the existence of other spirits, not immediately but, as he says, through the intervention of ideas.

Berkeley's proof that we have knowledge of God is going to follow from the claim that we know other spirits through the intervention of ideas. He initially follows the same formula that he used in the argument originally presented in PHK 29, which he references here in PHK 146. The vast majority of ideas we enjoy, those “called the Works of Nature” are not caused by any human at all, so they have to be caused by some other spirit. What is important here is the evidence Berkeley goes on to cite, before he concludes in the following section PHK 147, that this other spirit is none other than God.

But if we attentively consider the constant regularity, order, and concatenation of natural things, the surprising magnificence, beauty, and perfection of the larger, and the exquisite contrivance of the smaller parts of the creation, together with the exact harmony and correspondence of the whole, but above all, the never enough admired laws of pain and pleasure, and the instincts or natural inclinations, appetites, and passions of animals; I say if we consider all these things, and at the same time attend to the meaning of the attributes, one, eternal, infinitely wise, good and perfect, we shall clearly perceive that they belong to the aforesaid spirit, *who works all in all, and by whom all things consist*.

This presents a summary of the nature of the ideas we have of the Works of Nature that Berkeley thinks establishes that these ideas are in fact the work of God.

Two things jump out from this passage. The first is that Berkeley is going beyond the kind of orderliness he mentioned when he first went through this argument in the initial portion of the *Principles*, that allows us to reap in the harvest when we sow in the springtime. In *this* passage, Berkeley is first stressing the large scope of the order for which we have evidence and, second, he is stressing the interconnected, systematicity of that order. These are the elements Berkeley has laid out for us in the middle and final portions of the *Principles*, as he clarified the kinds of things belonging to and the kind of knowledge we have of the Works of Nature. The second element that jumps out is the introduction of a new set of laws, “the never enough admired laws of pain and pleasure.” Nevertheless, the workings of these laws have been present throughout, as Berkeley has been repeatedly pointing out that the function of the Laws of Nature is to give us foresight: the regularities we discover are, for us, for the purpose of action, they tell us what to do, and, we can suppose, what motivates us to work out what to do and so to pay attention to predictable regularities are these laws of pain and pleasure. We find this consideration in Berkeley's frequent mentioning that systems in and of

themselves are useless to us unless they translate into perceivable ideas. Berkeley in PHK 147 is not only directing attention to the extreme complexity of our system of ideas that constitutes the knowledge of nature we can attain, but also highlighting the way in which this systematic knowledge is embedded in action.

Berkeley is sure we will recognize that the existence of other persons is known to us inferentially, just as we know God's existence, that in neither case do we just see spirits. He is equally sure we will recognize that we have more and better evidence for the existence of God than we do other spirits when we recognize that the efficacy of the evidence for the existence of other spirits, namely, the motions they make of which we have ideas, actually depends upon the will of God. And finally he takes up what is a longstanding problem for any proof for the existence of God, the numerous imperfections of the world as we know it. In his answer to this familiar problem, Berkeley again refers back to PHK 62, and PHK 31, sections, it will be remembered, that are central to his discussion of knowledge of nature and of natural philosophy. From PHK 62 we have already learned that it is important that the Laws of Nature be uniform, and that it is this uniformity that testifies to God's wisdom as well as His goodness. And from PHK 31 we learn that without the uniformity of the Laws of Nature, human knowledge would not be possible, for “without it all reach and compass of thought, all human sagacity and design could serve to no manner of purpose: it were even impossible there should be any such faculties or powers in the mind” (PHK 151). The answer to the question, then, why are there imperfections in the world, is, what we, from our vantage point, identify as imperfections are the result of what is in fact the condition under which humans have knowledge, the systematic unity of nature provided by general, stable Laws of Nature.

Berkeley returns finally to the issue of pain and now to the claim that pain “in the state we are in at present, is indispensably necessary to our well-being” (PHK 153). In order to appreciate this point, however, we need to again take the long view “so as to comprehend the various ends, connexions, and dependencies of things, on what occasions and in what proportions we are affected with pain and pleasure, the nature of human freedom, and the design with which we are put into the world” (PHK 153). Berkeley has dropped some unexpected elements into this mix, such as the intriguing reference to the nature of human freedom.<sup>12</sup> But it is undeniable that he is absolutely clear that what will dispel our doubts is an appreciation of the “whole system of beings.” The pain that we might shortsightedly take as something evil will come to be seen instead as something good, as imperfections in nature can come to be recognized as something good, when we recognize its role in the larger scheme of things. The role of pain, however, unlike that of the imperfections due to the uniformity of nature, is not required one would think, just so that we can know, but so that we can act on our knowledge. The knowledge we are equipped to acquire is not for rapt contemplation but for practical action.

The last paragraph of the *Principles*, however, does not direct us to be up and doing, but redirects our attention back to God. It reads:

For after all, what deserves the first place in our studies, is the consideration of *God*, and our *duty*; which to promote, as it was the main drift and design of my labours, so shall I esteem them altogether useless and ineffectual, if by what I have said I cannot inspire my readers, with a pious sense of the presence of God: and having shewn the falseness or vanity of those barren speculations, which make the chief employment of learned men, the better dispose them to reverence and embrace the salutary truths of the Gospel, which to know and to practise is the highest perfection of knowledge.

(PHK 156)

This final paragraph is not merely the pious flourish of a young man who will in the fullness of time grow up to be a bishop, but lays out what Berkeley does indeed take to be the point of his work. He takes the consideration of God and our duty to be of central or prime importance. And it is also the case, as he wrote in the first paragraph of the Introduction, that he takes the issue that will form the central problem of his work to be that of skepticism. The connection between the goal, consideration of God, and the issue, a lamentable skepticism that has overtaken philosophers is also found in the Introduction. Philosophers fall into skepticism when they become convinced of the imperfections of our faculties, which do not permit us to have knowledge of the hidden essences of things. But Berkeley warns, “[w]e should believe that God has dealt more bountifully with the sons of men, than to give them a strong desire for that knowledge, which He has placed quite out of reach (PHK Introd. 3). Berkeley's project has been to give an account of knowledge as we have it based on the faculties we actually have, which can only be in us, thanks to the bountiful gift of God. The faculties we have enable us to have sensible ideas and to make connections among ideas. Because the ideas that come to us can be found to exhibit systematic connections, we are able to understand these ideas, to make predictions, and to act on these predictions. We lay our skepticism to rest when we realize we are equipped to understand an intelligible, because orderly, world. Knowledge of nature is actual. Understanding the nature of knowledge that is actual allows us to identify the agent of that knowledge as a wise and good spirit, that is to say, as God. Atheism is laid to rest when and because skepticism is laid to rest.

## notes

- [1](#) This is established in PHK 86.
- [2](#) Berkeley has now adopted the term “sensible object” and also “unthinking thing” in the passage quoted above, rather than “sensation,” but there is nothing in the context of this passage, where Berkeley has been using “sensation,” to suggest that he is now talking about anything other than sensations, entities that can be described as “immediately perceived by sight or touch” and not, it should be noted, by sight *and* touch.
- [3](#) Berkeley concludes with a further example illustrating his general claim that attempts to abstract from particulars leads to confusion. He says: “to frame an abstract idea of *happiness*, prescinded from all particular pleasures, or of *goodness*, from everything that

is good, this is what few can pretend to” (PHK 100). It is hard to know what to make of this. There is no surprise in Berkeley's holding such a view, but he has neither been addressing matters of happiness or goodness previously, as was the case for extension, nor is he about to embark on an examination of such matters, as is true of time, place, and motion. Nor does he tell us, as he did in the earlier discussed cases, what sorts of confusions he is warning us against. It remains as a problem for the reader to work out why Berkeley wanted to include these brief remarks.

- 4 It is worth noting that, as he turns to natural philosophy, Berkeley specifically includes relations among ideas of sense as part of his topic.
- 5 Here Locke is an obvious example.
- 6 Locke and Malebranche are very occasional exceptions to this general rule, but in neither of these examples does Berkeley quote quite so extensively as he does in the case of Newton.
- 7 There is a final anomaly that I am not going to address here since it would take me too far afield from the present focus on the *Principles*, but I throw it out for consideration. Berkeley revisits the bucket experiment in *De Motu*, but he gives a different account of why the bucket experiment is not evidence for the need to appeal to absolute space. Since *De Motu* was published after the first edition of the *Principles*, one likely seeming explanation is that Berkeley changed his mind. The only problem with that explanation is that he reprinted a revised version of the *Principles* after he published *De Motu*, and while he did make some changes to the discussion of space and motion, he left his account basically intact.
- 8 I am extremely grateful to all those who worked through this matter with me, but especially to Michael Liston for his helpful discussions with me about the bucket experiment and for his careful reading of what I wrote about it. I am also grateful for to Michael for his recommendation that I read Nick Huggett's relevant sections in his *Space from Zeno to Einstein: Classic Readings with a Contemporary Commentary* (MIT Press, 1999) which I also found useful. Any mistakes still existing in my presentation are, of course, my own.
- 9 In PHK 97–98, where it will be recalled he dismisses absolute time as an incomprehensible abstract idea.
- 10 Buying into this condition will require an account of the notion of force that Berkeley can be comfortable with and which is not provided at this point in the *Principles*, but which was taken up in both *De Motu* and *Alciphron*.
- 11 Berkeley concludes his discussion of mathematics with a very brief dismissal of infinitesimals. He points out that different people hold different theories of infinitesimals which cannot all be true, and he speculates that anything achieved through adopting the notion of infinitesimals can also be derived using sensible minima, but he provides no demonstration of this claim here in the *Principles*.



[12](#) The nature of human freedom is discussed by Berkeley at greater length in *Alciphron*, VII, 16–20.

## chapter 7

### ***three dialogues between hylas and philonous: the preface and first dialogue, 1 171–194***

#### **The Preface**

A reader who, having finished *Principles of Human Knowledge*, picks up *Three Dialogues*, will find a book that looks and sounds quite different. Instead of a fairly conventional philosophical treatise, where Berkeley both clearly signals what topic he is addressing, and whose arguments are laid out in numbered paragraphs, here the reader finds, as the name implies, an exchange of ideas between two characters. And it is in *Three Dialogues* that Berkeley, always a graceful writer, comes into his own as a stylist. Taken all in all, *Three Dialogues* is a much livelier read than the *Principles*. But is this stylistic difference the only difference between the two books? Does Berkeley intend *Three Dialogues* to supplement the *Principles*? To replace it? Or, is *Three Dialogues* nothing more than the *Principles* rewritten in a more attractive style? Was Berkeley, in rewriting his work, seeking a wider audience, or was he trying again to convince the intended audience of the *Principles*?

These are all good questions, and different readers of Berkeley's work have formed different opinions about how to answer them. It must be noted, however, Berkeley himself provides answers to them in the Preface to *Three Dialogues*. In the first three paragraphs of the Preface, Berkeley lays out an account of his motivation. Speculative men have neglected what ought to be the goal of their meditations, namely, “the improvement of our lives and actions” (Pref. 167) and instead, by raising doubts about those things “that fall under our senses” have given rise to “skepticism and paradoxes.” What is needed is an examination of what has led philosophers into these predicaments, and to substitute for their principles others that will rescue them from their unfortunate beliefs. This plan, as Berkeley immediately tells us in the fourth paragraph, is precisely the one he carried out in the *Principles*, and which he intends to repeat in *Three Dialogues*, only clarifying his principles by placing them “in a new light.” Berkeley here is saying that he is not altering or putting forward a new theory in his second book. Nor is he addressing a new audience. He is still talking to those who might have absorbed philosophical prejudices because he thinks they may, through their mistakes, mislead others, who might, being encouraged to skepticism, move into dangerous territory, such as the mysteries of revelation.

If Berkeley is just repeating his old arguments, it must be acknowledged that he is carrying out his plan in an entirely different manner. Here, I am referring, not just to the dialogue form in which this book is written. It must be noted, as well, that in addition to stylistic changes, the presentation of the material in *Three Dialogues* is not at all that of the *Principles*. We have already remarked on the fairly straightforward organization of the *Principles* – first, a preliminary pass through the theory in its entirety, next, a development of that theory through

the device of Replies to Objections, and finally, a drawing out of the consequences of the theory leading to conclusions about skepticism and knowledge. *Three Dialogues* is also, of course, divided into three parts, but the three dialogues of which it is composed don't mirror the structure of the *Principles* at all. So before attempting any global comparisons between *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*, it will be important to understand how and why Berkeley has organized his argument in the way that he did in *Three Dialogues*.

A second difficulty is that there appear to be clear substantive differences between the two texts. There are some quite striking examples. One, which we will be looking at shortly, is that Berkeley fills the First Dialogue with an elaborate discussion of sensible qualities that appears to be missing from the *Principles*. As well, the question whether Berkeley's doctrine coheres with common sense is a recurring theme in *Three Dialogues* but is dismissed out of hand in the *Principles*. Finally, the lengthy discussion of Newton's work and the account of mathematics found at the end of the *Principles* has no place in *Three Dialogues*. An important question, therefore, is to what extent these various differences represent changes in Berkeley's theory between the two books.

A final preliminary concerns one of the basics of the dialogue form. The entire book, consists in a conversation between two fictional characters, Hylas and Philonous, who meet in a garden attached to a college.<sup>1</sup> So we do know about these characters that they are the kind of people who belong to a college. The two characters have been given Greek names, as was common when authors at that time wrote in dialogue form. "Philonous" means "lover of wisdom" and "Hylas" is derived from the Greek word for matter. Berkeley has labeled his characters in ways that reveal the positions they favor. Every speech Philonous makes puts forward claims and ideas that are similar to ones that Berkeley expresses in his own voice in the *Principles*. It is very natural therefore to identify Philonous with Berkeley, to say, Philonous is Berkeley. But who then is Hylas? There have been attempts to identify Hylas with one of Berkeley's interlocutors, say, Locke. Or, since not everything that Hylas says is held by Locke or by anyone else, he might be identified with some more general persona, perhaps, the reader. One thing, however, that I think is important to keep in mind is that there is a sense in which Hylas is as much Berkeley as Philonous is. Every word Hylas speaks was written by Berkeley. Rather than trying to identify Hylas with one or more persons, particularly since, being a shifting target, Hylas is hard to pin down, a more useful question to ask is, what purpose is the character, Hylas, or his contributions at any one time, making to Berkeley's arguments? What use is Berkeley making of his fictional character, Hylas? An advantage of recognizing the fictional nature of Hylas, and indeed of Philonous as well, is that it opens up the possibility that the argument being laid out in *Three Dialogues* is one that develops throughout the work as the character of Hylas learns and changes his mind. I will be exploiting this possibility in what follows.

## First Dialogue, 171–194

The First Dialogue of *Three Dialogues* covers a lot of ground. It introduces the two characters of the Dialogues, lays down the issue to be discussed, and, by means of the

conversation, wrings from Hylas two important concessions. The first occurs about halfway through the First Dialogue, when Hylas admits that “all sensible qualities are alike to be denied existence out of the mind” (3DI 194).<sup>2</sup> This is the first issue that many commentators have supposed constitutes a significant difference between *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*, inasmuch as *Three Dialogues* indubitably contains arguments for this thesis not found in the *Principles*.<sup>3</sup> The task of this chapter will be to look carefully at the arguments Berkeley develops in *Three Dialogues* for this conclusion of Hylas's, both in order to understand the position for which Berkeley is now arguing and to work out how the material here relates to the argument of the *Principles*. The explicit argument directed to the claim to be examined here doesn't get underway until 3DI 174, but the four pages preceding contain much that is important for setting up the terms of the debate.

## Initial Scene Setting

Hylas, who is apparently accustomed to sleeping in, opens the dialogue by revealing that he is up early due to a problem on his mind arising from a late night discussion. Philonous responds with a flowery and enthusiastic account of the beauties of nature to be enjoyed by the early riser. It might appear that this first long speech of Philonous's is not of any particular importance to the subject of the dialogue, but a brief review shows that this is not the case. In his speech, Philonous is running through the various deliverances of the senses, as he calls Hylas's attention to purple sky, sweet notes, fragrant bloom, and the gentle warmth of the sun. Berkeley is in fact describing instances of what will turn out to be the central topic of the First Dialogue, sensible qualities and their status. It is probably also significant that we are being reminded that the experience of these sensible qualities is pleasurable, we enjoy them and they put us in the right mood for meditation. It is an important theme for Berkeley that sensations are experienced as pleasurable or painful.

It develops that the issue that has been keeping Hylas up at night is the misbehavior of those who in his eyes pretend to endorse skepticism or wild paradoxes. These men, themselves scholars or intellectuals, are misbehaving because they entice others to be skeptical as well and to be suspicious of what Hylas calls “important truths.” Hylas's worries are of course the very same that Berkeley introduced in the Preface to *Three Dialogues*, as well as in the *Principles*, as constituting his motive for writing both books. The motivation for *Three Dialogues* at least initially is the same as that of the *Principles*, and the target of both books is the same, philosophers. Since these worries are here expressed by Hylas, it seems that it is a worry shared by all – Hylas in this case is as much a spokesperson for Berkeley as is Philonous.

Hylas and Philonous soon diverge, however, as Hylas identifies the belief he regards as the source of dangerous paradoxes, that there is no such thing as material substance, for this is a belief it turns out Philonous endorses. This disagreement sets up Philonous's challenge that provides the framework for the *Dialogues* as a whole: What if it turns out that you who believe in material substance are a greater skeptic and further removed from common sense than I, who reject material substance? This framing question about skepticism, the one that is

debated throughout the work, is in fact the matter Berkeley takes up in the final section of the *Principles*. Here in *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley is signaling from the beginning that the question that interests him is epistemological and not just ontological. The worry about material substance is that including it among the things in the world leads to skepticism about that world.

There is another issue, however, that enters the picture here in *Three Dialogues* that has not played a central role in the *Principles*, the matter of common sense. Philonous is alleging it can be shown to be less commonsensical to believe in material substance than to reject it. Indeed, it is often taken to be the case that Philonous is proposing agreement with common sense as a criterion for accepting a theory. This seems to be diverging from the *Principles*, where Berkeley presents himself as engaged in a dispute between philosophers, where common or ordinary beliefs are not at stake,<sup>4</sup> and as we have just seen, the same at least initially seems to be the case in *Three Dialogues*. The appeal to common sense and its relative importance to Berkeley has been both puzzling and controversial to his readers. Exactly how much difference does it make to Berkeley if a belief, particularly a belief he accepts, is not recognized as a part of common sense?<sup>5</sup>

## Sensible Things

In any case, the issue Berkeley goes on to raise is not, what is common sense, but rather “what do you mean by a *sceptic*?” (3DI 173). Hylas is not given what might be a common sense answer, someone who doubts everything, but is instead pushed to narrow the scope of the skeptic's doubt to that of “distrusting the senses, of denying the real existence of sensible things, or pretending to know nothing of them” (3DI 173). There is an historical justification for narrowing the scope of skepticism in this way, inasmuch as skepticism of the senses is a well-known philosophical position and prevalent among Berkeley's immediate predecessors. It is worth noting Berkeley has Hylas offer this account of skepticism, so at this stage in the argument, Hylas is not being presented as holding any of these philosophical notions. Instead, he is still joined with Philonous (and Berkeley) in condemning skepticism, and now, in particular, skepticism of the senses.

Berkeley has, however, incorporated into Hylas's account of skepticism the phrase “sensible things,” and this opens the way to the final matter Berkeley needs to get on the table, the correct understanding of the term, sensible thing. Berkeley establishes, through a chain of linking identifications, that sensible things are sensible qualities, limited to the proper objects of the senses. Here in *Three Dialogues* it is the existence of sensible things that he starts by assuming. Berkeley has taken on the project of getting to what we have identified as the conclusion of this portion of the argument, that “all sensible qualities are alike to be denied existence without the mind,” on the assumption that sensible things exist. But sensible things, according to this first step in the argument, turn out to be nothing more than the proper objects of the senses. In the second, considerably longer portion, Berkeley proceeds seriatim through each of the proper objects of the senses and then to a consideration of the so-called primary qualities, demonstrating in each case that their existence is not something other than

their being perceived. I am going to begin by taking a look at this first portion of the argument, which I think is extremely helpful both for clarifying Berkeley's previous thinking, often held to be somewhat murky, and for setting the stage for the second, longer project.

## What Is Immediately Perceived

When Hylas and Philonous agree that anyone would be a great skeptic who denied that sensible things exist or who claimed to know nothing of their nature, it is reasonable to suppose that by sensible things, they are talking about the things we see and feel around us: tables, houses, mountains, and rivers. Anyone who denied that such visible and tangible things existed would certainly count as a big skeptic. (Of course throughout the seventeenth century, doubts have been raised about our knowledge of the nature of these objects, so the actual threat of skepticism is certainly lurking.) Berkeley sets himself the task in this first portion to have Philonous convince Hylas that by sensible things he really means the proper objects of the senses, a move that seems on the face of it quite counterintuitive. The first step that Hylas takes, however, although it appears innocuous, moves him in a direction that Philonous is able to take full advantage of. Hylas explains that by “sensible things” he means “things perceived by the senses” (3DI, 174). This particular substitution on Hylas's part (rather than a looser formulation like, things which under appropriate circumstances can be sensed) allows Berkeley to introduce into the discussion the supposition that things that are sensible are identified through being perceived. We recognize which things are sensible by means of something we, as perceivers do, we perceive them. Hylas undoubtedly continues to think that tables, trees, mountains, and rivers are good examples of things perceived by the senses, but Philonous is going to get him to think much more carefully about what the senses are doing when these things are perceived by us.

The crucial step in the argument is introduced at this point. Philonous asks, “Are those things only perceived by the senses which are perceived immediately? Or may those things properly be said to be *sensible*, which are perceived immediately, or not without the intervention of others?” (3DI 174). Hylas's response to this question is perfectly reasonable. He says, “I do not sufficiently understand you.” Certainly many of Berkeley's readers have shared Hylas's puzzlement.<sup>6</sup> Most particularly, it is not obvious what the circumstances are in which we perceive “with the intervention of others.” What sorts of “interventions” does Berkeley have in mind here? The example he has Philonous give Hylas has not been entirely helpful. When I read the words on a page, I immediately perceive the letters, the visible shapes on the page, and only mediately their meanings, as “God, virtue, truth, &c” (3DI 174). Berkeley follows up this somewhat unsatisfactory example by getting Hylas to assent to three consequences of the understanding he has apparently given him of when we perceive immediately and when mediately. Hylas agrees that when we see different colors in the sky, when we hear many sounds, or when we feel something both hot and heavy, we are immediately perceiving the colors, the sounds, or the feelings of hotness and heaviness, but only mediately their causes. How Philonous produced this agreement from Hylas is not obvious. Neither the meanings of the words on the page, nor the various causes of the sensible qualities we see, hear, or feel

appear to be perceived at all. Indeed, they don't even seem to be the kinds of things that are perceived and for this reason it would seem that mediate perception is not a kind of perception or certainly not a kind of sense perception. But there is no doubt that the various objects identified as immediate, the colors, the sounds, the feelings, are in fact perceived. So the conclusion that things perceived by the senses are immediately perceived seems warranted, since, according to the examples given here, it only seems to rule out cases where we supplement or draw conclusions from our sense perceptions to things that are unperceived. Everything that we ordinarily take ourselves to be perceiving by means of the senses, the tables and trees, will be immediately perceived. And it certainly feels as if we perceive these things without the intervention of anything else, we do, after all, just perceive them.

The sticking point in accepting this account of the distinction between immediate and mediate perception is the conclusion that Philonous is heading towards that he derives from this admission. He says:

This point then is agreed between us, that *sensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense*. You will farther inform me, whether we immediately perceive by sight any thing beside light, and colours, and figures: or by hearing, any thing but sounds: by the palate, any thing beside tastes: by the smell, besides odours: or by the touch, more than tangible qualities.

(3DI 175)

Philonous gets from Hylas the willing admission that nothing is perceived immediately except the proper objects of the senses. In reaching this conclusion, Berkeley is echoing the claim with which he began PHK 1, that among the objects of human knowledge are “ideas actually imprinted on the senses,” glossed by a list of proper objects. But how did Berkeley reach this point by means of the distinction between immediate and mediate perception? Exactly where in the argument did we learn that the only things that are immediately perceived are the proper objects of the senses?

The passage in *Three Dialogues* relies on two kinds of examples of cases that are not immediately perceived, the case of causes that are inferred by reason, and the case of the meanings of the words on the page that are described as “signified and suggested to the mind by the sensible marks” (3DI 174). If we return to the *New Theory*, we find that Berkeley makes use of this language analogy to more fully inform us about cases of seeing. In this work he is concerned to make the point that, in seeing, we are very apt to confuse what is suggested with what is seen. In NTV 51, the way words suggest ideas is compared or assimilated to the way in which immediate objects of sight suggest mediate objects of sight. The example actually under discussion in this paragraph is distance. Distance is not immediately perceived by sight, but yet, Berkeley says, it is perceived by sight (NTV 11), that is, it is mediately perceived by sight, perceived “secondarily and by intervention of” immediate objects. The reason why distance is not immediately perceived by sight is because it is not the kind of thing sight is built to register, it is not a proper object of sight, but instead is an object of touch. Because suggestion occurs instantaneously, it feels as though we “just



see” distance, even though what is actually happening is that tangible ideas are accompanying the visual and other ideas that signify and suggest distance.

If we read the passage in *Three Dialogues* in light of the distinctions and explanations of the *New Theory*, then Berkeley's conclusion becomes easier to draw. There are primary and immediate objects of sight and there are secondary and mediate objects suggested by the former. Mediate perception, in this case, is not the result of an inference, but instead, as the comparison with language suggests, it takes place in us relatively automatically. We don't, for example, register some distance cues, and then entertain the suggestion that they signify tangible distance. Rather we see the distance cues with a tangible meaning. This means that we are not going to be able to tell whether or not a perception is immediate or mediate by asking ourselves whether or not we apprehend something intervening. The distinction between cases of immediate and cases of mediate perception is going to be harder to discover than Philonous's examples suggest. You can't tell whether or not suggestion has occurred by introspecting and discovering an episode of suggestion.

In fact, it is not until much later in *Three Dialogues* that Berkeley provides anything like a criterion for recognizing when perceptions are immediate and without intermediary. In an often discussed passage towards the end of the First Dialogue Berkeley has Philonous say:

For instance, when I hear a coach drive along the streets, immediately I perceive only the sound; but from the experience I have had that such a sound is connected with a coach, I am said to hear the coach. It is nevertheless evident, that in truth and strictness, nothing can be *heard* but *sound*: and the coach is not then properly perceived by sense, but suggested from experience ... In short, those things alone are actually and strictly perceived by any sense, which would have been perceived, in case that same sense had been first conferred on us.

(3DI 204)

Berkeley does not state this criterion, that we perceive immediately whatever we would perceive when the sense had been first conferred, explicitly in the *New Theory*, but the various thought experiments he proposes with respect to the Man-Born-Blind-and-Made-to-See have this same approach in mind. In order to understand what it is I just see because I have sight, I try, by thinking about the experiences of the Man-Born-Blind-when-Made-to-See, to strip off from my own visual experiences everything that is due to subsequent learning, and thus isolate what I would see were sight first conferred on me.<sup>7</sup> Immediate perception is what each sense faculty is built to register. And now, if we understand this picture to be what lies at the basis of Berkeley's distinction between immediate and mediate perception, then his conclusion about the proper objects of the senses falls right out. The immediate objects of each sense, what is perceived by that sense when it is first conferred on us, are precisely the proper objects of each sense.<sup>8</sup>

To recap: Berkeley has Hylas and Philonous agree that sensible things are things perceived by sense. Berkeley takes this rather uncontroversial notion one step further by arguing that things perceived by the senses are immediately perceived and that what is immediately

perceived are only lights, colors, figures, sounds, tastes, odors, and tangible qualities. The question is, where precisely has Berkeley got to when he has reduced sensible things to the proper objects of the senses? What role does his reduction play in his argument? To my mind, an important element in Berkeley's thinking is the claim, expressed later in this Dialogue, that immediate perception is what the senses are built to register. This approach suggests that we can identify the process of immediate perception with ways of feeling the senses fall into, they are what the senses sense passively. If we accept this as Berkeley's line of thinking, then in identifying what is immediately perceived with the proper objects of the senses, it looks like he is identifying the proper objects of the senses with sensations, and sensations are the sorts of things that are mind-dependent. The answer to the question, what is Berkeley up to when he translates sensible things into the list of the proper objects of the senses is that he is leading Hylas to accept that the proper objects of the senses are sensations or sensible ideas.<sup>9</sup>

An additional consideration that can be offered in support of this suggestion is that it takes Berkeley to the position with which he began the *Principles*. The first sentence of that book, it will be recalled, begins: "It is evident to any one who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are either ideas actually imprinted on the senses, ..." and Berkeley goes on in the second sentence to give a fuller account of such ideas, listing for each sense organ the ideas with which they provide us. Berkeley's language in the *Principles* is explicit: he is starting that work with the assumption that there are ideas and, in particular, ideas that are the proper objects of each sense. In *Three Dialogues*, he is giving reasons for accepting this starting point, making use of the distinction between immediate and mediate perception introduced in the *New Theory*. We can see these introductory pages of *Three Dialogues* as supplementing the *Principles*, by working us into the starting point or initial assumption of the argument to come. One very relevant worry, however, might be that, given that Berkeley is now working in dialogue form, why is he entitled to suppose that Hylas would accept this emendation? Isn't Hylas giving away the store if he agrees that things immediately perceived by the senses are sensible ideas? The short answer to this question is, No. If we pay attention to the way in which Hylas is made to argue, it is clear that he has no reason to deny that we perceive sensible ideas.

## **"To *Exist* Is One Thing, and to Be *Perceived* Is Another"**

At this point in the Dialogue, Hylas and Philonous begin an extended discussion about what can be assumed about sensible ideas. This lengthy discussion has no counterpart in the *Principles* and it is often assumed that Berkeley, realizing that he had failed to make his idealist case at the beginning of the *Principles*, is putting a defense of his case into the mouth of Philonous, his spokesman, by showing that since sensibles can't exist "out there," they must exist "in here," in the mind. Berkeley indubitably has an agenda in this section, which will have as a consequence that he can lay claim to his idealism, but the way that he goes about making this case is a little more indirect. In the passages that follow, he assigns no positive positions to Philonous, but instead all the positive assertions come from Hylas. Philonous's job is to convince Hylas that Hylas's own beliefs are groundless.

Notice, to begin with, in *Three Dialogues* the proposition under discussion is not “*esse is percipi*.” Instead it is a proposition enunciated by Hylas and it is that “to *exist* is one thing, and to be *perceived* another” (3DI 175). This is as it should be, for, in this way of arguing, the burden of proof is explicitly on Hylas. It is important to get clear at the outset what position Hylas is arguing for when he asserts this proposition. He has already agreed that we immediately perceive the proper objects of the senses, or sensations. Sensible qualities, that is, are not taken to exist in a limbo, about which we are wondering, do they exist out there in the world or in here in my mind? We know we are sensing and so we do not doubt that sensations exist. But what *Hylas* needs to show is that from the fact that we are sensing or perceiving some sensible quality, we are in a position to assert that that sensible quality also exists mind-independently, out there. Hylas makes clear exactly what he means by this claim. He says, in the context of the first quality under discussion, “Whatever degree of heat we may perceive by sense, we may be sure the same exists in the object that occasions it” (3DI 175). He is asserting very plainly that perceiving some degree of heat is a reason to suppose that the very same degree of heat also exists in outward things. So whenever I feel heat, I have reason to believe that very quality exists in the object. Hylas is therefore expressing a version of “the opinion strangely prevailing among men” in PHK 4, that all sensible objects go right on existing mind-independently just as we perceive them. This is the thesis that Berkeley tried to reject in the *Principles* by means of his anti-abstractionism, and against which he has Philonous argue in *Three Dialogues* by a variety of different arguments.<sup>10</sup> In presenting his case that it is not true that the existence of sensible qualities is one thing, and their being perceived another, Berkeley uses an argument by enumeration. He proceeds in turn to consider each of the proper objects of the senses. He devotes the most attention to the first case of a sensible quality he considers, that of heat, and the last, that of color. There are good reasons, I think, for concentrating in this fashion. The case of heat is the easiest one for him to make, the one that captures our ordinary intuitions most straightforwardly, and the case of color is the hardest. He is able, as well, to stress some useful points in the intervening discussion of the other senses.

## Heat

When Hylas and Philonous begin their discussion of heat, they agree that heat is a sensible thing. This is to say, according to what they have only just recently agreed to, heat is immediately perceived by the senses. By “heat” therefore they refer to that feeling we enjoy when we bask in the sun or huddle by the fire. Hylas's position is that heat, so understood, also has, in his words, “a real, absolute being, distinct from, and without any relation to their being perceived” (3DI 175). Hylas is committed to the existence of the heat we perceive and to the absolute existence of this heat. The very heat we apprehend by sense goes right on existing in the sun or in the fire after we have stopped basking or huddling, because to exist is one thing and to be perceived is another. Philonous's first move is to call attention to properties of the experience of feeling heat by means of what is often called “The Pleasure/Pain Argument.” He asks Hylas whether a great degree of heat, something very hot indeed, is not a great pain, and Hylas assents. This is where Philonous begins to break down

Hylas's intuitions. Hylas wants to suppose that heat is a quality of unperceiving things like the sun, or the fire, that can be understood to be material things with qualities inhering in them or belonging to them. But, if very great heat is very great pain, then this is to claim that very great pain can exist in an unperceiving, senseless thing and this is clearly impossible. This last point is accepted but not argued for in the text, that things without senses cannot be said to be subject to pain. Indeed, it is not a difficult point to accept, and it would at that time be widely accepted that pains are a way of feeling, so to say there is a pain is just to say it was felt. Insofar as the existence of very great heat can be assimilated to the existence of pain, then its existence just is the painful feeling too. There is no way for it to exist unfelt.

Hylas thinks this position just rests on a confusion. He wants to distinguish the pain from the great heat. Philonous's response is initially unclear. He concludes that Hylas's distinction cannot be made because "the intense heat immediately perceived, is nothing distinct from a particular sort of pain" (3DI 176). His argument rests on three claims: that intense heat is immediately perceived, that pain is immediately perceived, and that we perceive one single idea. The picture that Philonous is getting at is that heat is just a particular way of being painful, so there isn't any way in which we can distinguish or separate one from the other. But how do his three claims get there? We know that if heat and pain are both immediately perceived, we don't have to learn to perceive either one. We don't for example learn that heat will be accompanied by pain. Rather, feelings of heat and feelings of pain are feelings we have by virtue of the kinds of sensory apparatus we are born with. They are just ways of feeling we fall into upon stimulation. And in this case, Berkeley thinks he can remind us, there is just one simple feeling of intensely hot pain. What has to underlie this last move is the assumption that sensible qualities like heat are as they are felt. This result, again, is going to fall out of Berkeley's way of thinking about immediate perception, which is just what happens to us by virtue of having senses. Berkeley's ultimate goal in the pleasure/pain example is a particular way of thinking about immediate perceptions. Philonous asks Hylas, "Can you frame to yourself an idea of sensible pain or pleasure in general, abstracted from every particular idea of heat, cold, tastes, smells, etc." (3DI 177). Philonous is asking Hylas whether he can separate off the feeling of pain from the particular sensible idea that is painful, like great heat, so that it would be possible to argue that only the pain is felt while the great heat goes on existing unfelt in the fire. Since Hylas admits he can't do that, the upshot is that Berkeley is using a particular thought-experiment here to illustrate that you can't abstract the feeling when you perceive from the idea perceived. He has had Philonous walk Hylas through a version of an anti-abstraction argument. The conclusion they reach is that pain and pleasure are just ways we feel various of the proper objects of the senses. So if pleasure and pain require a sentient being in order to exist, the same will be true for all of the sensible qualities we experience pleasurable or painfully. They too will require a sentient being in order to exist.

Hylas's way out of this position is straightforward. He says, in essence, that's fine for all the qualities we experience pleasurable or painfully, but it is still possible to maintain that qualities that are neither pleasant nor painful have an absolute existence. Philonous does not at this time challenge the assumption that there can be such qualities, because he wants to

make use of a new argument.<sup>11</sup> He raises an old chestnut of a perceptual variability argument: “Suppose now one of your hands hot, and the other cold, and that they are both at once put into the same vessel of water, in an intermediate state; will not the water seem cold to one hand, and warm to the other?” (3DI 178). The very familiarity of this argument has led many to read Berkeley as offering a common form of the argument that goes: The same water feels both hot and cold. But it is contradictory to suppose that water is both hot and cold. Therefore, heat and cold must be in the mind and not in the water. And one flaw often pointed out with Berkeley's use of such an argument in this context is that he had already offered a reason in the *Principles* that undermines this argument. In *Principles* 15, Berkeley writes: “Though it must be confessed this method of arguing [by variability arguments] doth not so much prove there is no extension or colour in an outward object, as that we do not know by sense which is the true extension or colour of the object.” Even though it is true that the same water feels both hot and cold, there is no reason why it could not be either hot or cold.

This approach to the variability argument, however, assumes that Berkeley is trying to argue that hot and cold must be in the mind, because they cannot be in the water. But, as I have already argued, that sensible qualities have a mind-dependent existence is not in question, but is assumed by both Hylas and Philonous. The argument here is addressed to Hylas's further assumption that the very sensible qualities we perceive also have a mind-independent existence. That this is the point at issue is confirmed when we see that Philonous restates this view before giving the hands-in-water example. He asks Hylas to agree that “These bodies therefore upon whose application to our own, we perceive a moderate degree of heat, must be concluded to have a moderate degree of heat or warmth in them: and those, upon whose application we feel a like degree of cold, must be thought to have cold in them” (3DI 178). It is upon *these* principles, as Philonous swiftly concludes, that Hylas is committed to a contradiction, since one hand tells us there is cold in the water and the other that there is heat. Since this is contradictory, what we have to give up is that bodies have *absolutely* in themselves the very qualities we perceive them to have.

The final point Berkeley makes with respect to ideas of temperature is that this way of looking at things is not as odd or unfamiliar as it first appears. We are perfectly accustomed, when a pin is driven into a finger, to say that the pain we feel is not in the pin. Why then should we want to say anything different in the case of coal burning a finger? In both cases, the feelings are occasioned by the assault of the pin or the coal making similar depredations on our bodies. Berkeley, it should be noted, is making a point that should have been quite familiar to his readers. While Berkeley is making his case quite explicitly and at great length in *Three Dialogues*, the idea that the sensible qualities we feel do not exist as we feel them in objects or material substance, however startling this may seem commonsensically, is not new philosophically.

## Further Sensible Qualities

The discussion about heat and cold has laid down the parameters of the arguments Berkeley

is going to use in considering taste, odors, and sounds. Philonous is able to point out to Hylas that the ideas in question can be pleasant or painful and that they exhibit such variability that it is not possible to claim that an outward object possesses the very quality being perceived. In each case, as well, refinements are introduced into the argument, which help to underline the points Berkeley has been making. Once it has been agreed, for example, that taste can be pleasant or painful, Hylas tries to save his position through a distinction. He proposes that while flavors-as-perceived-by-us are certainly pleasant or painful, flavors as they exist absolutely in the object are not. Such a move, of course, is a rejection of Hylas's own originally stated position, that the very sensible qualities we perceive also exist absolutely in the object and Philonous reminds him of this. Since what we are interested in is what our senses register, speculations about insensible qualities are not to the purpose. Berkeley is highlighting the nature of the enterprise. We know what we immediately perceive by the senses and the question being raised is whether these qualities and not some different (unperceivable) set of qualities exist mind-independently. The discussion of odors is relatively brief and relies heavily on the points already made. Berkeley does raise the possibility of species-variability. That other species clearly find some aromas pleasant that to us are revolting suggests that they are not in fact registering the same odors. But this of course raises the question, why should it be that the quality that enjoys an absolute existence be the one that we, rather than some other animal, registers? Hylas is again balked from asserting his common sense assumption that what we sense is what continues to exist mind-independently.

In the discussion of sound, Berkeley has Hylas and Philonous take the argument in a different direction. This is a little surprising, since there is no reason not to continue to use the argument patterns already established. Sounds are certainly found to be pleasant or painful, and there is perceptual variability in the way sounds are registered as the deaf and tone deaf can attest. There is even, as the examples of bats and dog whistles show, species variability. But instead of running through these arguments (yet again) Berkeley has Hylas abandon his original position entirely. Sound, he maintains, is not a quality of objects at all but rather should be attributed to the air. Sound is, in fact, nothing but motion in the air. Hylas is ignoring an admission that he made earlier, that we perceive sounds immediately, but not their causes, or is perhaps trying to identify sounds with their causes, so that it becomes possible to say that I hear the motion of the air. Philonous points out, quite correctly, that Hylas's account depends on a distinction they have already rejected, between sound-as-perceived and sound-as-it-is-in-itself, but allows the discussion to continue to call to our attention some disadvantages of such a distinction. If we identify, as Hylas is proposing, real sound with motion in the air, rather than with sound-as-perceived, then we must also be willing to say that real sound has none of the attributes ordinarily associated with sound, since it can be neither high nor low, loud nor soft. Indeed, we are actually maintaining that real sound is not and cannot be heard. While, the earlier arguments have focused on discouraging the move from sensible-qualities-as-perceived to qualities-absolutely, Berkeley here is redirecting our attention to sensible-qualities-as-perceived. It is in fact the qualities we perceive that are what we ordinarily intend by sensible qualities. Moving away from our ordinary understanding is going to move us in the direction of such oddities as real but



unheard sounds.

## Colors

In the discussion of color, which concludes the examination of the traditional objects of the senses, Hylas reverts to his initial position. Berkeley has him reiterate several times over that “each visible object hath that color which we see in it” (3DI 183).<sup>12</sup> This is the view that underlies the common sense position that grass is green and cherries are red, that the color we see is the one the object wears. Philonous's way of undermining this intuition has been, among others, to deploy variability arguments and that is what he puts forward here too. But, before embarking on these arguments, Berkeley allows Hylas to make a distinction, which is not only useful from Hylas's point of view, but reveals something about his general common sense approach. Philonous offers Hylas a counter-example to his claim that the colors we see exist in objects. “Are the beautiful red and purple we see on yonder clouds really in them?” (3DI 184). Or are the clouds instead dark and misty? Hylas does not back off at this point, but instead asserts that the colors on the clouds are merely apparent. This is a response that will successfully undercut variability arguments – the colors we see that vary from the colors the objects wear are apparent colors – but only so long as Hylas can distinguish between real and apparent colors. He offers an account that does indeed do a good job of capturing ordinary intuitions. Apparent colors, he says, are the ones that “vanish upon a nearer approach” (3DI 184). The idea seems to be that real colors are stable colors, while apparent colors are changeable. We know that we are seeing the real colors of the object when the color doesn't alter in different circumstances. This is a criterion that not only captures common sense views of colors, but also provides Hylas with a tool for beating back variability arguments. The quality the object possesses is the one we perceive all or most of the time. Variations from this stable standard are apparent, not real, colors.

This criterion Berkeley sets out to challenge. His first step is to have Philonous take aim at Hylas's precise suggestion, that apparent colors are the ones that “vanish upon closer scrutiny.” Philonous points out that under a microscope, which surely counts as closer scrutiny, the blood that looks red to the naked eye loses its redness. In assessing this argument, it is important to be careful about what it is that Berkeley is hoping to show. Those who think that the micro-structure of objects brings us closer to their real nature are inclined to be enthusiastic about this argument.<sup>13</sup> But why should *Berkeley* want to endorse this position? In the argument Berkeley is making here, his focus is on the claim that apparent colors vanish, and not on the claim that real colors are revealed upon closer scrutiny.<sup>14</sup> Hylas's task has been to show that sensible colors continue to exist extramentally and his “do-not-vanish” claim is in support of this project. Real colors are the colors we see that don't vanish. The Argument from Microscopes is an argument that all colors we see can be made to vanish, and hence, none of them can be, according to Hylas's criterion, real.

Philonous does defend the veracity of microscopical seeing against Hylas's suggestion that it is a mere trick, but his defense does not result in privileging the microscope, but instead



allows him to assimilate microscopical seeing to a variety of other cases in which the nature of the instrument by means of which we see affects what we see. Philonous's praise of the microscope allows him to secure Hylas's agreement to the proposition that the "colours therefore by it perceived, are more genuine and real, than those perceived otherwise" (3DI 185). This statement is, of course, directly contrary to what Hylas had set out to show. Berkeley's next move, however, is to develop this admission into a species variability argument with far-reaching consequences. He observes first that mites, very small animals we can scarcely see, must also see the things that threaten them, things which are of course much too small for us to see.<sup>15</sup> They must be seeing with bodies constructed, as Berkeley puts it, with different humors than ours, and will doubtless see colors differently, even as we, when jaundice affects the humors of our eyes, see yellow where others do not. All of these cases, the microscope, the variations in color vision in different species, and the variations in our own color vision brought about by changes in our bodies, constitute evidence that the colors we see are mediated and altered by the instruments with which we see. It is never the case that we simply register the colors that are out there.

Berkeley has Philonous sum up the argument about colors in a longish speech culminating with Hylas willing to agree that all colors are equally apparent. To many, it has seemed that Hylas has given in too fast. If he had been willing to bolster his argument by claiming that the colors we see as stabilized under standard viewing conditions are the ones on the object, he could have continued to suppose that, most of the time, we see real colors. But in fact the considerations that Philonous brings forth in his speech not only provide grounds for rejecting the idea that apparent colors are the ones that vanish, but also raise problems for the general picture that lies behind Hylas's point of view. Philonous points out that all the examples of variability just canvassed undermine the view that colors exist stably on objects since in no case is the object itself changed when the color changes, and adds a few more, that colors look differently under different lights, and that prisms dramatically alter colors. He concludes:

And now tell me, whether you are still of the opinion, that every body hath its true real colour inhering in it; and if you think it hath, I would fain know farther from you, what certain distance and position of the object, what peculiar texture and formation of the eye, what degree or kind of light is necessary for ascertaining that true colour, and distinguishing it from apparent ones.

(3DI 186)

All these considerations about variability mitigate against the picture with which Hylas is working. Hylas thinks of the colors we experience in a familiar way. Objects possess a single stable color and, any time we are not perceiving this stable color, the color we see is not real but apparent. In a bad light we can be misled about the real color of the object, but once we take it into daylight the real color is revealed. Philonous challenges this outlook when he points out that we never from one moment to the next perceive the same color on the object. Morning light is different from evening light, if broad daylight is high noon on a sunny day, that comes at most but once a day. That there are standard viewing conditions under which

the real color of the object is revealed is not borne out by experience. So long as we accept Hylas's intuition that the true color of an object is the one color we see all or most of the time, then we are also driven to conclude there is no such true color and hence no way of talking about the stable color on the objects. The colors we actually see are fleeting and variable. The picture that Hylas is working with, that we are put in touch by means of our senses with a stable and enduring world, is not actually an accurate account of the way our senses work.

## The Very Same Arguments

So far, Berkeley's argument by enumeration has restricted itself to the proper objects of the senses. He concludes, however, by contending that "the very same arguments which you admitted as conclusive, against the secondary qualities, are without any farther application of force against the primary too" (3DI 194). Berkeley does introduce some additional arguments against primary qualities not relevant to secondary qualities in this section of *Three Dialogues* but it is important to observe that the project of this section remains very similar. Berkeley leads into the discussion of primary and secondary qualities from a last ditch attempt by Hylas to resurrect his argument about sound with respect to color. He proposes that color is nothing more than the motion of light particles. Philonous reminds him that he has by this move stopped talking about color-as-perceived, which is the only sort of color that has color properties like red or blue and so, whatever may be said about the processes by means of which color sensations are produced in us, these processes are not the same as color. This means that when Hylas turns his attention to primary qualities, it is not, for example, in order to justify or explain his previous account of color production. Rather, when Hylas remembers that philosophers have made a distinction between primary and secondary qualities, part of what he remembers and has, he says, now become convinced of, is that the secondary qualities "are only so many sensations or ideas existing in the mind" (3DI 188). He has now become convinced, with respect to the sensible qualities that have been under discussion, that it is not the case that being perceived is one thing, and existing is another. The sensible qualities we perceive cannot be identified with any quality existing unperceived. So now, Hylas is continuing in the same vein as before, trying to locate, among our immediately perceived ideas, those that continue existing unperceived, whose existence is not identical to being perceived, except that he is now proposing to limit those immediately perceived ideas to ideas of primary qualities. The position to which he subscribes in this case is the analog of those he has earlier attempted to defend: "The very figure and extension which you perceive by sense, exist in outward objects or material substance" (3DI 188). Hylas is claiming that extensions, shapes, and sizes as we perceive them continue to exist mind-independently. This position is immediately subjected by Philonous to variability arguments. We are reminded again of the situation of the mite and the microscope. Most tellingly, perhaps, Philonous makes an argument about extension that is very similar to the one he has just made about color. He points out that an object has as many sizes as can be discerned at different distances. There is no canonical viewing position from which we see the stable size of the object. Exactly the same point can be made about shape, as well, of

course. Rectangles and pyramids, let alone elephants,<sup>16</sup> can be seen from many different angles as having many different shapes. We are no more in a position based on what we immediately perceive to identify stable primary qualities than we are with respect to secondary. Finally, Hylas's position, that even though secondary qualities cannot exist unperceived the same is not true for primary qualities, has as a consequence that primary qualities can exist without secondary qualities. Berkeley deploys the anti-abstractionist arguments introduced in the *Principles* to show that we have no ideas of extension-in-abstract or motion-in-abstract and that in fact we cannot conceive of primary qualities except as accompanied by secondary qualities. This being the case, all the list of arguments deployed against the proper objects of the senses will equally apply to the primary qualities as well since the only way in which we can perceive such qualities as size and shape is embedded in sensible qualities like color or texture. The result of this final state of the argument is to underline that the only qualities we have to deal with are qualities as immediately perceived by us, which qualities are variable not stable and fixed.

## Summing Up

The task, I have suggested, that Berkeley set himself in the first half of *Three Dialogues*, is to make the position of PHK 1–7 more plausible. He has needed to provide considerations that will make the assimilation of unthinking, sensible things or sensible objects to ideas acceptable, so that the crucial claim that the *esse* of such unthinking or sensible things is *percipi* becomes convincing. Berkeley attempts these challenges in *Three Dialogues*. The initial point of agreement between Hylas and Philonous – that it is clearly an unwarranted skepticism to doubt or profess ignorance of sensible things – sets the stage for a view of what we and our knowledge of the world is like. We are creatures whose experience is ultimately sensory in nature. Working within this picture, Berkeley argues that:

- (1) If a sensible thing is a thing perceived by the senses, and
- (2) If the only thing the senses are built to do when first conferred upon us is to deliver characteristic discriminable sensory qualities

Then, (3) there is nothing else for any sense to do but to perceive its proper object. The ear can tell you nothing of the color of the object, the eye nothing of its odor.

Just by thinking about what the senses can do, what they can immediately perceive, Berkeley has argued that the objects of the senses, that is, things perceived by the senses, or sensible things are each sense's proper object of sensation and nothing more.

Berkeley has left to show that the *esse* of the proper objects of the senses is *percipi*, that it is not the case that the existence of such objects is one thing and their being perceived another. Berkeley makes use of two main arguments. The point of the Pleasure/Pain argument is to encourage us to extend our clear intuitions about pleasure and pain, that the way they exist is through being felt, to all the proper objects of the senses. In every case, it is the sentient state of a sentient being that constitutes the existence of the particular proper object in question.

As the point has sometimes been put by twentieth-century philosophers, the object of a state of sentience is an internal accusative. To say, “I hear a B-flat” is to express something about the way in which the state of hearing is realized. (Or, as Berkeley puts it, “There was a sound, it was heard.”) The presence of the sound does not indicate the existence of something distinguishable from the state of hearing itself. The variability arguments provide reasons why the qualities we perceive cannot be taken to have a continued existence independent of their being perceived. The qualities as we perceive them vary, they vary a great deal, and they vary depending upon the nature of the instruments used to perceive them. They cannot be taken to be identical with stable entities having such a continued existence. Both of these considerations show there can be no objects of perception independent of their being perceived.<sup>17</sup>

The plausibility of Berkeley's argument depends, first, upon his identification of sensible things with the proper objects of the senses, and, second, with considerations that permit the identification of the proper objects of the senses with, as Berkeley frequently calls them, sensations. Sensations are clearly and intuitively the kinds of things that do not exist unsensed, whose nature depends upon the sensory instrument by means of which they are sensed, and are the kinds of things that are fleeting and variable. But, this being the case, Berkeley's demonstration that their *esse* is *percipi* is a very limited result. Sensations are what we immediately perceive. We have said nothing about what is mediately perceived. Berkeley has not yet given us any reason to suppose that we do not by means of our sensations mediately perceive, for example, material substance. Still worse, while his approach in *Three Dialogues* may have gained some plausibility by highlighting the sensational nature of ideas, surely it will make it much less plausible for Berkeley to argue that our ideas just are real things? While these are excellent reservations, what is important to keep in mind is that Berkeley's argument is by no means over at this point, neither in the first half of the First Dialogue nor in PHK 1–7. In *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley has certainly extended the argument of PHK 1–7, both by clarifying the presupposition that is his starting point, that we have ideas, ideas exist, and by enriching the nature of the thought-experiments Berkeley wanted his readers to conduct, beyond an appeal against abstraction to include variability arguments and by making the abstraction argument more vivid through the appeal to pain and pleasure. Berkeley in the first half of the First Dialogue would have hoped that he was offering a better, more convincing range of evidence for the argument he made in the *Principles*, but there is no reason to suppose that he thought his original argument was faulty or invalid. In fact, inasmuch as Berkeley intended his audience in the *Principles* to be philosophers, and inasmuch as philosophers in general accepted that the proper objects of the senses were mind-dependent, he might not have imagined when he wrote the *Principles* that he needed to make the extensive arguments he subsequently provided in *Three Dialogues*. What Berkeley is doing in the first part of the First Dialogue is not so much correcting arguments found at the beginning of the *Principles*, as bringing readers less imbued with current philosophy up to speed.

## notes

- 1 At the end of the First Dialogue, Philonous says: “Hark; is not this the college-bell?” (3DI 207).
- 2 The second occurs much later in the First Dialogue, at 3DI 203, where Hylas distinguishes between immediately perceived ideas and real things. This principle of Hylas's will be discussed in the next chapter.
- 3 Comparisons between the arguments for idealism in *Principles* and *Three Dialogues* can be found in G. Dicker, *Berkeley's Idealism: A Critical Examination* (Oxford University Press, 2011), and S. Rickless, *Berkeley's Argument for Idealism* (Oxford University Press, 2013).
- 4 Indeed, in the *Principles*, Berkeley does not in least recommend thinking with the vulgar, but only speaking with them, while thinking with the learned. Consider PHK 52, where Berkeley says that “language is suited to the received opinions, which are not always the truest.”
- 5 This issue has been discussed by George Pappas in chapter 8 of his book, *Berkeley's Thought*, and by S. Bordner, “Berkeley's ‘defense’ of common sense,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 49 (3) (July 2011): 315–338.
- 6 For some excellent examples of those who have shared Hylas's puzzlement, see George Pappas, especially in his *Berkeley's Thought* (Cornell University Press, 2000), chapter 6, and Georges Dicker, especially in his *Berkeley's Idealism* (Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 5. I have written on this matter in “The objects of immediate perception” in *New Interpretations of Berkeley's Thought*, edited by Stephen H. Daniel (Humanity Books, 2008), 107–119, and in “The books are in the study as before,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (Spring 2008): 85–100.
- 7 That the criterion introduced in *Three Dialogues* makes good sense of Berkeley's argument in the *New Theory* provides encouragement for the assumption I am making here, that Berkeley did not change his mind about the nature of the distinction between immediate and mediate perception between the time he wrote the *New Theory* and the subsequent publication of *Three Dialogues*.
- 8 It is perhaps surprising that we have to go back to the *New Theory* to get help in understanding the distinction between immediate and mediate perception. Berkeley does, very occasionally, talk about what is immediately perceived in the *Principles*, although never in a context in which he explicitly contrasts immediate perception with mediate perception.
- 9 The case for the identification of Berkeleian ideas of sense with sensations has been forcefully made by P.D. Cummins, “Berkeley's ideas of sense,” *Nous* 9 (1975): 55–72.
- 10 Berkeley continues to use versions of anti-abstractionist arguments in *Three Dialogues* so I do not want to suggest that he gave up on the cogency of such an approach, but it is certainly the case, as we will see, that he appears to have come to believe that further or

different arguments in this particular instance would be easier for his readers to accept.

- [11](#) It should be noted that later on in the First Dialogue Berkeley does indeed reject just this argument, writing: “But after all, there can be no rational ground for that distinction between an intense and a more moderate degree of heat, for surely an indifferent sensation is, as truly a *sensation*, as one more pleasing or painful; and consequently should not any more than they be supposed to exist in an unthinking subject” (3DI 191–192).
- [12](#) I have written more about Berkeley's theory of color perception in “Why Berkeley can maintain that snow is white,” *Philosophical and Phenomenological Research* 67 (1) (2003): 101–113. See also M.D. Wilson, “Berkeley on the mind-dependence of colors,” in *Ideas and Mechanism: Essays on Early Modern Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 229–242.
- [13](#) See, for example D. Armstrong, “Color realism and the argument from microscopes,” in *Contemporary Philosophy in Australia*, edited by R. Brown and C.D. Rollins (Allen and Unwin London, 1969), 301–323.
- [14](#) As we shall see, Berkeley leaves this portion of Hylas's criterion unchallenged for the moment, only to reject it later.
- [15](#) In using the example of mites, Berkeley is undoubtedly thinking about Malebranche's similar appeal to mites to argue that our senses are inadequate to reveal to us the real sizes of things, since what is tiny for us is huge to a mite.
- [16](#) As Robert Schwartz likes to point out.
- [17](#) While the variability arguments are new to *Three Dialogues*, they allow Berkeley to foreground, right at the beginning of the book, a point that was important to his argument in the *Principles*, that sensible ideas are not stable, but fleeting and variable.



## chapter 8

### ***three dialogues between hylas and philonous: first dialogue, 2 195–207***

The first half of the First Dialogue ends with Hylas conceding that, unless he has overlooked something, he accepts that “all sensible qualities are alike to be denied existence without the mind.” Philonous immediately offers him the chance to bring up whatever second thoughts he might have. In the second half of the First Dialogue, Hylas avails himself of this opportunity to raise a sequence of issues. It is very tempting to regard this sequence as a series of Objections from Hylas to the thesis that sensible qualities don't exist without the mind together with Replies or defenses of the thesis from Philonous. Hylas, we might think, is hitting Philonous with everything he's got (although there are those who believe he might have found more to hit with), while Philonous does his level best to defend himself. There are some problems, however, with this way of reading the Dialogue. The first is the obvious one I have mentioned before. There is no actual Hylas, he is a fictional character, and everything he says is something Berkeley wants him to say. The reader should resist the temptation to identify with Hylas, at least until it is clear what Berkeley is up to. The second point, moreover, is that Philonous does not actually offer Hylas a chance to refute his, that is, Philonous's theory. What Berkeley has Philonous say is: “You are at liberty to recover any slip you might have made, or to offer whatever you might have omitted, which makes for your opinion” (3DI 194). Philonous is offering Hylas the chance to defend *Hylas's* first opinion, that is, that to exist is one thing and to be perceived is another, because when we perceive, say, red, we are perceiving an independently existing red. It is this principle Hylas sets out initially to defend.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Act–Object Distinction**

In Hylas's first attempt to retrieve his original intuition he tries to repair matters by offering a more complicated account of what a perception is. He is not quarreling with the position that our understanding of the world begins with having perceptions, but he does want to maintain that perceptions can consist of two elements, what Hylas calls an object and a sensation.<sup>2</sup> Philonous spells out Hylas's position, with Hylas's consent, like this: “... you distinguish in every perception two things, the one an action of the mind, the other not ... And this action cannot exist in, or belong to any unthinking thing; but whatever beside is implied in a perception, may” (3DI 195). The only piece of a perception that must exist in a mind is the act of mind perceiving, while the piece of the perception that is not an act of mind, the object of perception, can exist, as Hylas now puts it, in an unthinking substance. Hylas is trying to figure out a way, within a perception, to identify something that can also exist unperceived and so can inform us about the unperceived world. Hylas is also brought to agree that, in order for this account to work, without the act of mind, the *perception* can't exist, that is, it is



the special activity of the mind that turns the object into an object of perception. This concession provides Philonous with his opening. He points out that, in perception, there is no mental activity, inasmuch as we can't will to perceive, for example, red, and then do so. Rather, perceiving is a passive process. When we open our eyes, we perceive colors, whether we wish to or not. This once admitted to be the case, Philonous can now conclude that, lacking an action, "doth it not follow from your own concessions, that the perception of light and colours, including no action in it, may exist in an unperceiving substance? And is this not a plain contradiction?" (3DI 197). The perception of an object is not something the mind makes happen, it doesn't seize on the object and take the object into itself. We don't have a case of one thing, the mind, doing something to another thing, the object of mind. But Hylas wanted to analyze a perception into an act and its object. Once we recognize there is no act, Hylas is reduced to claiming that a perception, as, for example, a sensing of red, can exist in an unperceiving thing, which he has already been led to admit is impossible (3DI 196). We are quite clear that nothing like that ever happens in the case of pain and indeed must recognize that perceptions are things that happen to minds, minds fall into them, they are "all equally passions or sensations in the soul" (3DI 197). There is no way that objects of sensing could be in external objects, they must be mind-dependent because that is the only condition in which they exist. Hylas throws in the towel, acknowledging that he is only "a thinking being, affected with variety of sensations; neither is it possible to conceive how a sensation should exist in an unperceiving substance" (3DI 197). Hylas is now conceding that there is no way that the objects of perception can exist independent of the states of perception in which they are objects.

There is a residual issue that pokes its head up in Hylas's concession speech. Hylas calls himself a "thinking being" but one who is affected by, hence passive in the reception of, sensations. This language is in contrast with the way that Berkeley otherwise frequently refers to creatures with minds, who are often called "thinking, *active* beings."<sup>3</sup> It is worth keeping in mind, however, that in this particular discussion both Hylas and Philonous are strictly limiting themselves in their language to objects of *immediate* perception, red and yellow, light and color are the examples cited, and they are referred to as sensations. So long as Berkeley's discussion is understood to be limited to the passive reception of sensations, there is no contradiction. Instead, the door is open for holding that active thinking involves a good deal more than simply receiving ideas.<sup>4</sup>

## Modes, Qualities, and Substratum

Hylas realizes that he got himself into trouble all the way back when he found himself willing to identify sensible things with objects of perception. So he tries a different tack. Sensible things, he realizes, are often thought of as modes or qualities. In making this move, however, it is worth noticing that Hylas is still identifying sensible things with immediate objects of perception, since he suggests that they are really qualities, like red and hot, and not things like mountains and rivers. What is important about qualities, Hylas thinks now, is that they don't exist on their own, but must exist in a substance or substratum. Hylas is putting

forward a position that the immediate perception of sensible things alone carries with it the supposition of an independently existing substratum. The easiest way to understand what Hylas is getting at here is in terms of the claim Locke makes in the *Essay*, 2.23.1. In that passage, Locke says that, having noticed some simple ideas going together, we give them one name, and "... not imagining how these simple *Ideas* can subsist by themselves, we accustom our selves, to suppose some *Substratum*, wherein they do subsist, and from which they do result, which therefore we call *Substance*." From the point of view of the current stage of the discussion between Hylas and Philonous, Hylas is using a claim like this one to argue that the very experience of the immediate objects of perception alone carries along with it the supposition of some independent existence.

Philonous makes short work of this suggestion. Since every sensible idea or mode or quality brings along, according to this view, the additional idea of a support, that idea of a support becomes inconceivable. There is no way that Hylas can deliver an account of this support, except in terms of sensible ideas, like extension, which therefore, according to the argument itself, would also need a support, thus leading to a regress. Philonous can conclude that Hylas has not even a relative idea, as Locke claimed, but no idea at all of this alleged substratum. Hylas had attempted to argue that the very presence of immediately perceived ideas automatically carried with them the concept of a support, that independent existence is built into the immediate perception of ideas. Philonous has procured from him the admission that he can give no content to this alleged concept of a support and so is able to conclude that Hylas's original claim amounts to this: "When you conceive the real existence of qualities you do withal conceive something you cannot conceive" (3DI 199). Philonous is calling Hylas on claims about what he can or must conceive. Such claims require a demonstration of the content of the alleged concept.

## The Unconceived Tree (The Master Argument)

Hylas has failed to show that the presence of immediately perceived ideas can carry with them the idea of an independently existing support for these ideas and is forced to admit that the idea of such a support existing without the mind is inconceivable. Berkeley next has Philonous respond to a suggestion from Hylas that perhaps, even though single sense qualities don't imply a support, it might be that a group of sensible qualities do. Presumably what Hylas has in mind, here, is the "going constantly together" part of Locke's account of ideas of substances. It cannot be a coincidence that the color, aroma, and taste (say, of an apple) always recur together. There must be some independent substance supporting them all and gluing them together. Philonous responds to this proposal by issuing what has been called "The Master Argument"<sup>5</sup>: "If you can conceive it possible for any mixture or combination of qualities, or any sensible object whatever, to exist without the mind, then I will grant it actually to be so" (3DI 200). This challenge is very similar to one Berkeley made in PHK 22–23. The examples are somewhat different but the same bravado is present, as is the upshot of the argument, that such a conception is not possible.

Here, in *Three Dialogues*, as was the case in the *Principles*, Berkeley is able to clarify what

he means by “without the mind.” The argument as it appears in *Three Dialogues* is brief and has seemed to many quite weak. It trades initially on an analogy: just as it seems contradictory to say you saw an unseen tree, so it is contradictory to suppose you can conceive an unconceived tree. Such an analogy seems to embody a confusion. Of course the idea I am presently conceiving exists in my mind and that idea can't exist out of my mind, but surely, what my idea is supposed to be of, a tree existing without the mind, is something it is perfectly possible to conceive? This objection however, misses the point of Berkeley's thought experiment. When Hylas capitulates, this is what he says: “I may indeed conceive in my own thoughts the idea of a tree, or a house, or a mountain, but that is all. And this is far from proving that I can conceive them *existing out of the minds of all spirits*” (3DI 200). When Hylas supposed his ideas required a support on which they depended and from which they resulted, he was supposing that that support existed independent of *all* minds. Conceiving a tree, which might involve conceiving rough brown bark, green flexible leaves, or whatever, while merely omitting the presence of a mind, is just putting together the ideas minds have when they perceive trees. It is not conceiving a tree as it would exist out of all minds. It is not the idea of a support for a set of tree ideas as that support exists without any mind at all. “Without the mind” doesn't mean “in the absence of some mind or other” but as a tree would exist if no minds existed. That is what is inconceivable. Hylas has just previously admitted that he cannot conceive a mind-independent support for his ideas of a tree, and he is now conceding that this means that he cannot in fact conceive of a mind-independent tree at all. So, at this point in the discussion, Hylas's attempts to support his belief that to exist is one thing and to be perceived is another have all failed. Berkeley has argued that no idea I might have can contain or point towards an absolute, mind-independent “real” existence.

## **“Without the Mind” and “At a Distance”**

Hylas's next defense of his position is that, as he sees it, the things he perceives must exist without the mind because he just perceives them to be at a distance from himself, hence, his mind. Because the things he perceives are so clearly outside the mind, out there in space, they can't possibly be just mind-dependent sensations. This point of Hylas's is going to allow Berkeley to introduce into *Three Dialogues* the argument of the *New Theory*, and, as we know from the *Principles*, to address a notion that Berkeley thought he needed to answer. Since, here in *Three Dialogues*, as it was in the *Principles*, the issue being addressed is the proper understanding of what it means to exist without the mind, Berkeley begins his account of distance perception, as he did in the *Principles*, with the case of dreams. But the presentation of the material from the *New Theory* in the *Principles* is otherwise much brisker than we find here, and reaches a firm conclusion, that visible ideas are the language of the “governing spirit.” In *Three Dialogues*, the account centers on what is in the mind when we perceive distance, and doesn't reach as far the conclusion of the *Principles*.

Philonous, then, begins by making Berkeley's first point in the *Principles*, that we see things at a distance in dreams without taking them to be existing without the mind. We know that dreams are events happening to our minds. As he did in the *Principles*, Berkeley cuts the

connection between “at a distance” and “without the mind.” “Without the mind” doesn't mean outside of or away from the mind, it means independent of the mind.<sup>6</sup> The conversation proceeds however by focusing on an issue not raised in the corresponding *Principles* account, that of immediate perception. The chief points that Berkeley has Philonous make against Hylas are that the immediate objects of perception are sensations of light and colors existing in the mind, that they are continually changing and have nothing of distance about them, so that a Man Born Blind if made to see would take the deliverances of vision to be in his mind, not inside but dependent on his mind, and that, finally, the nature of distance, a line turned endwise towards the eye, is such that it cannot be perceived by sight. The important lesson that Berkeley is making here is that vision alone, the objects of vision immediately perceived, cannot under any circumstances inform us of distance, and so Hylas's thought that we just see things at a distance is in fact false.

There is one brief episode in the midst of this discussion, however, that opens it up in a different direction. Hylas asks: “do you not think sight suggests something of *outness* or *distance*?” (3DI 201). Philonous agrees that sight does suggest distance:

From the ideas you actually perceive by sight, you have by experience learned to collect what other ideas you will (according to the standing order of Nature) be affected with, after such a certain succession of time and motion.

(3DI 202)

Philonous is saying here that sight alone, the subject of this particular dispute, can't provide distance information, but that sight plus further ideas can. This answer includes some important ideas, that despite the changing nature of visible ideas, because we experience our ideas in an orderly manner, we can learn from visible ideas what other ideas we can expect. This answer only gestures at the conclusion Berkeley drew in the *Principles* from the material of the *New Theory*, but it does provide a way of thinking about what might be included in the term “suggests,” found in Hylas's question. It might be thought to point the way beyond the position that Hylas has staked out until now, that, in perceiving, we just perceive what exists “out there,” independent of the mind. What we are going to find is that at this point in the argument, Hylas will give up on his old principle, which he has been trying to defend until now, and adopt a new one, which does presuppose a relationship between the ideas we immediately perceive and something else.

## Two Kinds of Objects

I have been stressing repeatedly throughout the discussion of the First Dialogue that Berkeley keeps signaling that he is talking about *immediate* perception. At this point, he has Philonous make a speech that might be thought to be a summary of what he hoped to have established about immediate perception. He is responding to a question from Hylas: “can we perceive or know nothing besides our ideas?” (3DI 202).

And by the senses you can best tell, whether you perceive any thing which is not immediately perceived. And I ask you whether the things immediately perceived, are anything other than your own sensations or ideas?

(3DI 203)

Hylas, in response, introduces a new principle:

To speak the truth, Philonous, I think there are two kinds of objects, the one perceived immediately, which are likewise called *ideas*; the other are real things or external objects perceived by the mediation of ideas, which are their images and representations. Now I own, ideas do not exist without the mind; but the latter sort of objects do.

(3DI 203)

In Hylas's new account, we can be said to perceive real things, but we mediately perceive these real things or external objects, through the mediation of ideas, we perceive ideas that stand for real things.

It is appropriate to mark this moment as indicating a significant change in position for Hylas. Berkeley has had Hylas act out the story of how philosophical theories developed that he first told in the *Principles* in section 56. Hylas has been defending the position of what were there just called “men,” that “their ideas or objects of perception had an existence independent of and without the mind” (PHK 56). Hylas has now become convinced that ideas immediately perceived exist only *in* the mind and has taken up a new principle, which is in fact the one that Berkeley ascribes to philosophers who have similarly reached such a recognition. They come to hold “that there are certain objects really existing without the mind, or having a subsistence distinct from being perceived, of which our ideas are only images or resemblances” (PHK 56). Berkeley has had Philonous teach Hylas the philosophical truth that ideas exist only in the mind and Hylas has responded by adopting the philosophical position of the twofold existence of ideas and things. Hylas, one might say, has ceased to be a man and has become a philosopher.

It now behooves Hylas to defend his new position, that we perceive things through the mediation of ideas. In what sense do ideas represent things? Again, what is happening is that Berkeley has Hylas put forward a position that he must defend against Philonous's questioning. Philonous is going to push Hylas to explain in what sense the ideas we immediately perceive can represent non-ideas, external things. Hylas's first attempt is quite straightforward: Ideas represent things in the same way a picture or statue of Julius Caesar represents Caesar. Ideas can represent real things because these real things are like or somehow “have a conformity with” our ideas, in a phrase Philonous offers (3DI 203). Philonous undercuts this account of how we perceive things through ideas by pointing out that immediately perceived ideas alone can't bring to our minds that which they represent. The case Berkeley introduces here is a little confusing. Hylas is maintaining that real things that are themselves imperceptible are perceived by sense in the same way that Julius Caesar, described as “in himself, invisible” is perceived by sight through perceiving a picture of him. But real things, according to Hylas, are not the sorts of things that could ever be perceived by

sense, whereas Julius Caesar is presumably invisible because he's dead. When alive, he was perfectly perceivable. When we look at the actual claim Berkeley makes, however, it is not clear that it is the current imperceivability of Caesar that is at issue. Berkeley has Philonous point out that anyone looking at the picture of Caesar would immediately perceive only lights and colors. Whether the viewer took the picture to represent Caesar would depend upon additional information about Caesar in the viewer's possession. If the viewer had no such information, perceiving the lights and colors of the picture could not constitute the means for a mediate perception of Caesar. Berkeley's point here is that the kind of representation through immediate ideas that Hylas is maintaining requires additional mental work, via, he says, memory or reasoning. Immediate perception of light and color alone isn't enough to represent an object that resembles the idea perceived.

The upshot of this first part of the discussion is if immediately perceived ideas are supposed to represent external objects in the way in which pictures represent objects they resemble, then these ideas will require supplementation. Representation via resemblance is less direct than Hylas's account allows. Berkeley, however, does have Philonous clarify that there is a sense in which we can say that sensible things are mediately perceived through immediately perceived ideas. Berkeley uses to make this point the same example he had also used in the *New Theory*, that of a coach, in the passage quoted earlier in the discussion of immediate perception. To re-capitulate, here he says: "For instance, when I hear a coach drive along the street, immediately I perceive only the sound; but from the experience I have had that such a sound is connected with a coach, I am said to hear the coach. It is nevertheless evident, that in truth and strictness, nothing can be *heard* but *sound*: and the coach is not then properly perceived by sense, but suggested from experience" (3DI 204). Here in this passage Berkeley tells us that the only things that can be said to be strictly speaking perceived by some sense are "those things ... which would have been perceived in case that same sense had first been conferred on us" (3DI 204). But these ideas suggest to us other ideas "which are wont to be connected with them." So when I am said to hear a coach it is because the sound calls to mind further ideas that I have previously experienced in conjunction with that sound. Berkeley is reverting, it should be noted, to the account that he had given earlier in this Dialogue with respect to distance perception, where he pointed out that ideas of sight could suggest further ideas with which we expect to be affected. Lurking here in this set of remarks at this point in the Dialogue is that there are other ways in which ideas can represent besides resemblance. Ideas do represent non-resembling ideas with which they are frequently connected, while they don't represent resembling objects.

Berkeley concludes the First Dialogue with a discussion that aims at undercutting the view that ideas can be thought of as pictures of the objects they represent. He kicks off this discussion by having Philonous restate Hylas's position: "... you say our ideas do not exist without the mind; but that they are copies, images, or representations of certain originals that do" (3DI 205). Philonous will be questioning whether ideas and real things can be related as copy to original. The first problem he raises is one that has come up before in the Dialogue, that ideas are, as he says here, "perpetually fleeting and variable" but real things are taken to be "fixed and constant." This being the case, it would seem that no one would be able to tell

which of the crowd of constantly changing ideas, if any, was the actual copy of the external original. Berkeley is here putting his finger on a problem for anyone who thinks our ideas picture the external world. If what we experience are constantly changing and varying ideas, then most of our ideas will be misleading as copies of their original, failing to present the “real” shape or the “real” color of the putative stable origin.

The final problem in Berkeley's hands is perhaps a death blow to the view of things Hylas has been defending. The account assumes that we need idea-pictures to get us to a material world, because this world is not itself perceivable. As Philonous puts Hylas's commitment: “Ideas then are sensible and their archetypes or originals are insensible” (3DI 206). The challenge is to explain how, in such circumstances, it is possible to make good on any sort of copy or resemblance claim. As Philonous puts it here: “Can a real thing in itself *invisible* be like a *colour*; or a real thing which is not *audible* be like a *sound*?” (3DI 206). Hylas is willing to throw in the towel at this point and to concede that nothing can “be like a sensation or idea, but another sensation or idea”<sup>7</sup> (3DI 206). That ideas are copies of reality is taken to be a problematic claim if reality is thought to have an entirely different nature than the ideas alleging copying it. Berkeley has Philonous drive this point home with a further observation. Ideas, he points out, and Hylas agrees, are perfectly known, since, as Hylas says, “what I do not perceive or know, can be no part of my idea” (3DI 206). But Hylas has been driven, through numerous questionings, to admit that there is nothing in an idea that can exist without the mind. An idea is as it is, and it is as it is perceived.

Here at the end of the First Dialogue, Hylas sums up the place which he is now willing to say that he has reached: “I find it is impossible for me to conceive or understand how any thing but an idea can be like an idea. And it is most evident that *no idea can exist without the mind*” (3DI 206). The conclusion that Philonous claims to have reached is that *Hylas* is now a skeptic because, as he says to Hylas: “You are therefore by your principles forced to deny the reality of sensible things.” Philonous, it should be noted, is not claiming victory on his own behalf for any theory or claim belonging to him. The question of this Dialogue was: who is the greater skeptic? Berkeley has claimed to show that *Hylas's* principles lead to skepticism. The interesting question at this point is, what are Hylas's principles? Philonous thinks that the position that gets Hylas into trouble is the identification of reality with “an absolute existence exterior to the mind” (3DI 206), which is what allowed Hylas initially to claim that to exist is one thing and to be perceived another. Hylas has however, in the course of the Dialogue, offered two different principles in support of this claim. The first principle was that whatever is perceived by sense also exists in the object. Hylas was forced to give up this principle when he came to recognize that whatever idea or sensation immediately perceived by sense exists only in the mind. He has since been operating with a different principle, the twofold existence principle, that there are two kinds of entities, real things and the ideas through which we perceive the real things. It is the conjunction of this principle, together with Hylas's concessions that an idea can only be like another idea and that no idea exists without the mind, that form the basis for the charge of skepticism with which Berkeley has concluded this Dialogue. If you hold all three claims, then you are a skeptic.



# The Relationship between the *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*

The last point of agreement reached by Hylas and Philonous at the end of the First Dialogue is the Likeness Principle: an idea can be like nothing but another idea. In the *Principles*, the Likeness Principle was established in PHK 8. So what took Berkeley eight paragraphs to reach in the *Principles* fills instead many pages of *Three Dialogues*. That Berkeley added much more material to *Three Dialogues* not found in the *Principles* is undeniable, and it seems entirely plausible that he added material to *Three Dialogues* in order to improve what he had written in the *Principles*. But did Berkeley think his improvements were required to make up for fallacious arguments in the *Principles*?

The first thing to be noted is that Berkeley framed his argument differently in *Three Dialogues* than he did in the *Principles*. From the very beginning of *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley sets up his program as a contest about skepticism. He puts an epistemological issue front and center: His own theory will be found to be superior to those of others because it does not have the skeptical consequences that others do. Berkeley makes this same claim much later in the *Principles*. He doesn't begin to make a contrast between his own views and those that lead to skepticism until the third section of the *Principles*, where in PHK 86 he identifies those who believe in “the twofold existence of the objects of sense” as adopting “the very root of *scepticism*.” The epistemological consequences of his theory are no less important in the *Principles* than in *Three Dialogues*, but in *Three Dialogues* Berkeley has chosen to make it a determinative issue from the start. One way in which this choice works itself out is that the First Dialogue has a wider project than that of PHK 1–8, because it is directed to establishing that Hylas is a skeptic when he comes to hold both of the philosophical beliefs that there is an absolute existence of unthinking things, and that no idea can exist without the mind. The First Dialogue doesn't end until Hylas has adopted both these positions.

It is quite likely, moreover, that Berkeley in the *Principles* is supposing a readership of philosophers, who, whether or not they accepted the views that he is assigning to Hylas at the end of the First Dialogue, would be perfectly familiar with the theory Berkeley is taking as his target. Such an audience would not balk at the claim with which Berkeley begins the *Principles*, that “it is evident to anyone who takes a survey of the objects of human knowledge, that they are ... ideas” (PHK 1) and would be prepared to take as read that “[b]y sight I have the ideas of light and colours” and so on. An audience of philosophers would have no difficulty beginning with the assumption that there are ideas and that we have ideas of sensible qualities, because such people are those who, as Berkeley says in PHK 56, recognize that “the immediate objects of perception do not exist without the mind.” He is trying to convince this group of philosophers that “what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, this seems perfectly unintelligible” (PHK 3). Berkeley takes his target in the *Principles* to be those philosophers who have come to believe in an absolutely existing world independent of the mind but who also suppose that there are sensible ideas and that these sensible ideas exist only in the mind.

He deploys the tool he has laid out in the Introduction to the *Principles* of anti-abstractionism in order to show that “as it is impossible for me to see or feel any thing without an actual sensation of that thing, so it is impossible for me to conceive in my thoughts any sensible thing or object distinct from the sensation of it” (PHK 5). By the time that Berkeley wrote *Three Dialogues*, he may have thought that he had overestimated the sophistication of his readers. But both his target and his strategy in PHK 1–8 and in the First Dialogue is the same. He wants to take down the ontological assumptions of the philosophers. He therefore moves his audience in *Three Dialogues* along in two different ways. First, in 3DI 174–175, he gets his readers to recognize that by sensible things in fact is meant sensible ideas, and so moves them to the position assumed at the beginning of the *Principles*, that we have knowledge by having ideas. He then marshals a more elaborate set of arguments to reach the conclusion of PHK 5. These include considerations that were not a part of the original *Principles* argument, but which would have been familiar to the philosophers Berkeley took to be his readers, such as the different variability arguments that show up in *Three Dialogues*. They also include pointed versions of anti-abstractionist thought-experiments, such as the pain–pleasure arguments, as well as more straightforward invocations of anti-abstractionism, as in the primary and secondary quality arguments. In sum, it is certainly the case that Berkeley enriched his argument in *Three Dialogues*, compared to that of the *Principles*, as well as reorganizing that argument, but I see no reason to conclude that he regarded his earlier position as in error or in need of correction.

## notes

- 1 As we shall see, later on in this same Dialogue, Hylas adopts a new principle.
- 2 This is somewhat confusing terminology. A sensation is something the mind does, so the object is the object of sensing.
- 3 The first such occurrence is in PHK 27, where Berkeley writes: “A spirit is one simple, undivided, active being: as it perceives ideas, it is called the *understanding*, and as it produces or otherwise operates about them it is called the *will*.”
- 4 That something like this forms part of Berkeley's account is hinted at in a speech that Philonous makes at the beginning of the discussion of the act–object distinction which is difficult to integrate into the argument being made. Philonous says: “That the colors are really in the tulip which I see, is manifest. Neither can it be denied, that this tulip may really exist independent of your mind, or mine; but that any immediate object of the senses, that is, any idea or combination of ideas, should exist in an unthinking substance, or exterior to all minds, is itself an evident contradiction” (3DI, 195). Philonous seems to be suggesting here that he has a way of asserting what Hylas might take to be virtues of the distinction that he, Hylas, is trying to make, that colors exist on objects, perceived by many minds, without holding that immediate objects of the senses exist without all minds.
- 5 This argument is also discussed in Chapter 4.

- 6 As has been pointed out by A.R. White in “The ambiguity of Berkeley's ‘without the mind,’” *Hermathena* 83 (May 1954): 55–65, while this mistake is possible in English, it is not in many other languages. Latin, for example, uses “extra” for outside of and “sine” for independent of.
- 7 This is of course what Phillip Cummins has named the “Likeness Principle” also laid out in *Principles* 8. The version found there is discussed Chapter 4.

## chapter 9

### ***three dialogues between hylas and philonous: the second dialogue***

The Second Dialogue at first reading looks like something of a mixed bag. As the Dialogue begins, Hylas contributes one further reason for accepting his belief that to exist is one thing and to be perceived is another. Berkeley, it would seem, is beginning this Dialogue with an afterthought. After Hylas is easily silenced, Berkeley moves on to offer a proof for the existence of God, followed by a rejection of the existence of matter. It all seems quite disparate. A closer reading, however, reveals a thread running through the Dialogue. Hylas's afterthought concerns a kind of psychophysical account, popular in his day, of how ideas or sensations are caused. This topic, the causation of ideas, forms the basis for the rest of the Dialogue. Ideas are argued to be caused by God and not by matter. It is worth noticing too that Hylas's issue about the causation of ideas in us is the very issue that Berkeley introduced in PHK 56, to explain why philosophers came to adopt the principle of the twofold existence of ideas and things that Hylas now endorses. In fact, Hylas reiterates this sequence of reasoning during the course of the discussion at 3DII 216. Philosophers noticed that a number of the ideas existing in their minds were not caused by themselves and so cast about for another cause, something absolutely existing independent of minds. The nature of causation and the account of how ideas are caused lie at the heart of the competing theories of *Three Dialogues*.

### **A Psychophysical Cause of Ideas**

The account of idea-causation that Hylas proposes is indeed one often held at this time and forms, for example, the basis for the explanation Descartes puts forth in *Treatise on Man* and in the *Optics*.<sup>1</sup> It assumes that we can trace a series of motions from an object perceived, through a medium to the nerves, the brain, and ultimately to the soul resulting in an idea. Berkeley makes short work of such a theory. Hylas acknowledges under questioning that the brain is a sensible thing, from which, by steps he has already accepted, he is led to agree that sensible things are immediately perceivable, things immediately perceived are ideas, and ideas exist only in minds. So Hylas's causal story is about a brain existing in a mind. Hylas denies this. He says he is not talking about the brain that is sensed, but about the brain that he says he imagines lying behind the sensible brain. Philonous points out that this is to suppose that one set of ideas, of motions in the conceived brain, can cause another set of ideas, of motion in the sensible brain. Philonous is getting Hylas to recognize this is not an acceptable account of a causal process, particularly since there is nothing connecting a motion in brain or nerves with a sensation, a sound, or color. Hylas is brought to the realization that he cannot identify by these means a thing absolutely existing that can be a cause. In addition, Berkeley has introduced the notion that ideas are not plausible causes of other ideas.<sup>2</sup>

As things now stand, Hylas thought he could save his distinction between ideas and things by an account that told how ideas are the result of motions in things. When he is brought to recognize that he has, yet again, assigned an illegitimate independent existence to sensible things, then he is willing to accede to the accusation that Philonous made at the end of the First Dialogue and repeats here, that he is “in truth an arrant *sceptic*” (3DII 210). At this point, the issue of skepticism, which has been the framing issue of *Three Dialogues*, returns. It is worth asking, if Hylas is now to be convicted of skepticism, in what does his skepticism consist? He is not doubting the existence of his ideas, nor is he doubting his knowledge of his ideas, since at the end of the First Dialogue he himself asserted that he had perfect knowledge of his ideas. He has not, however, given up the principles he reached in the First Dialogue, so he has not given up the claim that there are absolutely existing things in addition to his ideas. What he has now been forced to admit is that his ideas do not permit him to reach any conclusions about absolutely existing things, either through a resemblance relation or by means of some sort of relation of causal dependence. So Hylas is now a skeptic with respect to any claims that might be made about the existence or nature of absolute reality. If Hylas became a philosopher in the course of the First Dialogue, he is now convicted of the philosophical skepticism Berkeley described in PHK 87, “that follows from our supposing a difference between *things* and *ideas*, and that the former have a subsistence without the mind or unperceived.”

## The Real Beauties of Nature

Hylas is convinced, however, as he now admits to skepticism, that Philonous too must be a skeptic. This is not surprising. Philonous, at this point in *Three Dialogues*, has undermined Hylas's confidence that led him to suppose that he did in fact have knowledge of mind-independent reality, but he has not offered any reasons to suppose that he, Philonous, has title to knowledge Hylas doesn't have. Nor does Philonous offer any such principles to knowledge in the rest of the Second Dialogue. What Berkeley does have Philonous do in response to Hylas's suggestion that he too is a skeptic, however, is both interesting and startling. He has Philonous embark on a very long speech, taking up most of 3DII 210–211, describing and praising the wonders of nature. The speech ends with the suggestion that Hylas (and other philosophers) have denied the reality of these wonders. Philonous cries:

What treatment then do these philosophers deserve, who would deprive these noble and delightful scenes of all reality? How should these principles be entertained, that lead us to think all the visible beauty of the creation a false imaginary glare? To be plain, can you expect this scepticism of yours will not be thought extravagantly absurd by all men of sense?

(3DII 211)

Philonous's claim is that philosophers who insist on the absolute existence of sensible things are the ones who threaten men of sense with skepticism.

What is striking about this passage, however, is that Philonous by no means limits himself to

claims to about the immediately perceived sensible ideas which he has been talking about in the First Dialogue and of which we have perfect knowledge. In this long speech, Philonous extends this notion of sensible things to include an all-encompassing description of nature. A careful reading finds that Philonous includes the following:

1. (3DII 210, ll. 15–23) Philonous describes the “natural beauties of the earth.” As he did in his opening speech in the First Dialogue extolling early rising, he explicitly links these beauties with pleasure. He is no longer, however, speaking of the pleasures of immediate sensations, but here mentions things like fields, groves, mountains, and rivers.
2. (3DII 210, ll. 23–32) Philonous calls attention to how elegantly things in nature are put together to serve their purposes, both individually and as a part of the whole.
3. (3DII 210, ll. 32–39; 211, ll. 1–7) The planets and the heavenly bodies including those that can only be seen through a telescope display orderly and useful motions and situations, following immutable laws.
4. (3DII 211, ll. 7–21) With the aid of the imagination we can realize the existence of vast and distant bodies nevertheless by a “secret mechanism” linked together in a “mutual dependence.”

Berkeley has in this speech laid before our eyes a vast universe, as he says, “a surplusage immeasurable,” all united together in a systematic interdependence according to the laws of nature, and all of which are apparently to be considered “sensible things.” The case Philonous wants to make is that Hylas's conviction that there is an absolute reality puts all this in jeopardy, but that he, Philonous, is not in the same position. I think it can fairly be said that Philonous has yet to show us how, on *his* principles, all this can be said to constitute a description of a reality about which there is no reason to be skeptical. What Berkeley might be said to have done here is to have re-described and energized the initial challenge Hylas and Philonous set themselves, to decide who is the greater skeptic. Philonous is going to have to show that, on his view of things, nature, as he has described it, is, in principle, knowable and not a “false, imaginary glare.”

## Ideas Caused by God

What Berkeley actually does do now is to follow up on Hylas's mistaken attempt to locate a mind-independent cause of our ideas by offering what he takes to be the correct account. The actual cause of our ideas, Berkeley has Philonous claim, is God.<sup>3</sup> Philonous lays out what appears to be a simple and straightforward proof for the existence of God. He starts with the premise to which he has secured Hylas's agreement: we have sensible ideas that cannot exist without the mind. Since, as everyone recognizes, we each have sensible ideas of which we are not the cause, then we ought to conclude of these ideas that “*therefore they are necessarily perceived by an infinite mind*” (3DII 212), namely God. Philonous is not a skeptic because, on his account, the causal principle is necessarily God.

This proof, while indeed simple and straightforward, is a little too simple to be immediately convincing, and certainly requires further discussion, discussion Berkeley provides in the following pages. The first thing he does is to provide some further detail about the nature of our ideas by distinguishing his views from those of others. Hylas asks whether Philonous agrees with those “moderns” who hold that we see all things in God, a phrase often associated with Malebranche. Philonous identifies these moderns as those who take the human soul to be able to directly perceive the essences of created things in God's essence. Berkeley has three criticisms of this theory. The first is that it mistakes the actual nature of the ideas we really perceive. Our ideas are not, as he spells out, the abstract general essences of Malebranche's theory, but, as has been agreed, the passive, inert deliverances of sense. As such, they could not be a part of God's essence. The second mistake is that the abstract ideas we are thought to grasp are supposed to be merely representations of the created world, which thus is held to exist mind-independently. Finally, since it is these abstract ideas and not our sensible ideas that are held to be true representations of the world, according to this theory, the sensible ideas we actually have are dismissed as misleading. Berkeley is highlighting with respect to his own views that the ideas we have to deal with are no more and no less than the inert passive ideas we immediately perceive, and that they are not representations, misleading or otherwise, of non-ideas. It is the existence of these ideas and these alone that Berkeley is arguing God causes. But now, we need to ask, what sort of explanation is Berkeley offering when he says that the existence of these ideas of sense is reason to conclude they are necessarily perceived by an infinite mind? How can Berkeley even say that my inert, passive, and of course fleeting ideas are perceived by God?

Berkeley clarifies things somewhat in a summary statement of his position coming at the end of the discussion of Malebranche. This summary begins with the same two claims he has been making all along: “the things I perceive are my own ideas” and “no idea can exist except in a mind” (3DII 214). But when he makes the point that ideas he doesn't cause are independent of his mind, he uses the phrase, “ideas or their archetypes.” This of course raises the possibility that God, as the cause of my ideas, perceives their archetypes and not my ideas themselves. What Berkeley actually says is ambiguous. “They must therefore exist in some other mind, whose will it is they should be exhibited to me” (3DII 214–15). “They” is ambiguous, it could refer either to “ideas” or “archetypes,” but there is a further clarification in this sentence. The ideas or their archetypes exist in a mind that wills their exhibition. God is the cause of my ideas because he wills that I perceive them. Berkeley adds, the ideas that I know to exist in me can only “be produced by” a mind or spirit, because only minds or spirits can be causes of ideas. This is how Berkeley can provide a connection between the existence of ideas in me and the existence of an infinite mind that necessarily perceives them. The necessary causal connection between an idea and its cause can only be between one mind and another.<sup>4</sup>

Berkeley can establish that minds cause ideas through an appeal to our own experience. Just as through our own experience we can recognize that some of the ideas we perceive are not made by us, equally, we experience other ideas as coming into existence through our own acts of will. On introspective grounds, we can assert that ideas are produced by a mind, and



so the existence of ideas not produced by us is a necessary indication of the existence of some other mind producing them. This does not get us of course to the place where Berkeley wants to be, where we recognize that that other mind is God's. Berkeley has laid down that the existence of our ideas is a reason to conclude there is an *infinite* mind, and so there is one more element that needs explanation. Berkeley provides this explanation, or perhaps provides an account of what this explanation must be like. He first distinguishes the ideas I produce, the ideas of my imagination, from the sensory ideas that are here identified as real things. About those ideas Berkeley says: "And from the variety, order, and manner of these, I conclude the Author of them to be *wise, powerful, and good, beyond comprehension*" (3DII 215). We know the ideas produced in us that we did not produce are the product of an infinite divine mind because they display the kinds of characteristics that require a divine mind. These are in fact the characteristics that might be found embodied in the description of nature found in Philonous's speech of praise.<sup>5</sup>

This stage in the argument concludes as Hylas hails Philonous's proof for the existence of God as "no less evident than it is surprising" (3DII 215). Others might feel that Hylas's satisfaction is a little surprising, since some more clarification might be in order. The outline of what Berkeley is up to is clear enough. Berkeley holds our ideas can only depend upon and hence can be explained by the existence of God as an infinite mind, and that it is God's will that forms the basis for the existence of our ideas. It is not just God's perceiving that accounts for our ideas but his active willing.<sup>6</sup> Berkeley has also made the claims that the ideas produced in us as opposed to the ideas we produce in ourselves are real things and are not representations, misleading or otherwise of real things, and that these real things are orderly. There are many questions that a reader of *Three Dialogues* might be forgiven for raising at this point. First, of course, what does it mean to say that the ideas produced by God and not by ourselves are real things.<sup>7</sup> How are we to understand Berkeley's reference to the ideas or their archetypes that he attributes to God and how are they – whatever they are – to be understood in relation to His will? How are we to understand the workings of God's will with respect to our ideas, and how is it that our passive, inert, and fleeting ideas are also real things with an order depending upon an infinite mind? Hylas has something else on his mind at this point, namely, can't we have God and matter too, but since, as we know, Philonous's answer is going to be no, these other questions still need answers.

## **Matter (and God) as the Cause of Our Ideas**

Hylas is prepared to accept God as the ultimate cause of our ideas, but he is unwilling to concede that God is the only cause of our ideas. Why, he asks, is it not plausible that God involved matter in the creation of ideas? On the one hand, it might be thought Philonous had already ruled out this possibility when he argued that ideas can only be produced by minds, but what Hylas's objection does allow Berkeley to do is to complete his argument against those philosophers who suppose ideas not caused by us are caused by a mind-independent material substance. This is not the first time Berkeley has made the case he is making here, that any appeal to matter will be revealed as either contradictory or meaningless. He went

through a similar set of arguments in the *Principles* in the twelfth objection (PHK 67–81).<sup>8</sup> The demonstration here is more exhaustive, but what is particularly notable is that it is unique in that it occurs in a context in which God has already been acknowledged as the supreme cause. Since Hylas and Philonous are explicitly discussing the possibility of a cause that is God-and-matter, Berkeley is able to address some of those questions I just raised about the nature of God's creative activity.

Berkeley has Philonous begin by laying down the terms of the debate: Since everyone agrees sensible things exist only in the mind, then matter can only enter the picture as a deliverance of reason. The question has to be, by what inference do you establish the existence of matter? Hylas's first response lays out what has been identified as the standard philosophical position: Matter is required to be the cause of the ideas of mine I don't cause, where matter is understood to be, as Philonous puts it, “an extended, solid, moveable, unthinking, inactive substance” (3DII 216). So defined, Philonous has a ready response: “how can that which is *inactive* be a *cause*; or that which is *unthinking* be a *cause of thought*?” (3DII 216).

Philonous clearly has Hylas where he wants him because if Hylas claims either that matter is active or that it is thinking, then he is describing mind and not matter. Hylas, however, seizes on the term “moveable” to propose that there is a certain kind of action peculiar to matter, namely, motion. Matter is a kind of sub-cause because it is a source of motion. Hylas's mistake, however, is that he has forgotten he has already agreed that motion is a sensible quality, but Philonous drives home the point by distinguishing what happens when I move my finger from my finger's being moved. The former is an action based on a volition, whereas the latter, which is sensible, describes a passive idea. Philonous has, through his discussion of the standard philosopher's account, not only revealed its contradictory nature, but has reached a conclusion. There is no action except through volition and, hence, there can be no efficient cause except a spirit. At this point, Philonous has produced confirmation of his earlier suggestion that it is only the will of a spirit that can produce ideas.

Hylas's next set of moves are designed to show that, while matter might not be itself a cause, still it might have a significant role to play in the production of ideas. He proposes that matter is required as some sort of instrument of an unspecifiable nature. To this Philonous responds that, whatever an instrument is thought to be like, it can only be required if the task is one that can't be performed without that instrument. I don't use an instrument to move my finger, but I do to uproot a tree. Under these circumstances, it is absurd to suppose God would need an instrument since an omnipotent being clearly doesn't need anything else in order to bring about his purposes. Philonous is asking Hylas to recognize that, for God, to will is to act and to act is to will. He neither needs to think before he acts or to cast about for what he needs to bring his act to fruition. For our projects, we finite humans need means, bronze or marble, if we want to make a statue, but God doesn't need clay to make a man. And while humans do need bronze or marble to make a statue, this is not because they need to call upon some power in the material to realize their plans to make a statue. All humans need is to be able to recognize that marble or bronze can be counted on to behave in certain ways according to the Laws of Nature. A sculptor using marble as a means to make a statue knows under what conditions this particular material will behave because these conditions are expressions of the

Laws of Nature. What we need in order to know our way about the world is not knowledge of powers existing in the world, but rather knowledge of the Laws of Nature.<sup>9</sup> An implication of this account is that what God creates is not a world with powers but a law-governed world. This implication in turn suggests that when Berkeley has earlier talked about the ideas or their archetypes that exist independent of my mind and which are the cause of my ideas, he may not be supposing that I have an idea of red because God is thinking, here is an idea of red which I will make happen in the mind of Margaret Atherton. Perhaps God's volitions are more aptly expressed by the Laws of Nature.

Two interesting points have emerged from the rejection of the thesis that we can understand the role of matter as that of an instrument. The first is that *God's* causal activity, his will that is "no sooner exerted than executed" (3DII 219), is linked with an expression of the Laws of Nature, and the second is that when we employ material means, what we need to know to carry out our purposes is not whatever powers those material means might possess, but which natural laws describe their behavior. This last point is developed in Hylas's next attempt to introduce matter into an account of God's causal activity. Hylas proposes that matter serves as an occasion for God's activity, it is "an inactive unthinking being, at the presence whereof God excites ideas in our minds" (3DII 220). The picture is that, while we can no longer appeal to matter as a causal explanation for why marble or bronze display their several regular characteristics, we can attribute this order and regularity to matter, serving now as reminders to God about what He should will at this time. That God should require these hints is obviously an unacceptable hypothesis, but in rejecting it, Philonous makes an interesting point. "I only ask," he says, "whether the order and regularity observable in the series of our ideas, or the course of Nature, be not sufficiently accounted for by the wisdom and power of God" (3DII 220). All we need to get about in the world is orderly ideas, and that our ideas are orderly is enough to allow us to conclude that their creator is a wise one, without casting about for further causes of their order.<sup>10</sup>

So far, Hylas has repeatedly tried to come up with an account of matter that would provide him with a good reason to infer the existence of matter as a partial cause of ideas, and each time his attempt to provide such an account is shown to be faulty. Hylas's final set of moves are efforts to empty the concept of matter of all the content that has proved troublesome, and to reject all positive accounts of matter in favor of entirely negative approaches. But of course, the initial problem will still remain. Hylas will have to show that, on his current understanding of the concept of matter, he still has good reasons for believing it exists. Needless to say, he is going to have trouble meeting this challenge. Hylas's first attempt is to propose that, by matter, he means nothing more than the "general, abstract idea of entity"<sup>11</sup> (3DII 222). On Berkeley's way of thinking about abstraction, this would amount to, as Philonous says, "a distinct idea of entity in general, prescinded from and exclusive of all thinking and corporeal being, all particular things whatever" (3DII 222). Hylas admits he is unable to frame such an idea and hence cannot cite it as a reason to suppose the existence of matter. Hylas's next attempt to meet Philonous's challenge is that we need matter to ground an account of reality. Presumably, Hylas's idea is that we need to appeal to matter to explain the difference between things that are real and things that are not real. Philonous's response is

that, in the case of the sensible things that are the topic of discussion, “I see it” or “I feel it” is a good reason to take a sensible thing like a glove to be real, while appealing to the existence of what he terms an unknown thing existing in an unknown manner cannot provide any reason at all for the existence of the glove. Philonous's claim here is comparative. Why would anyone say that the reality of a glove they can see and feel is grounded or guaranteed by the existence of an unknown matter?

Hylas's last gasp is to maintain he doesn't need a positive reason to take matter to exist, just so long as the existence of matter has not been shown to be impossible. This is, of course, a rather weak reason to take matter to exist, but Philonous rises to the challenge. He gets Hylas to agree that matter would be shown to be impossible if the concept of matter contained contradictions. But Hylas is now insisting on a purely negative concept of matter, since all his positive attempts to provide such a concept have proved incoherent. Philonous's case is that, under these circumstances, demonstrating the impossibility of matter is itself impossible. Under these circumstances it is not a reason to claim, as Hylas initially wanted, that matter is possible, because it has not been shown to be impossible, inasmuch as a concept including no ideas is a concept of nothing. Philonous concludes he has revealed that “in all your various senses, you have been shewed to mean nothing at all, or if any thing, an absurdity” (2DII 226). The Second Dialogue concludes as Hylas admits that matter has been shown to be impossible.

## What Has Been Achieved in the Second Dialogue

To show that matter is impossible is a fine achievement. In the Second Dialogue, however, this ontological conclusion is embedded in a wider framework. As Berkeley originally pointed out in PHK 56, philosophers were driven to assume the existence of matter, or the existence of absolutely existing things, because they recognized the need for a causal explanation for the idea we have we did not cause. Identifying matter as such a cause is clearly a bad move inasmuch as such explanations can be shown to be either incoherent or meaningless nonsense. But the Second Dialogue embeds this insight within a context that makes two further points. The first is that relying on the twofold existence scheme of ideas and things or material causes reduces our understanding of the natural world to a “false, imaginary glare.” The upshot of a faulty ontology is an unnecessary skepticism. But Berkeley's rejection of matter in the Second Dialogue has more than skepticism as its target. Still worse, from Berkeley's point of view, as he again initially remarked in PHK 57, it distracts philosophers from the actual cause. This mistake has, as Berkeley begins to develop in the Second Dialogue, the unfortunate consequence of leading humans away from God, but also away from an understanding of natural reality that is based on the orderly interconnections of sensible ideas. In developing his proof for the existence of God, Berkeley has also refined his account of the natural world we know. It is useful to note that in laying out his account of causation in the Second Dialogue, Berkeley has carried his argument here in *Three Dialogues* roughly to the place that he reached in the first summary of his argument in the *Principles* (28–33). That this is an account that leads away from skepticism and

towards a correct understanding of the nature of real things is Berkeley's task to develop in the Third Dialogue.

## notes

- [1](#) See in particular the selection from the *Treatise on Man* in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, Vol. 1, edited by J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 99–108., and especially figures 1 and 2. Similar accounts can be found in the *Optics*, selections from which can also be found in this volume.
- [2](#) A claim that Berkeley establishes as part of his initial argument in the *Principles* at PHK 25.
- [3](#) In PHK 57, Berkeley had proposed that the philosophers' insistence on an absolutely existing cause for ideas led them to overlook the obvious cause, namely, God.
- [4](#) That ideas can only be caused by minds is a position that Berkeley also establishes in PHK 26.
- [5](#) This is again roughly the way the argument goes at the end of the first section of the *Principles*. After drawing attention to the fact that I can cause some of my ideas (PHK 28), Berkeley argues from the liveliness and the “strength, order, and coherence” of the ideas I don't cause that they are caused by God in PHK 29–32.
- [6](#) This point has been made by M. Frankel in “Berkeley and God in the quad,” *Philosophy Compass* 7 (6) (2012): 388–396, and has also been argued for by J.R. Roberts in “A mystery at the heart of Berkeley's metaphysics,” in *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by D. Garber and S. Nadler, Vol. V, 214–246. (Oxford University Press, 2010).
- [7](#) This is an issue that Berkeley tackles right away in the *Principles*, in PHK 33, just as soon as he has offered a reason to believe God exists. Here in *Three Dialogues* he leaves it hanging.
- [8](#) These arguments rejecting the concept of matter are discussed in Chapter 5.
- [9](#) This is of course the kind of account of our knowledge of the natural world that Berkeley initially describes in the *Principles*: “... and in general, that to obtain such and such ends, such and such means are conducive, all this we know, not by discovering any necessary connexions between our ideas, but only by the observation of the settled laws of Nature, ...” (PHK 31).
- [10](#) Berkeley makes this same point in PHK 32 and in PHK 57.
- [11](#) This may be what Berkeley took to be Locke's position. In his Second Letter to Johnson, he writes: “Abstract general ideas was a notion that Mr. Locke held in common with the

Schoolmen, and I think all other philosophers; it runs through his whole book of Human Understanding. He holds an abstract idea of existence; exclusive of perceiving and being perceived.” Berkeley to Johnson, 24 March 1730, in *Correspondence*, 322.

## chapter 10

### ***three dialogues between hylas and philonous: the third dialogue***

In the first few pages of the Third Dialogue, several interesting things happen that provide a framework for this final dialogue. The first is that Hylas embraces skepticism with noticeable fervor. According to Hylas now:

We keep a stir about knowledge, and spend our lives in the pursuit of it, when, alas! We know nothing all the while: nor do I think it possible for us ever to know anything in this life. Our faculties are too narrow and too few. Nature certainly never intended us for speculation.

(3DIII 227)

Hylas is here expressing precisely the position Berkeley identifies in the Introduction to the *Principles* as the troublemaker it would be his goal to dispel. There he wrote:

It is said the faculties we have are few, and those designed by Nature for the support and comfort of life, and not to penetrate into the inward essence and constitution of things.

(PHK Introd. 2)

What is particularly distressing to Berkeley about this skepticism he finds abroad in the land is that the skeptics are, as it were, blaming their Maker rather than themselves for their inability to know. His goal is to convince his readers that a capacity to have knowledge of nature is within their grasp, thanks to our Maker, and that any shortcomings we encounter are our own fault. Hylas, having abandoned the complete trust in the senses with which he began the First Dialogue, now associates himself with this loss of faith in our cognitive abilities that it is Berkeley's project to dispel.

In the Introduction to the *Principles*, Berkeley lays the blame for this retreat into skepticism squarely on philosophers. It is they, he maintains, that “have first raised a dust, and then complain that we cannot see” (PHK Introd. 3). And, during the course of the first two dialogues, Hylas has become just such a philosopher. He was first weaned away from his initial conviction that what we perceive just are the qualities existing in the world, and was led to recognize that what we immediately perceive are ideas existing in the mind. He was next brought to realize that he was unable to conceive a meaningful account of an absolute, independently existing matter as a cause of ideas. At the beginning of the Third Dialogue, Hylas is ripe for the kind of skepticism to which philosophers fall prey. He exclaims:



How often must I tell you, that I know not the real nature of any one thing in the universe? I may indeed upon occasion make use of pen, ink, and paper. But what any one of them is in its own true nature, I declare positively I know not. And the same is true with regard to every other corporeal thing. And, what is more, we are not only ignorant of the true and real nature of things, but even of their existence. It cannot be denied that we perceive such certain appearances or ideas; but it cannot be concluded from thence that bodies really exist.

(3DIII 228)

Hylas is echoing here precisely the skeptical issues Berkeley raised in the final part of the *Principles*, that “it is not only impossible for us to know with evidence the nature of any real unthinking being, but even that it exists” (PHK 88). Here in the Third Dialogue, Philonous and Hylas agree on a diagnosis, not surprisingly, the same diagnosis Berkeley offered in the *Principles*. Hylas has fallen into skepticism because he had come to believe that the ideas we immediately perceive depend upon an unperceivable and inconceivable (and unperceiving) matter. Hylas has become a skeptic due to the pull of a particular, and in Berkeley's eyes particularly troublesome, philosophical position.

The third interesting thing to notice here at the beginning of the Third Dialogue happens next. Hylas turns the table on Philonous. He says while he now understands the foolishness of the belief in material substance, his only consolation is that Philonous will be unable to do any better. He issues a challenge: whatever position Philonous puts forward, Hylas undertakes to demolish. Hylas is sure that he can show through his questioning that whatever difficulties Philonous raised against material substance also hold against whatever hypothesis Philonous adopts. He undertakes to lead Philonous too into skepticism. What this means is that, whereas initially it was Hylas who laid out positive views and Philonous who questioned them, here in the Third Dialogue the reverse is going to be true. The positive assertions will belong to Philonous and Hylas will be challenging them. So, presumably, Berkeley's own complete theory will emerge from the positive claims Philonous lays down. We need to ask, then, while reading through this Dialogue, what is Berkeley's complete theory? What are the positive claims he has Philonous make?

## What Philonous Believes

Berkeley gives every appearance of answering that question in Philonous's very next speech, laying out for Hylas what it is that he believes. The speech has however unfortunately proved controversial and difficult to interpret, so it will repay close attention. It is a long speech, but first, in brief, Philonous says that, because he trusts his senses, then “it is my opinion, that the real things are those very things I see and feel, and perceive by my senses” (3DIII 229). Therefore, by his senses he knows the nature of things, that, for example, snow is white and fire is hot. He is equally confident that he knows the existence of things, and here I'll quote at greater length.

That a thing should be really perceived by my senses, and at the same time not really exist, is to me a plain contradiction; since I cannot prescind or abstract, even in thought the existence of a sensible thing from its being perceived. Wood, stones, fire, water, flesh, iron, and the like things, which I name and discourse of, are things that I know. And I should not have known them, but that I perceived them by my senses; and things perceived by the senses are immediately perceived; and things immediately perceived are ideas; and ideas cannot exist without the mind; their existence therefore consists in being perceived; when therefore they are actually perceived, there can be no doubt of their existence.

(3DIII 230)

This looks on the face of it quite straightforward. Berkeley is laying claim to the kind of knowledge possessed by people of common sense who know the nature and existence of things like wood and stones because they immediately perceive them, and anything actually immediately perceived indubitably exists. Berkeley, under this reading, would certainly be making short work of skepticism, although he would need to rely heavily on the notion of “actual immediate perception.” It seems that, in order to dismiss skeptical doubts in this way, Berkeley has to be taken to holding that he thinks that I know the nature and existence of a stone or some wood because I actually immediately perceive that thing, the stone or the wood. Actual immediate perception would be of some particular common sense object. But, Berkeley also frequently points out that what we immediately perceive are ideas that are fleeting and variable. Doesn't he owe us an account of how the actual immediate perception of fleeting and variable ideas results in the perception of a particular object?<sup>1</sup> There is another worry to consider about this passage as well. Berkeley here seems to be satisfied that he has dispelled skepticism by asserting we know the nature and existence of common sense objects like stones and wood. But at the beginning of the Second Dialogue this was the least of what Berkeley professed himself not to be skeptical about. There he was proclaiming the beauty and the glory of “the whole system immense,” of the “crowd of worlds” (3DII 211). So, here at the start of the Third Dialogue, does Philonous's speech about wood and stones represent the sum total of what Berkeley wants to claim that he knows? Or, is it, perhaps, an opening gambit?

There is a very interesting similarity between the two central claims Berkeley endorses in the “wood, stones” passage under discussion and two claims that, at the very end of the Third Dialogue, Berkeley identifies as constituting “the substance of what I advance” (3DIII 262). In this first passage, Berkeley has Philonous assert:

The real things are those very things I see and feel, and perceive by my senses.

and

things perceived by the senses are immediately perceived and things immediately perceived are ideas.

Again, at the end of the dialogue, we find that the two claims he endorses are “shared

between the vulgar and the philosophers” (3DIII 262). The vulgar hold:

*Those things immediately perceived are the real things.*

while the philosophers believe that:

*the things immediately perceived are ideas which exist only in the mind.*<sup>2</sup>

These two claims in the final passage bear of course a close similarity to the two views with which Berkeley dispelled skepticism in the “wood, stones” passage. So it looks as though the “wood, stones” passage does encapsulate Berkeley's final view.

Before we accept this interpretive strategy, however, there is something we need to take into account about Berkeley's adoption of the views of the vulgar and the philosophers at the end of the Dialogue. Neither the vulgar nor the philosophers are in complete agreement with each other and Berkeley himself is not thoroughly in agreement with either one. With the vulgar, he thinks his senses show him the nature of real things, but he does not agree with the vulgar that the real things perceived by my senses have an absolute, mind-independent existence. This is because he agrees with the philosophers that what is immediately perceived are ideas, but he disagrees with the philosophers that ideas are effects of absolute, mind-independent real things. This has been established in the first two Dialogues. The vulgar and the philosophers are each half right but in each case they are mistaken in identifying real things with different kinds of absolute mind-independent existence. So maybe we ought to read the “wood, stones” passage as an opening gambit. Berkeley needs to *show* that he can agree with both the vulgar and the philosophers because he has an alternative account of real things that does not assume their mind-independent existence.

## An Annihilation Objection

Berkeley has Hylas pick up on precisely the issue that has been troubling about the dismissal of skepticism in the “wood, stones” passage – that I know such things exist when they are *actually* perceived. Hylas raises what was the Fourth Objection of the *Principles* (PHK 45–48): if things exist only when actually perceived, then, Hylas asks, “supposing you were annihilated, cannot you conceive it possible, that things perceivable by sense still exist?” (3DIII 230). Philonous's answer here echoes what Berkeley wrote in the *Principles*, that by “out of the mind” he means “out of all minds.” He is denying of sensible things the kind of existence that is presupposed of material substance, absolute, mind-independent existence. This is the sort of existence of which we can have no conception, although of course we can conceive of a tree that no one is currently perceiving, or even the motion of the earth, because we conceive all these things in sensible terms, in terms of ideas which only exist in the context of perceiving.

This point is about where Berkeley takes the annihilation objection in the *Principles*, that “out of the mind” means “out of all minds,” mind-independent existence, but in the Third Dialogue, he is able to go further because he has already in the Second Dialogue argued that God exists as the cause of our ideas. So he uses this claim to complete the annihilation

objection in the Third Dialogue, writing:

It necessarily follows, there is an *omnipresent eternal Mind*, which knows and comprehends all things, and exhibits them to our view in such a manner, and according to such rules as he himself hath ordained, and are by us termed the *Laws of Nature*.

(3DIII 231)

This is an expression of what Jonathan Bennett has called the Continuity Argument<sup>3</sup> and which has been immortalized in Ronald Knox's famous limerick.<sup>4</sup> Berkeley in this formulation is taken to be claiming that trees and other sensible objects continue to exist when there is no one to perceive them because God is perceiving them. This interpretation has been contested,<sup>5</sup> and indeed it is important to notice that in this passage Berkeley does not speak of God's perceiving, as if He were a Giant Eyeball in the Sky, but rather of his knowing and comprehending. So while it is Berkeley's mission here to explain in what sense the existence of sensible things “consists in being perceived” (3DIII 230), he is not necessarily holding that the ideas we perceive, like a tree or a stone, or like hot or white, continue to exist when finite beings are not having them on the grounds that these same ideas exist as perceived in God's mind. What Berkeley needs to do is to show how it is that God's knowing and comprehending all things constitute the conditions under which we can identify the ideas we perceive as real things. These conditions are in fact spelled out at the end of the passage quoted above. The ideas that are real things are “exhibited to our view” according to the Laws of Nature. God's knowing and understanding all things results in us in ideas that arrive in regular lawful patterns so that we can identify trees, stones, hot fire, and white snow. This further consideration paints a more complicated picture than the simple picture drawn from the “wood, stones” passage. Berkeley has added that the ideas we immediately perceive that are the real things come in lawful regularities. This addition makes it easier to suppose that the immediately perceived ideas mentioned in the “wood, stones” passage are not directly ideas of wood and stones, but immediately perceived sensible qualities that occur in regular patterns such that we group them together into larger units called wood and stones, fire and snow. Under this reading, there will be two elements to Berkeley's rejection of skepticism, the immediately perceived ideas and the Laws of Nature that together allow us to identify real sensible things.

## Knowledge of Immaterial Substance

Philonous's reply to the annihilation objection does depend, however, on a claim he has made previously, that sensible things that are independent of my mind must depend on God's mind, for the reason that ideas can only depend upon minds (3DII 215). Sensible things cannot depend upon material substance, but must depend upon immaterial substance instead. Hylas pounces on this substitution. Philonous's argument rests on the allegation that ideas are inert and only spirits like God are agents. This implies that Philonous can have no idea of God. Hylas thinks Philonous has given him exactly what he has been looking for, a reason to say that the same argument that can be brought to bear against material substance will also hold

for immaterial substance. The challenge for Philonous is to show that we do have knowledge of minds or spirits even though we cannot have ideas of them.

Berkeley has already addressed this challenge before in the *Principles* (PHK 135–146) and Philonous's first response to Hylas reiterates points made there. I have an intuitive knowledge of my self as a thinking substance, although what I know is not an idea. I may nevertheless be said to have a notion of my mind and I can enlarge upon this notion to have a notion of God. Berkeley may have felt, and with some reason, that readers found this answer unsatisfactory, relying as it does on a rather murky claim about the intuitive but notional knowledge I am said to have of my own self. In any case, Berkeley seems to have tried to remedy this situation in a long passage he added to a revision of *Three Dialogues* in 1734, where he has Hylas raise the Parity Argument yet again.<sup>6</sup> Philonous responds in two long speeches.

In the first added speech, Philonous is answering Hylas's objection that: “You admit nevertheless that there is spiritual substance, although you have no idea of it; while you deny there can be such a thing as material substance, because you have no notion or idea of it” (3DIII, 232). Philonous's answer is that Hylas has misunderstood the reason why he rejects the existence of material substance. He does not reject material substance just because we have no idea of it. Simply lacking an idea is no reason at all to deny something's existence, although, of course, asserting anything's existence does require evidence in the form of an idea of it. Material substance, however, cannot exist, because any idea or notion of it is inconsistent. It is impossible that we should ever have an idea of it. The notion of immaterial substance, on the other hand, is not inconsistent, there is nothing inconsistent in the claim that perceiving spirits should support or give rise to ideas. And, finally, the case of spirit is nothing like an unknown entity, because I do in fact know my own spirit through reflection. The first case Philonous is making is that Hylas is just wrong to claim that the same argument that prevailed against material substance will hold for immaterial substance – he has misunderstood the nature of the argument.

Hylas's next question takes up an interesting issue, not least because it seems to anticipate Hume. Hylas asks Philonous why he is not “only a system of floating ideas” (3DIII 233). The reason Berkeley has Hylas give for this question is equally interesting. He is asking Philonous to justify his claim that when he knows himself he knows a spiritual *substance*. Why isn't it the case that the attacks on the notion of substance in the material case don't also apply to immaterial substance. Hylas's objection here is one that Berkeley has not tried to meet before, and it is one that is well worth trying to meet. The claim that minds are substances supporting ideas is a central one for Berkeley and in making it he is making use of a somewhat archaic metaphysical concept, substance, that might be thought to be on the verge of going out of fashion. Locke thought it had no meaning in either the case of minds or bodies, for example. So it seems that Berkeley does owe us an explanation for why he thinks what we know when we know a mind is a substance.

While Berkeley has had Philonous start the final speech of the Parity Argument on a note of exasperation, in fact, the speech itself, if not containing genuine novelties, nevertheless puts

things in new ways and is worth looking at closely. The first sentence, however, does indeed reiterate points Berkeley has made before, and contains three familiar claims: (i) that Berkeley knows his own self, a central theme throughout his work, although it is important here that the way that he says I know my own self is explicitly by being conscious of myself; (ii) that this “I” or “self” I am conscious of is distinct from my ideas; and (iii) that what I am and hence am conscious of is “a thinking active principle that perceives, knows, wills, and operates about ideas” (3DIII 233). These last two points were made as early as the second paragraph of the *Principles*.

The next sentence addresses more directly Hylas's worry that when I know my self I know only a system of floating ideas.

I know that I, one and the same self, perceive both colours and sounds: that a colour cannot perceive a sound nor a sound a colour: that I am therefore one individual principle, distinct from colour and sound; and for the same reason, from all other sensible things and inert ideas.

(3DIII 233–234)

I know I am not just a system of floating, discrete ideas, because my perception is of simultaneous or connected ideas, as Berkeley says, of a sound and a color. The mere presence of different ideas of a sound and a color is not enough to explain their relations of simultaneity or connectedness, because ideas are inert and cannot do anything, let alone perceive one another. The connectness comes in because I am aware of my self as a single source of ideas perceived, that therefore perceives sounds, colors, and all the other ideas I perceive. It is the presence of both these elements, that I am conscious of, not just of the presence of ideas, but the perceiving of related ideas by one single thing, my self, that allows me to draw the conclusion that I am (i) “one individual principle” and (ii) “distinct from colour and sound.”

What we know so far is that the self is one thing, that which perceives, and ideas are other, distinct things, and we know both things because we are conscious of both self and ideas in perceiving. What we don't know yet is the relationship between these two distinct things, and in particular, we don't yet have a full answer to Hylas's question about why, when we know a self, we are said to know a substance. The answer to these questions comes in the second half of this passage.

But I am not in like manner conscious either of the existence or essence of matter. On the contrary, I know that nothing inconsistent can exist, and that the existence of matter implies an inconsistency. Farther, I know what I mean, when I affirm that there is a spiritual substance or support of ideas, that is, that a spirit knows and perceives ideas.

(3DIII 234)

We can pull from this passage an answer to Hylas's question about substance and support. When I know, as Berkeley has described, that a spirit perceives ideas, then I know that a spiritual substance supports ideas. The relationship that exists between the two distinct entities, spirits and ideas, is precisely the relationship that exists between a substance and that



which the substance supports.

Unfortunately, at least initially, this does not look like much help, particularly since the word, “support,” has been much queried. But there is an implication in a slightly earlier sentence that may be of some use. When Berkeley says, “I am not in like manner conscious either of the existence or essence of matter,” the implication is that he *is* conscious both of the existence and also of the essence of spirit. When Berkeley says earlier in this passage that he knows he is “a thinking active principle that perceives, knows, wills, and operates about ideas,” he is not merely saying he knows some things that as a spirit he does, but that this passage describes his knowledge of his essence, of what, as a thinking principle, he is. He might be said to be siding against Locke, who said that we know what spiritual substance does, but not what it is, and to be siding with Descartes, who thought he knew that “thought alone” belongs to “our nature.”<sup>7</sup> If Berkeley knows his essence, then he, like Descartes, is prepared to answer the question, what am I, by giving an account of his nature, what it is that makes him the kind of thing that he is.<sup>8</sup> For Berkeley to know his essence, he must be supposing that the self-knowledge he has when he is immediately conscious of his self is not just the self that he is, but the essential kind of self he is. What he knows then, when he says he knows that he is “a thinking, active principle,” is that thinking is his essence or nature, that thinking is the way he exists, and that, except by thinking, he does not exist. Thinking is the essence or nature of beings like himself that support ideas. If thinking is the way he exists, then the various perceivings, knowings, willings, and operatings about ideas he finds within himself depend upon his nature as thinking in order to exist. They are all determinate ways of thinking, and it is in being thought that an idea comes to exist. This account of mind and its doings fits well into a standard substance ontology. Self or mind is an independent entity requiring only its own essence in order to exist, and ideas are dependent entities, requiring the existence of minds in order to exist. Minds and ideas are distinct because they exist in different ways, independently in the case of minds, dependently in the case of ideas. This then is what Berkeley is talking about when he says, “There is a spiritual substance or support of ideas, that a spirit knows and perceives ideas.” The relationship between minds and ideas that he has uncovered can be identified as “support” because ideas depend upon perceiving minds to exist, the only way for an idea to exist is for a mind to perceive it, whereas minds depend upon nothing but their own nature. That is why spirits are substances.

## The Gardener and His Cherry Tree

Hylas professes himself satisfied on the lack of parity between spirit and matter, and moves on to make a series of objections, which have the general form: Isn't what you are saying, Philonous, irredeemably odd? Before embarking on a detailed examination of these objections, it is worth pausing a moment to see where we are in the argument. Philonous's discussion of the question Hylas raised about substance led him to the assertion that ideas and archetypes of ideas depend only on minds in order to exist. This is a version of the assertion found in the “wood, stones” passage that things perceived by the senses exist when immediately perceived. Hylas has attempted to undermine this assertion, first through the



annihilation objection, and then by questioning Philonous's alleged knowledge of God, that he required for his answer to the annihilation objection. Hylas now picks back up on the claim about the mind-dependence of ideas and their archetypes, asking about Philonous's identification of sensible things with their being perceived. Hylas asks, Doesn't this identification run counter to the views of "all mankind" who suppose that the existence of a sensible thing is one thing and its being perceived is another? Hylas's line of questioning here allows Berkeley to meet one of the obstacles that stand in the way of acceptance of his theory, that our common sense way of looking at things assumes that we perceive things that are independent of our ideas. It is worth underlining that Hylas's question is about the ontological presuppositions of "all mankind" and not about whether ordinary common sense people know either the nature of sensible things or that they exist.

Philonous's first speech in response praises the common sense of the gardener who uses his senses to decide whether or not some sensible thing really exists in his garden. If he perceives a cherry tree, he says it exists, and if he doesn't perceive an cherry tree, then he says it doesn't really exist in his garden. (Presumably, however, the gardener is prepared to admit orange trees into his ontology.) This fact about the gardener is not actually an answer to Hylas's question, because it does not suppose that the gardener takes it that the way that an unthinking thing like a cherry tree exists is by being perceived. In fact, presumably Hylas is quite right that he doesn't believe this. The gardener just thinks that sensory evidence is good evidence for the existence or non-existence of what is actually in his garden.

Hylas follows up by pointing out this gap in Philonous's argument. Whether or not an cherry tree is perceivable in the garden is relevant evidence for its existence. But this is just to say that what is at stake to which this evidence is relevant is the ongoing existence of the cherry tree in whatever state in might be in that renders it perceivable when a perceiver is in the offing. There is no reason based on the gardener's behavior to identify the real existence of an cherry tree with its being actually perceived. Philonous's answer, for anyone who has been buying into the story of the gardener and his knowledge of the cherry tree seems perfunctory. He says:

And what is perceivable but an idea? And can ideas exist without actually being perceived? These are points long since agreed between us.

(3DIII 234)

Inasmuch as the issue now between Hylas and Philonous is the ongoing unperceived existence of the cherry tree, Philonous is right to say that Hylas has gone back on his earlier concessions. Hylas has previously agreed that we are not in a position to assert the ongoing unperceived existence of anything. Such things are not perceivable; what is actually perceivable, he has recognized, are ideas. To say the cherry tree is perceivable is to say that there are characteristic sensible ideas we do have in appropriate circumstances.

Hylas returns to what is the nub of the issue, and it is the same one that fueled the annihilation objection. Wouldn't the gardener want to say that the tree he perceived existed independent of his own mind? Philonous's answer is of course the same one he gave to the

annihilation objection: the gardener is quite correct to say that the tree exists independent of his own mind, and would probably be happy to own that it existed in God's mind, even if he did not appreciate that the existence of any sensible thing is a reason to know God exists. In the end, Berkeley is not attributing to common sense an understanding of the ontological issues that underlie the dependent existence of sensible things. Nor is he endorsing any common sense belief of the gardener, such as his belief that the cherry tree, with all its sensible qualities, goes right on existing unperceived. Nevertheless, he makes it plain that he thinks the real villain of the matter is the materialist philosopher who believes in absolute mind-independent existence. Berkeley thinks the gardener is in better shape when it comes to identifying the existence of cherry trees than the materialist. He still thinks the gardener is confused about the ontology of cherry and orange trees but he thinks that he is not, like the philosopher, a trouble maker.

## **Real Things and Imaginary Things**

What Berkeley is aiming for, then, in the gardener example, is that the ordinary beliefs of the gardener are not a reason to suppose that the existence of the cherry tree is one thing and its being perceived another. Berkeley is in a position to supplement the ordinary belief that things immediately perceived are real things with the belief he shares with the philosopher, that things immediately perceived are ideas. Hylas next articulates the challenge Berkeley needs to meet: if everything that exists exists in the mind, how can we tell the difference between real things and imaginary ones? Berkeley's answer here is quite dismissive. Since we are all agreeing that things immediately perceived are ideas, and since there is no criterion that could identify an extramental reality at our disposal, we can recognize that we all tell the difference between real and imaginary things in the same way. All anybody has to go on are criteria that strictly apply to ideas. We all can talk about the vividness of some ideas and the faintness of others, the involuntary nature of ideas we identify as real and the way ideas that are real things exhibit connections with each other. Telling the difference between the real and the imaginary cannot make use of as evidence an appeal to unperceivable existence.

## **Things and Ideas**

Berkeley in this answer has spoken with the philosophers, those who think things immediately perceived are ideas. Next, he has Hylas speak up for common sense. Doesn't it seem odd, he asks, to say that nothing more exists than spirits and ideas, and that things do not exist? Berkeley's answer is interesting in several ways. He admits he is using the word, "idea," where most people would talk about things. He says he is using this terminology to underline what he takes to be central to his position: "a necessary relation to the mind" (3DIII 235). Using the word "idea" allows Berkeley to associate himself with a common usage among philosophers, who call "the immediate objects of the understanding," ideas, but he also undercuts the assumption typically associated with the word "thing," that it describes something having mind-independent existence. Berkeley is highlighting by his use of the phrase "necessary relation" that the important distinction he wants to make when he

distinguishes minds and ideas is the distinction between that which has independent existence and that which has dependent existence. When he says that the only things that exist are spirits and ideas, this means, he tells us, that there are precisely two kinds of entities, those that exist when they perceive and those that exist when they are perceived. We call those that are perceived “ideas” and not “things” to indicate this necessary relationship. In this answer, Berkeley is reminding us of the way in which his position differs from the philosophers, and concludes (triumphantly) that it is the philosophers who distinguish between ideas and things who end up speaking oddly, maintaining that snow is not white and the like.

## Spirits as Causes

Berkeley, on this most recent exchange, has moved on to a more direct confrontation with philosophers. He has both endorsed the claim that distinguished them from persons of common sense, that what is immediately perceived are ideas not things, and then distinguished himself from philosophers, who take sensible qualities to depend upon material substance. The next set of objections, coming from Hylas, will be coming from the point of view of philosophers and will in one way or another challenge Berkeley's rejection of mind-independent material substance. The first objection brings up the oddity that is a clear result of rejecting material substance, that all causes are spiritual causes rather than material. Berkeley's first answer here is quite quick. It's even more odd, he points out, to claim that things that are inert are causes, and it is in fact quite shocking to put something like Nature or Fate as the ultimate cause of all instead of that which is generally acknowledged as the supreme and spiritual cause, namely God.

## Divine Causation and Human Agency

Hylas's response to Philonous's claim, that he is merely adopting the standard theistic position that God is the ultimate cause, is to offer his own standard objection to any such theistic claim, a version of the problem of evil. If God is the immediate cause of every act, aren't you making God the ultimate cause of all evil actions? Philonous's answer to this familiar problem has led many of his readers to question whether any account of human agency is compatible with Berkeley's ontology. Berkeley's answer has two parts. He says that, first, it is the intention not the motion that is the source of sin, and second, that humans do have (limited) powers to produce motion. These two claims, and even their consistency,<sup>9</sup> have been found problematic by numerous scholars. Many share the worry, put very well by George Pitcher, who writes:

Arms and legs are material objects; as such, they are in Berkeley's system, nothing but families of (a) ideas of sense (sense-impressions, sense-data) and (b) ideas in God's mind. So to cause one's arm, say, to move in a certain way is to cause some appropriate ideas in the family of ideas. But a person cannot cause any ideas of sense. God is the true cause of all ideas of sense.<sup>10</sup>

As Pitcher sees it, lacking a material arm for me to move, the most that I can do is to intend that my arm move, but then God has to create the sequence of ideas that constitute my arm moving. The conclusion is that Berkeley has no option but to embrace occasionalism. My intentions can at best serve as occasions for God to send me the appropriate ideas. Berkeley's protestations notwithstanding, humans can't in any real sense move their arms.

There are several things to notice about the kind of worries voiced by Pitcher and shared by many. The first is that, while Berkeley does indeed think that the arm I raise is a sensible thing immediately perceived, and so is an idea or ideas which cannot exist without the mind, he has been very explicit in the pages preceding this passage here about human agency that the sensible things by me perceived exist independent of *my* mind. It is not my task to, as it were, create my arm when I raise it. In both the gardener and the annihilation arguments, Berkeley has tried to establish that a sensible thing like my arm is a real thing existing independent of my mind because it is “known and comprehended”<sup>11</sup> by God, who “exhibits them to our view in such a manner, and according to such rules as he himself hath ordained and by us termed the Laws of Nature” (3DIII 231), as I have quoted before. Berkeley is trying to establish an account of nature that is not quite as odd a view as Pitcher assumes. Berkeley's world is not a crowd of ideas popping in and out of individual minds under the stage-managership of God. What is important is not God's separate, individual actions, but that we live in a world made comprehensible through the presence of the Laws of Nature.<sup>12</sup> Having willed the Laws of Nature, God has no need, in each and every individual case, to make sure that the laws are applying. It is these Laws of Nature, moreover, that provide not just that the arm I raise exists independent of my mind but can also exist in the mind of other finite beings, who can, for example, respond to my raised arm as a signal to proceed or as a threat. The things in the world are not so dependent on *my* mind that I have to make my arm in order to make it move. The world, just as the materialists believe, is created by God. All that Berkeley is trying to remove from our understanding of creation is Pitcher's material, mind-independent arm, and one reason for this is because Berkeley is far less sanguine than Pitcher that it is easy to see how a volition can bring about a change in an absolutely existing piece of matter.

But of course Pitcher is entirely right that we are powerfully gripped by the question, So how *do* we make our arm move? It is clear, on the one hand, that Berkeley does think this is something we can do. It can't be ignored that Berkeley describes humans as moving sufficiently often to show that he does indeed think that moving our limbs is something we just know about ourselves.<sup>13</sup> So this is a problem for those who have thought Berkeley's way of absolving God from responsibility for our sinful acts is to claim that the efficient cause of the motion is irrelevant from the point of view of responsibility, so long as the intention is ours. It is also true however, that Philonous seems to say as much in his response to Hylas. He says:

I farther observe, that sin or moral turpitude doth not consist in the outward physical action or motion, but in the internal deviation of the will from the laws of reason and religion. This is plain, in that the killing of an enemy in a battle, or putting a criminal legally to death, is not thought sinful, though the outward act be the very same with that in the case of murder. Since therefore sin doth not consist in the physical action, the making God an immediate cause of all such actions, is not making him the author of sin.

(3DIII 236–237)

It is certainly easy to read this passage as saying that it is our intention alone that brings with it responsibility, and that God is therefore free to make the motions carrying out the intention without guilt. But it is also true, as Jonathan Bennett has observed, in *Learning from Six Philosophers*, cited earlier, that Berkeley goes right on in the next sentence to say that humans in fact are agents with the power to produce motions. “Lastly,” Berkeley writes, “I have nowhere said that God is the only agent who produces all the motions in bodies. It is true that I have denied there are other agents beside spirits: but this is very consistent with allowing to thinking, rational beings, in the production of motions, the use of limited powers, ultimately indeed derived from God, but immediately under the direction of our own wills, which is sufficient to entitle them to all the guilt of their actions” (3DIII 237). Berkeley here holds, not only that we are responsible for our volitions, but have a limited power with respect to the efficacy of our volitions.

Berkeley leaves his discussion of human agency right there, and, at this point, it is hard not to agree with Bennett that Berkeley is giving with one hand what he takes back with the other. For, what sort of limited power could Berkeley be imputing to human agents that could have as a result that, when I form a volition to move my leg, my leg indeed twitches? There is, however, one clue in the speech claiming that humans are agents that suggests that the issue of human agency is not being conceptualized as Berkeley might have intended. In this passage, Berkeley specifically describes those that are agents as “thinking, rational beings.” So long as we take the problem of agency to require an explanation of how a volition formed in my mind can bring about a twitch in my leg, we seem balked of an answer, and indeed, this is not surprising, since not even a materialist can provide a decent answer to this question either. One problem the materialists have however is that they are conceiving what the volition is to bring about in material, mechanical terms. For Berkeley, of course, mechanical explanations are always unacceptable because body-machines are ideas and ideas are inert. So a volition can't be like a switch to make the body go. The volition, instead, must come from or depend upon the nature of the thinking, rational agent. Let us also remember that Berkeley indubitably thinks humans are agents and that this is a view running through all his work and not just in this discussion of agency. That we are agents forms an important part of his project. We can see this, for example, in PHK 31, where Berkeley explains that since our ideas occur in us according to the Laws of Nature, “this gives us a sort of foresight, which enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life. And without this we should be entirely at a loss: we could not know how to act anything that might procure us the least pleasure, or remove the least pain of sense.” The power that belongs to rational agents, as Berkeley describes it, is not a mechanical power, but the power to guide our actions

according to a rational plan. An action is not adequately or completely explained by identifying an efficient cause of the relevant motion, but by laying out the goal the action was intended to realize. An agent is engaging in a different action when bashing an enemy over the head as an act of war than is one who is bashing Uncle Elmer over the head to inherit his fortune. This is to say that the actions of agents are explained by final, not merely by efficient, causes, by intentions and not by twitches. Because the Laws of Nature enable us to understand our ideas of the world in which we live, we are able to frame and carry out long-term plans. This is the picture of agency that is central to Berkeley's theory. While it is true, then, that Berkeley thinks that we move our legs ourselves, or how else could we carry out our long-term plans, it is the plans and not the motions alone that constitute human agency. In sum, once we recognize the role of the Laws of Nature, which Berkeley has been now repeatedly stressing, we can find a richer and less problem-filled account of human agency.<sup>14</sup>

## Substance and Spiritual Substance

With this account of human agency, Philonous has completed his answer to Hylas's challenge to show how things in nature can be shown to have spiritual rather than material causes. Hylas's new challenge focuses directly on the central philosophical notion under dispute, that of matter or corporeal substance. He claims for matter the “universal sense of mankind” (3DIII 237) something that everyone would agree to accept. Philonous, in his reply, is going to sort out what philosophers accept from what common sense accepts, but he is also going to put a claim of his own front and center. Philonous first associates himself, as he did in the “wood, stones” passage, with the ordinary run of mankind, those who trust their senses, and by them know the nature and existence of things. He follows these commitments by also asserting the two philosophical positions, that objects immediately perceived are ideas, and that sensible qualities are objects immediately perceived. Philonous at this point has sufficiently clarified his views on the nature of minds or spirits that he is able to add a claim of his own, not held by either the vulgar or the philosophers. He says that, because “there is no substance wherein ideas can exist besides spirit” (3DIII 237), taken together with the two philosophical assertions he has just endorsed, he is able to draw the conclusion that:

It is therefore evident that there can be no *substratum* of those qualities but spirit, in whom they exist, not by way of mode or property, but as a thing perceived in that which perceives it.

(3DIII 237)

Berkeley is now neither identifying himself with the vulgar or the philosophers, but is putting forward a new theory of his own. He positions himself with the vulgar and hence in agreement with the “generality of mankind” only to the extent that he, like them, accepts the existence of sensible bodies with sensible qualities, which, he says, can appropriately be called “matter.” But he is replacing the philosophers' material substance with spiritual substance, leading to a different philosophical theory.

# Trusting the Senses

Since Philonous has in this response endorsed the trustworthiness of the senses, Hylas reminds him that there are many familiar cases where the senses have been recognized to be less than trustworthy. He instances three commonly cited cases, the straight oar that looks bent in water, the visual appearance of the moon as a small flat disk, and the square tower that looks round at a distance. The answer that Philonous gives is at least on the surface quite clear. We are never mistaken about what we immediately perceive, but only in what we make of it, the expectations we develop about what we immediately perceive, or, as he puts it here, “He is not mistaken with regard to the ideas he actually perceives, but in the inferences he makes from his present perceptions” (3DIII, 238).<sup>15</sup>

The first two cases Berkeley discusses, the oar and the tower, are hoary chestnuts, examples that are frequently cited as cases of perceptual illusion. Berkeley's point in these two cases is that there is nothing illusory at all about what we immediately perceive. The oar in water does present a crooked appearance and the tower does look round. Mistakes arise only if we think the crooked or the round appearance is a direct indication of a mind-independent crooked oar or round tower. Then you might suppose the oar will continue to look crooked out of water or will feel crooked to the touch or that the tower will continue to look round when you advance on it. But instead our senses behave perfectly appropriately. The oar does feel straight to the touch and the tower as we approach it does look square. The misapprehension a perceiver might be under misleads him “in the wrong judgment he makes concerning the ideas he apprehends to be connected with those immediately perceived, or concerning the ideas that, from what he perceives at present, he imagines would be perceived in other circumstances” (3DIII 238). He calls the crooked oar an illusion because he expects that an oar that looks crooked in water will continue to look crooked out of water. If we abandon the belief in a mind-independent crooked oar, we are able to develop perfectly correct expectations about the oar or the shape of the tower. In fact these are cases where Berkeley thinks suggestion is at work. We routinely take the sight of a small blurry tower in the distance to be the sign of a larger, more precisely contoured building, and we are not surprised when we advance upon it to discover that its size and shape changes.

The final example Philonous discusses is somewhat different. He says:

The case is the same with respect to the Copernican system. We do not here perceive any motion of the earth: but it were erroneous thence to conclude, that in case we were placed at as great a distance from that as we are now from the other planets, we should not then perceive its motion.

(3DIII 238)

In this example, of course, we are not dealing with suggestion, considered as that which habituates us to develop expectations, because Berkeley does not imagine that we are in a position to end up at a great distance from the earth. We can however use the faculty Berkeley has already mentioned, the imagination, to predict what we would see if we were so placed. Using this faculty, we no longer suppose an earth that looks stationary when we stand



on it will look stationary under all circumstances. We would not however want to call the stationary appearance of the earth an illusion, even though we have come to recognize that an earth that appears stationary under some circumstances will appear to be moving from different vantage points, just as we recognize that a small round tower will look different from other vantage points. The common lesson Berkeley is drawing is that we are never mistaken about the ideas we immediately perceive, but we need to get clear about what our task is with respect to these ideas. We use the ideas we are presently having to develop expectations or to draw conclusions about other ideas we are likely to have. If we take our ideas to directly reflect some one way the world is, we will make mistakes, but these mistakes are our fault and not the fault of our senses. Berkeley has now explained to us in exactly what sense we are entitled to trust our senses, and it is worth observing that his reasons are not exactly those of common sense or of ordinary people.

## Further on Substance and Spirits

Having reassured us about the kind of truthfulness we find in the senses, Berkeley returns to the central claim of the previous section, that “there is no *substratum* but spirit.” Hylas suggests to Philonous that there is no real difference in their views, they both think ideas in us are the result of powers without us, but they just use different words to describe this power. Hylas calls it “matter” and Philonous calls it “spirit” but this is just a dispute about words. Philonous's task is to show that his word choice, that is, spirit, is the only one that is applicable, that the power they both agree exists can be neither matter nor some other uncharacterized third thing. Having differentiated his position from that of the vulgar in the preceding paragraph, Berkeley is now showing further how his theory differs from that of the philosophers. Showing that the power they agree upon can't be matter is easy at this stage. As has frequently been agreed, the power can't be an extended thing, since extension is an idea and we are talking about the power to cause ideas, and so it must, as a power, be active. This rules out the possibility that it is something extended and inert. The power to give rise to ideas in us must, moreover, be a spirit. This is also pretty easy to show from what has been said.

From the effects I see produced, I conclude there are actions; and because actions, volitions; and because there are volitions, there must be a will. Again, the things I perceive must have an existence, they or their archetypes, out of my mind: but being ideas, neither they nor their archetypes can exist otherwise than in an understanding: there is therefore an understanding. But will and understanding constitute in the strictest sense a mind or spirit. The powerful cause therefore of my ideas, is in strict propriety of speech a *spirit*.

(3DIII 240)

Berkeley has laid out succinctly the evidence that leads him to conclude that the only substance supporting ideas is mind or spirit, which he has often identified with God. He is establishing a firm disagreement with the position of the philosophers. The succinctness of

the proof, however, leaves unanswered questions. What are these “actions” which require “volitions”? It is probably significant that Berkeley speaks of actions rather than, for example, motions, for this makes it easier to suppose that he is not talking about the mere popping into existence of immediately perceived ideas, but has in mind the more elaborate activities that Berkeley had earlier ascribed to agents. But we need to know more about what Berkeley has in mind by this piece of evidence. Further, in his reasons for ascribing understanding to the substantial support for ideas, it would be nice to know what Berkeley means when he talks, with respect to ideas, of “they and their archetypes” which must exist out of my mind. What is being referred to as an “archetype” here? Berkeley is making an argument which he seems to think will allow him to identify substance with spirit and will also allow him to identify a powerful spirit who is the source of our ideas. But in giving this proof, and in pushing his account of his own theory onward, he has left much unanswered.

## God and Pain

Berkeley in fact advances our understanding of these matters by means of Hylas's next objection, although the connection between these two passages has not always been recognized. Hylas asks, if, as Philonous alleges, the cause of my ideas is a spirit, who is, of course, God, then is it not the case that in order to cause my idea of pain, God must have an idea of pain? And isn't this an imperfection, and so not attributable to God? Philonous's answer to Hylas's question is, no, God doesn't have to feel pain to cause it in us. This answer has seemed to many unsatisfactory. How can God cause the idea in us without having the idea He is causing? And if He is said to lack the idea, isn't this a threat to His omniscience? Or, finally, if God wills I have an idea, without Himself having the idea He is willing, then is God a blind agent?

The first thing to notice is that Berkeley actually extends the class of ideas God does not have well beyond that of pain. It is not just pain that God does not experience but in fact any sensible idea at all. Berkeley says:

We are chained to a body, that is to say, our perceptions are connected with corporeal motions. By the Law of our Nature we are affected upon every alteration in the nervous parts of our sensible body: which sensible body rightly considered, is nothing but a complexion of such qualities or ideas, as have no existence distinct from being perceived by a mind: so that this connexion of sensations with corporeal motions means no more than a correspondence in the order of Nature between two sets of ideas, or things immediately perceived. But God is a pure spirit disengaged from all such sympathy or natural ties. No corporeal motions are attended with the sensation of pain or pleasure in his mind.

(3DIII 241)

Berkeley is telling us in this passage that none of God's ideas are anything like our ideas. *All* of our ideas are sensible ideas and *none* of God's ideas are sensible. This fact alone should dismiss any remaining temptation to adopt the picture of what Berkeley is up to enshrined in

Knox's limerick, discussed earlier in the context of the passage at 3DIII 231. The reality of the world does not depend upon God's having the ideas we are not currently having. God does not maintain the existence of the Tree in Quad when there is no one having ideas of it by filling in with his own ideas because God does not have sensible ideas at all.

That God's ideas are not sensible like our ideas does require a certain amount of rethinking of what is involved in saying that God is the cause of our ideas. The presence of an idea in my mind is not obviously the result of God's forming an intention to cause that particular idea in my mind, for it is hard to see how God could have that intention without having the problematic idea. But Berkeley has already given us some clues about how God functions as a knowing agent. I have proposed that Berkeley thinks that agency is not to be expressed as a sequence of immediate acts, but rather is captured and explained in terms of long-term plans and final causes. God's plans for us are experienced by us and within our experience as what is here called the order of Nature, that is, sensible ideas experienced by us as regularities. Because of these regularities, I can attribute to God mentality, that is, agency and understanding, but in referring to the objects of God's understanding as archetypes of our ideas, Berkeley might be thought to be signaling that “from the effects I see produced” (3DIII 240), I can infer a spirit as cause, but it would be inappropriate to assume that, from my sensible ideas, I can read God's mind and identify what ideas are to be found there.

## Matter and Gravity

Berkeley has now given a more fleshed-out account of the nature of the spiritual substance he is putting in place of matter. He has Hylas, in his next few objections, again putting himself in the position of the philosopher defending matter. The first such objection is one Berkeley apparently set great store by. He has Hylas argue that it is possible to demonstrate that “the quantity of matter” is “proportional to the gravity of bodies” (3DIII 241), and hence possible through demonstration to prove the existence of matter. Philonous's retort is that such a demonstration is circular. Berkeley first noted this objection in a relatively early remark in his Notebooks, where he says: “Newton's Harange amounts to no more than that gravity is gravity.”<sup>16</sup> In addition to its occurrence in this passage in *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley repeats it in a Letter to Johnson of 25 November 1727, and finally in *Siris*, where he expresses himself particularly succinctly:

If any one should think to infer the reality or actual being of matter from the modern tenet that gravity is always proportionable to the quantity of matter, let him but narrowly scan the modern demonstration of that tenet, and he will find it to be a vain circle, concluding in truth no more than this – that gravity is proportionable to weight, that is, to itself.

(*Siris* 319)

Here, in *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley returns the argument to his chief target in this work. Even if you show that gravity is proportional to some sensible qualities, this is not the same as showing anything about material substance.

# Explaining the Phenomena

This argument is one coming not just from philosophers, but on behalf of particular natural philosophers, presumably those impressed by the work of Newton. Hylas's next objection is also on behalf of natural philosophy and it is the same one that Berkeley introduced in the *Principles* when he turned the argument there in the direction of natural philosophy (PHK 50). Here, Hylas asks, what about all the “hypotheses and explications of the phenomena” (3DIII 242) that assume the existence of matter? Phenomena, in this sense, are the appearances of things in our experience that the natural philosophers seek to explain by, as it might be, constructed hypotheses about the structure of matter. If there is an appearance of red in my visual field, then I might hypothesize that this is due to briskly moving corpuscles, for example. Since the phenomena under consideration here are those I experience by means of my senses, Philonous can easily get Hylas to agree that natural philosophers seek to explain the presence of ideas. This allows Philonous to introduce the same account of what explaining the phenomena amounts to that was given in the *Principles*, with one notable addition. In the *Principles* we read:

To explain the phenomena is all one as to shew, why upon such and such occasions we are affected with such and such ideas.

(PHK 50)

Here in *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley says:

Therefore, to explain the phenomena is to shew how we come to be affected with ideas in that order and manner wherein they are imprinted on our senses.

(3DIII 242)

By the addition of the phrase, “in the order and manner,” Berkeley is calling attention to the fact that natural philosophers do not simply face the task of explaining the presence of a red idea here now, but must also explain why, for example, some ideas regularly occur with other ideas or why ideas occur in regular temporal sequences. Berkeley is then able to conclude, as he has been doing in the preceding pages, that phenomena so understood, can be explained on the assumption of a knowing, willing cause, and not by assuming an unperceiving and inert matter. He is also able to make a further point: that natural philosophers, who have assembled information about the manner and order of ideas, have made a useful contribution to knowledge, since “by observing and reasoning on the connexion of ideas, they discover the laws and methods of Nature, which is a part of knowledge both useful and entertaining” (3DIII 243). Berkeley is calling to our attention that, in a world in which the connections among our ideas are regular and lawful, it is the province of natural philosophers to recognize and articulate these laws.

## Believing in Matter

The next objection from Hylas is easily dealt with. Why, Hylas asks, would God induce all

mankind to believe in matter if there is no such thing? Elsewhere suggestions that everyone believes in matter are dismissed on the grounds that, since the concept of matter is incoherent, it cannot be the case that everyone actually believes in it. The concern here is that a belief in matter might be thought to be the result of natural, God-given faculties. This is a notion that Berkeley is anxious to explode. He therefore points out that since there is no unavoidable evidence for the existence of matter that might be thought to compel our consent, there is nothing for which God might be blamed. The further point this objection allows Berkeley to make, however, is one that he is going to follow up on in the next objection: it is that the vast majority of mankind do not believe in matter at all. This is merely an aberration among philosophers. Berkeley has throughout this conversation between Hylas and Philonous been moving back and forth fielding objections from the point of view of philosophers and that of ordinary persons of common sense. In this objection and the next, it seems that Berkeley is targeting philosophers and defending common sense. But by the end of this next exchange, things look a bit different.

## Introducing Novelties

Hylas kicks things off by accusing Philonous of introducing novelties, and, of course, if Philonous is merely defending common sense, he can reject this accusation out of hand. Philonous does indeed claim that he is doing no more than what he terms here “vindicating” common sense, but before he makes this claim, he offers two other points. The first is that, as far as knowledge goes, novelties are to be welcomed, not condemned, otherwise we would never learn any new knowledge. The second point is of course that it is actually philosophers who have introduced novelties. Berkeley gives an extended and familiar list:

That the qualities we perceive, are not on the objects: that we must not believe our senses: that we know nothing of the real nature of things, and can never be assured even of their existence: that real colors and sounds are nothing but certain unknown figures and motions: that motions are in themselves neither swift nor slow: that there are in bodies absolute extensions, without any particular magnitude or figure: that a thing stupid, thoughtless and inactive, operates on a spirit: that the least particle of a body contains innumerable extended parts.

(3DIII 244)

It is against this set of novel views that Berkeley says he is going to defend common sense and he adds that his defense may include some new ways of speaking. Berkeley now tells us what he holds that he will agree to call a novelty. It is:

That it is absolutely impossible, and a plain contradiction to suppose, any unthinking being should exist without being perceived by the mind.

(3DIII 244)

This is of course Berkeley's bedrock ontological conviction and it is a view that he does not share either with the philosophers or the vulgar. He is then defending common sense against

the paradoxes of the philosophers by means of a principle he does not share with common sense.

## Changing Ideas into Things

Hylas responds by picking up on what is certainly from the point of view of common sense the most problematic aspect of what Philonous has just endorsed. “Can anything be plainer,” he says, “than that you are for changing all things into ideas?” (3DIII 244). This is of course precisely what many readers of Berkeley have taken him to be saying, from Doctor Johnson, who refuted him by kicking a stone, to William Butler Yeats, who spoke of “God-appointed Berkeley that proved all things a dream.”<sup>17</sup> Berkeley introduces this charge to set the record straight: “I am not for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things” (3DIII 244). This slogan, as we might call it, has the virtue of encapsulating the thrust of Berkeley's argument in both *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*. He does not set out to argue that things are really ideas. He instead begins with an assumption he took to be uncontroversial, that there are ideas or that we have ideas. Indeed, the assumption that we have ideas is one that Berkeley shares with philosophers and the vulgar alike. The task he sets himself is to show that we don't need any further extramental ontological assumptions in order to account for the existence and nature of things. In identifying himself with a line of argument like this, Berkeley sees himself as on the side of common sense against Hylas, who has been most recently speaking for the philosophers: “You do not trust your senses, I do” (3DIII 245).

Hylas's retort is to point out to Philonous that discovering the nature of things by means of the senses is no simple matter because the senses give rise to conflicting reports. He cites examples that have led philosophers to assume the existence of things in addition to ideas: “Why is not the same figure, and other sensible qualities, perceived in all manner of ways? and why should we use a microscope, the better to discover the true nature of a body, if it were discoverable to the naked eye?” (3DIII 245). In these kinds of cases, Hylas thinks, it is the mind-independent thing that provides a stable identity for the different appearances. Philonous's answer to this question is going to introduce a vastly more complicated picture of what it is to turn ideas into things. This is a very important paragraph that will repay close attention.

Right from the start, the first sentence of Philonous's longish response presents us with an interpretive problem. Philonous says:

Strictly speaking, Hylas, we do not see the same object we feel; neither is the same object perceived by the microscope which was by the naked eye.

(3DIII 245)

Since the problem to be addressed is the relationship between ideas and things, it is not surprising that Berkeley has chosen a different word, “object,” when he wants to speak strictly. But this is also a word that exists uneasily between ideas and things. In the case of the first clause, for example, is Berkeley saying there are two different kinds of things in the

world, those we see and those we touch, or is he saying that the kinds of ideas we have when we see are entirely different, heterogeneous, as he puts it in the *New Theory*, from the kinds of ideas we have when we touch? It is possible to find textual evidence throughout Berkeley's writing to support either reading. The very important passage that follows, however, disambiguates Berkeley's language. He writes:

But in case every variation was thought sufficient to constitute a new kind or individual, the endless number or confusion of names would render language impracticable.

Therefore, to avoid this as well as other inconveniencies which are obvious upon a little thought, men combine together several ideas, apprehended by divers senses, or by the same sense at different times, or in different circumstances, but observed however to have some connexion in Nature, either with respect to co-existence or succession; all which they refer to one name, and consider one thing.

(3DIII 245)

Berkeley is saying here that we have ideas, lots of ideas that differ one from another. These are the objects he is talking about in the preceding sentence. But, he says, we don't just register each different idea as it comes, and the reason seems to be that we want to talk about them. Hailing each different idea with its own proper name would not be a practical way of speaking of our ideas. So, Berkeley tells us, people take a hand in the matter. They observe the various ways in which ideas are related or connected with one another. The next step that again people take is to put together these ideas observed to be connected with one another, and to give the combination one name. At this point, having made and named this combination, they "consider [it] one thing." Berkeley has just described a process in which human beings have ideas and make things. Humans may be said to be in the business of turning ideas into things.

In the next part of this passage, Berkeley returns to the issue Hylas raised, and, in so doing, lays down his own account of what it means to come to know the nature of things by means of the senses:

Hence it follows that when I examine by my other senses a thing I have seen, it is not in order to understand better the same object which I had perceived by sight, the object of one sense not being perceived by the other senses. And when I look through a microscope, it is not that I may perceive more clearly what I perceived already with my bare eyes, the object perceived by the glass being quite different from the former. But in both cases my aim is only to know what ideas are connected together; and the more a man knows of the connexion of ideas, the more he is said to know of the nature of things.

(3DIII 245)

In the last clause of the passage just quoted, Berkeley might be said to have given us another slogan, this time about what it means to say sensible ideas give us knowledge of the nature of things. The important word here is "connection." It is not the case, Berkeley is telling us, that when I pick up the pen on my desk, I am not learning the same things about the size and shape of the pen I learned about by sight. My visible ideas of the pen can be of any size and



will be of different shapes depending upon my vantage point. More to the point, none of my visible ideas can be said to be, as Hylas proposed, the *same* figure as the idea I have by touch. When I touch the pen, I am not in a position, for example, to correct my visible ideas, any one of which is a perfectly appropriate visible idea to have, but instead I learn how a thing presenting these visible ideas feels. I am learning that some new tangible ideas can be connected with my original visible ideas. Similarly, when I look through a microscope, it is not the case that the real nature of the blood on the slide has been revealed. I am gaining more visible ideas, besides the ones that I had when I looked at the slide with a naked eye, but I am also learning that, under the special circumstances of the microscope, other ideas will follow upon the red appearance I saw initially. But in stressing that what I pay attention to are connections, Berkeley is not just saying that learning more about the nature of things is a matter of noticing or piling up more and more ideas from different sense modalities. It is important that I don't call the combination of ideas to which I have attached a name a thing unless the ideas have been observed to have been connected, as he says, "either with respect to co-existence or succession." Things are not just great clouds of ideas I happen to have noticed. Rather I make these ideas of things on the basis of criteria dealing with observed regularities, which allow me to know what to expect under what circumstances. Blood reliably looks colorless under a microscope and so we can add "colorless under a microscope" to what we know of the nature of blood. It is because I have made the ideas that I call things using particular criteria that I can be said to have knowledge, and knowledge about natures.

Berkeley completes this passage, first by explaining why, on his account, he is entitled to trust his senses and then by diagnosing the mistake that leads people to be skeptical about the deliverances of the senses. He begins by highlighting an observation he makes often about ideas: our ideas are never stable, they are always changing. Any expectation therefore that ideas are going to reflect a fixed nature of things is doomed to disappointment. But his account, which does not require fixed ideas, but only ideas changing in a regular fashion, is able to obviate this difficulty. As he says:

It will not thence follow, they are not to be trusted, or that they are inconsistent either with themselves or any thing else, except it be with your preconceived notion of (I know not what) one single, unchanged, unperceivable, real nature, marked by each name: which prejudice seems to have taken its rise from not rightly understanding the common language of men speaking of several distinct ideas, as united into one thing by the mind.

(3DIII 245–246)

The mistake arises when we think that our use of a single name is an expression of something like a single real nature existing in the world and that our language is the way it is because it reflects the way the world is. Instead, Berkeley is telling us, our language is part of a larger human project, and is designed to capture something man-made, a set of distinct ideas "united into one thing, by the mind." The thrust of this passage is to deny that the senses are naturally built for skepticism, by emphasizing the human contribution to knowledge.

Philonous follows up this account of the role of the senses in human knowledge with a

summary of why the theory of the philosophers does lead to skepticism. The philosophers are unable to demonstrate that we have real knowledge because, according to them, our knowledge is real when our ideas match what he here calls their “originals,” the sources they are supposed to represent. But since these originals cannot be known, we can never know that we have real knowledge. Second, since our ideas are variable, we can't ever know which if any might copy a stable original. Finally, since we can't conceive how an idea might exist absolutely or without the mind, we can't ever conceive the nature of something existing absolutely. Berkeley has been making these points throughout *Three Dialogues*, all of which support the claim that any appeal to mind-independent absolute existence to provide a justification for the knowledge our ideas afford us leads to skepticism. These are points to which Hylas has already assented during the course of their long conversation. Philonous follows up this conclusion with four questions:

Now give me leave to ask you, *first*, whether your referring ideas to certain absolutely existing unperceived substances, as their originals, be not the source of all this *scepticism*? *Secondly*, whether you are informed, either by sense or reason, of the existence of these unknown originals? And in case you are not, whether it be not absurd to suppose them? *Thirdly*, whether, upon inquiry, you find there is anything distinctly conceived or meant by the *absolute or external existence of unperceiving substances*? *Lastly*, whether the premises considered, it be not the wisest way to follow Nature, trust your senses, and laying aside all anxious thought about unknown natures or substances, admit with the vulgar those for true things, which are perceived by the senses?

(3DIII 246)

Hylas declines to answer these questions, but they are not really questions at all, they are queries, rhetorical questions analogous to the queries that form the basis for Berkeley's economic tract, *The Querist*. In this sense, they provide the grounds for an argument. Anyone who has agreed to the points made in the first part of this speech, will be able to answer all of these questions in the positive and so ought to be prepared to “admit with the vulgar those for real things which are perceived by the senses.” Hylas is not yet willing to make this admission, and so, instead of answering the questions, he, in his next few points, raises objections to this conclusion that real things are those perceived by the senses.

## Perceiving the Same Thing and Perceiving Cherries

These next few objections all stem from what might be thought to be fairly ordinary or common sense objections to the position that the sensible ideas we perceive and not some extramental thing constitute the real things. This line of argument culminates in Philonous's speech about perceiving a cherry, which is often taken to be a defense of common sense on Berkeley's part. Hylas's first objection is that the things he perceives are perceived by others as well. He says this is a reason to distinguish ideas of sense from ideas of the imagination and it looks as though he is right here. Ideas of the imagination exist in a single finite mind, whereas the ideas of sense of a tree that I have as well as you ought to require a cause other

than either of our minds. Berkeley on previous occasions has been swift to identify that common cause as God, but he takes a different line here. Berkeley has Hylas articulate this point, that there must be a reason why you and I can perceive the same tree, but from the opposite point of view. Hylas asks: "But the same idea which is in my mind, cannot be in yours, or in any other mind. Doth it not therefore follow from your principles, that no two can see the same thing?" (3DIII 247). Berkeley's case is that a dispute of this sort is entirely verbal, that there are different things that we can mean by "same," and that any attempt to make the position more precise, as by insisting with philosophers on an "abstracted notion of identity," can only muddy the waters. In defense of this approach, Berkeley instances two cases. If we imagine a group of people without language, they would nevertheless, Philonous says, "agree in their perceptions" (3DIII 247). If one person hands another an apple, who takes it, both would agree their perceptions had been coordinated, that Eve held out something visible and tangible towards Adam, who took what he saw. In ordinary speech, that's what we mean when we say, Adam and Eve perceived the same apple. Once Adam invented the word "same," then he might want to say, because the ideas he and Eve perceived were quite a lot alike, that what they perceived was the same, since when she admires the red color of the apple then he too will agree the apple has a pleasing color. Eve, however, impressed by the number of perceivers, both herself and Adam, might want to say they each had their own ideas, and so they were not the same. But the underlying situation, that they agreed in their perceptions, would not have changed, so the dispute is over how that situation they both recognize is to be described. Something analogous obtains in Berkeley's second case, where we might disagree about whether a house that had been gutted and rebuilt to a different interior plan was or was not the same house, without disagreeing in the slightest about what had happened to the house. The moral in the case of ideas seems to be: don't worry about abstract ontological classifications, same apple or different apple, but pay attention to relations among ideas, and how they are coordinated. Hylas has a riposte, that if we assume an external archetype, we can suppose ourselves to be dealing with the same thing, which was the original point of his objection. Philonous responds that he too is in a position to refer to an external archetype, but given what has just gone before, this reference to an external archetype should not presumably encourage anyone to argue about whether the same idea is in God's mind as in mine, but should instead lead us to take this external archetype to be the principle underlying the coordination of ideas.

Hylas's final question is: But does your defense against skepticism amount to anything more than that "we are sure that what we really see, hear, feel, in a word, that we are affected with sense impressions?" (3DIII 249). Hylas might be saying, aren't you in exactly the same position as the gardener who believes in the existence of the cherry tree because he knows what he sees? Philonous's first response looks like he is saying, yes, he is identifying himself with the gardener, because what he says is:

And how are we concerned any further? I see this *cherry*, I feel it, I taste it: and I am sure *nothing* cannot be seen, or felt, or tasted: it is therefore *real*.

(3DIII 249)

This is where Philonous tells Hylas that “a cherry, I say, is nothing but a congeries of sense impressions” (3DIII 249). And if that is all there is to being a cherry, then it looks like there is an easy way to defeat skepticism, simply perceive the ideas that are the members of the congeries. Assigning this position to Berkeley, of course, will require decisions about exactly what are the members of the congeries that make up a cherry and how many of the members need to be perceived in order to perceive the cherry.<sup>18</sup> But it is important to notice exactly what it is that Berkeley says here. What he does is to repeat the account he gave shortly before in the microscope passage at 3DIII 245. Here, the full passage reads:

A cherry, I say, is nothing but a congeries of sense impressions, or ideas perceived by various senses: which ideas are united into one thing (or have one idea given to them by the mind); because they are observed to attend one another. Thus when the palate is affected with such a particular taste, the sight is affected with a red colour, the touch with roundness, softness &c. Hence, when I see, and feel, and taste, in sundry certain manners, I am sure the *cherry* exists, or is real; its reality being in my opinion nothing abstracted from those sensations.

(3DIII 249)

What stands out in this fuller account is that Berkeley is again describing the congeries or collection of ideas as the result of something performed by the mind. The mind is not simply receiving a group of sense impressions but is uniting them under one name, when those sense impressions occur in such “sundry certain manners” which can be supposed to include what Berkeley has referred to earlier as coexistence and succession. Berkeley's argument against skepticism does not require simply having sense impressions. I am in a position to know there is a cherry before me when my sense impressions have been united into the characteristic collection of impressions that have been labeled “cherry.” This unification, moreover, only occurs when the mind does something, observes the ideas that “attend each other.” Collections of ideas don't exist because of some extramental glue, but because of mental operations we perform.

## Existence in the Mind

According to this account, things like cherries exist in the mind in a pretty strong sense. This result inspires Hylas's next objection: “how is it possible there should be room for all these trees and houses to exist in your mind?” (3DIII 249). This objection is reminiscent of the Fourth Objection of the *Principles* (PHK 49), and receives at least initially a similar answer. Things are said to be in the mind in a sense appropriate to the way in which they depend on the mind, when they are perceived by the mind. In *Three Dialogues*, however, Berkeley adds a further condition, which reminds us that the context in which Berkeley is using this objection in *Three Dialogues* is somewhat different from that of the *Principles*. Here, he adds that objects can be said to exist in the mind both when it “comprehends and perceives them” and when “it is affected from without or by some being distinct from itself.” Just as Berkeley has frequently emphasized that “without the mind” does not mean “without *my* mind” so he

is saying that “in the mind” in this case does not mean just “in my mind.” Berkeley is claiming here that the existence of things – real things, about which we are not skeptical – requires the activity of something else, some other mind. The activity of my mind when I respond to the patterns of coexisting or successive impressions reflects the activity of some other mind, whose will it is that I receive ideas in regular patterns. So while I make ideas into things, this process is grounded in criteria that reflect the manner in which I receive ideas “from without.”

## The Creation Story

Berkeley concludes Hylas's set of objections with one that he describes as “a mighty difficulty” (3DIII 250). The objection questions whether the theory Philonous has been laying out is consistent with the Mosaic account of creation, the story of creation given in Genesis. This objection has no counterpart in the *Principles*, but was instead raised in a letter to Berkeley from Lord Percival, who said that his wife “desires to know if there be nothing but spirit and ideas, what you make of that part of the six days of creation which preceded man.”<sup>19</sup> Berkeley answered Lady Percival's question in a letter to Percival of 6 September 1710, where he wrote:

I do not deny the existence of any of these sensible things which Moses says were created by God. They existed from all eternity in the Divine Intellect and then became perceptible (i.e. were created) in the same manner and order as is described in Genesis. For I take creation to belong to things as they respect finite spirits, there being nothing new to God. Hence it follows that the act of creation consists in God's willing that those things should be perceptible to other spirits, which before were known only to Himself. Now both reason and scripture assure us there are other spirits (as angels of different orders, &c) besides man, who, 'tis possible might have perceived this visible world according as it was successively exhibited to their view before man's creation. Besides, for to agree with the Mosaic account of the creation, it is sufficient if we suppose that a man, in case he was created and existing at the time of the chaos, might have perceived all things formed out of it in the very order set down in the scripture, which is in no ways repugnant to our principles.<sup>20</sup>

The much longer corresponding passage in *Three Dialogues* does not contradict the response Berkeley sent to Lady Perceval, but the additions found there do clarify the position for which he is arguing.

Berkeley's first move is to spell out in greater detail the claim made in the first sentence of his reply to Lady Percival that he is not denying the existence of sensible things. As he has just made clear here the ideas that constitute his ontology are not “fictions and fancies” of the mind but instead the objects of the senses. What Berkeley adds that was not part of his response to Lady Percival, but is an ongoing theme in his work, is that the only thing whose existence he is denying is absolute external existence, which does not play a role in Genesis. Berkeley's quarrel is with philosophers and not with Moses. Here in *Three Dialogues*

Berkeley sets up the objection about creation within the context of a choice between his own theory and that of the materialists.

His next move is to give the same account of creation that he gave to Lady Percival, that creation is nothing more than becoming perceptible to creatures. What he says here is this:

When things are said to begin or end their existence, we do not mean this with regard to God, but his creatures. All objects are eternally known to God, or which is the same thing, have an eternal existence in his mind: but when things before imperceivable to creatures, are by a decree of God, made perceivable to them, then they are said to begin a relative existence, with respect to created minds.

(3DIII 251–252)

By introducing the phrase, “relative existence,” Berkeley is making explicit something clearly implied by his made-perceptible account of creation. When we speak of the creation of things, we are not speaking of the coming into existence of what has never existed before, since all things exist eternally in the mind of God. The sort of temporal coming-into-existence described in Genesis only obtains with respect to created spirits and is relative to them. Sensible things are created only with respect to the minds on which they depend.

Spelling out the kind of relative existence belonging to sensible things does seem like something less than real existence and Berkeley puts this worry in the mouth of Hylas. If sensible things have only a relative existence, then isn't this to say that they could have had at best a hypothetical existence before humans were created? In the response to Lady Percival, even though he does remind her of the existence of angels, Berkeley does use language that suggests a merely hypothetical existence, describing creation as what a man “might have perceived” had he actually been present at the creation. In *Three Dialogues*, however, Berkeley relies on a somewhat different image to explain how we can understand the creation. He writes:

In case we conceive the Creation, as we should at this time a parcel of plants or vegetables of all sorts, produced by an invisible power, in a desert where nobody was present: that this way of explaining or conceiving it is consistent with my principles, since they deprive you of nothing, either sensible or imaginable.

(3DIII 252)

Berkeley is here assimilating the Creation before the arrival of humans to the unperceived tree or the motion of the earth. What makes all these cases intelligible is that they are not supposing the existence of an otherwise indescribable power to make the plants, vegetables, trees, or motions perceivable if a perceiver is nigh. While the created world is indeed the result of an invisible power, it does not itself consist of invisible powers. Instead, what is being supposed to exist in creation are things with sensible qualities. Plants, vegetables, trees, and motions are all perfectly conceivable parts of the fabric of creation, and what would not be conceivable is what Berkeley terms here “the actuality of absolute existence.” Assigning to sensible things a hypothetical existence, an existence-in-waiting for a perceiver to appear would be tantamount to assuming the existence of an absolute and inconceivable power.

Hylas is prepared to agree that sensible things have a relative existence, that is, relative to mind, but Berkeley has also maintained that their existence is relevant evidence for the existence of God, that their existence is also relative to God's mind. But existence in God's mind is eternal existence. In what sense then can sensible things be said to come into existence in creation? Berkeley repeats his original account that equates creation with perceptibility, but now using concepts he has been stressing in *Three Dialogues*.

May we not understand [the creation] to have been entirely in respect to finite creatures, so that things, with regard to us, may properly be said to begin their existence, or be created, when God decreed they should become perceptible to intelligent creatures, in that order and manner which he then established and which we now call the Laws of Nature? You may call this a *relative* or *hypothetical* existence if you please.

(3DIII 253)

For many of Berkeley's readers, hypothetical existence is exactly what it looks like Berkeley is describing here. But this is to miss Berkeley's point. Berkeley has been pointing out from the very beginning that the world we live in is a relative world. What he wants to stress of course is that this world of ideas or objects of perception depends on minds, that their existence is relative to minds. What he also wants to stress, however, is that this relative world is the real world because ideas are perceived by us, as he says here "in the order and manner which [God] then established, and we now call the Laws of Nature." Because our relative world is also lawful, we are able to understand the nature of real plants, vegetables, trees, and motions, and to predict their behavior, including the behavior of unperceived trees and motions. It is this kind of intelligible world that Berkeley is contrasting with the supposition of what he later in this passage calls "an absolute subsistence extrinsic to the mind of God, as well as to the minds of all created spirits" (3DIII 253). The grounds for the intelligibility of Berkeley's world are to be found within the relative world of ideas, and not in something unknowable and absolute. The role that Berkeley is assigning to God is not perceiving sensible ideas but producing them in us according to the Laws of Nature. The relation that sensible ideas bear to God's mind then is not the same as the one they bear to us. Temporal relations of coexistence and succession are very important to us, but they are not part of the way in which God eternally knows.

Philonous at this point refocuses the discussion as he draws it to a close. Hylas is still bothered about how an eternal God can make things exist in time. In response, Philonous points out that this is a problem for any account of Creation. It is not his business to solve problems about the transcendent and hence incomprehensible nature of God, but merely to address Hylas's specific charge that immaterialism, as Berkeley's doctrine is here described, has problems that do not arise for materialism. Hylas, however, still feels a general uneasiness that allows Berkeley to conclude this particular discussion with a direct comparison of materialist and immaterialist accounts of creation. Philonous begins with the following claim:



What would you have! Do I not acknowledge a twofold state of things, the one ectypal and natural, the other archetypal and eternal? The former was created in time, the latter existed from eternity in the mind of God?

(3DIII 254)

In light of what has just preceded this passage, it is clear that the “twofold state of things” here described is a far cry from the twofold existence principle that Berkeley excoriated in the *Principles*. Whatever has archetypal existence in the mind of God is inaccessible to us and, while identifiable as the source of our natural ideas, has no role as a touchstone to identify the reality of things. Philonous issues a challenge: what we have to render the creation (or anything else) intelligible are our natural faculties, sense, imagination, and reason. So, using these faculties, is creation more or less intelligible on the assumption that matter exists? The answer is going to be that including matter makes creation less intelligible, since the Mosaic account of creation is of sensible things, and on the supposition of matter, sensible things have a relative existence, which in this case means relative to absolute existence. This leaves the account of creation clearly worse off since absolute existence has been acknowledged to be unintelligible. Finally, the supposition of matter gives aid and comfort to atheists, in the face of a general inability to explain how the will of a spirit could produce corporeal substance out of nothing, leading to the supposition that matter is co-eternal with God. Berkeley has in his final response to objections turned his answer to Lady Percival into an account of creation that permits him to display the disadvantages of materialism, as compared to a proper understanding of his immaterialism.

## Philonous's Defense of His Theory

None of the objections that Berkeley has put into the mouth of Hylas have panned out. Hylas has been represented as presenting objections both from the point of view of common sense and from that of philosophers committed to matter, and in both cases we find him capitulating. He is left with what Berkeley has Hylas himself describe as an “unaccountable backwardness that I find in myself towards your notions” (3DIII 256). In fact, Berkeley seems to be representing Hylas as in the same state that Hume was in when he notoriously said that Berkeley's arguments “admit of no answer and produce no conviction.”<sup>21</sup> In *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley tackles this attitude directly (if, as Hume's remark testifies, unsuccessfully). He hands the direction of the conversation back to Philonous for the remainder of the Dialogue, so that, presumably, Philonous can produce conviction in Hylas and Berkeley in his readers. Philonous begins with a very long speech, in which he follows up the account of the disadvantages of materialism by enumerating the advantages of immaterialism. Conviction will follow after Berkeley shows what immaterialism can do. In the present context, this speech is especially important because it establishes how Berkeley conceives the project of immaterialism and what he takes to be its important conclusions.

The first advantage that Berkeley claims for immaterialism is that if immaterialism is true, then it is possible not only to prove that God exists but that a God with the kind of nature

commonly ascribed to Him exists, rather than a First Cause, with the kind of nature needed to produce the world of the materialist philosophers. The God of the Immaterialists is not “an obscure general cause of things” but rather can be identified by His “spirituality, omnipresence, providence, omniscience, infinite power, and goodness” (3DIII 257). Berkeley has frequently mentioned the grounds provided by his theory that leads to this attractive proof of God's existence. Here, in *Three Dialogues*, for example, in the Second Dialogue, he claims that the ideas I immediately perceive provide me with direct evidence for the existence and nature of God, because “the variety, order and manner” of these ideas give reason to conclude that their Author is “wise, powerful, and good beyond comparison” (3DII 215). In all of his proofs for the existence of God, Berkeley emphasizes that there is a direct connection between an important feature of our ideas, their regularity, and the nature of their Divine Cause. While Berkeley spells out this feature of ideas most thoroughly in the discussion of the consequences of immaterialism for natural philosophy at the end of the *Principles*, here, in this speech in *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley moves briskly through the failures of materialist natural philosophy before concluding:

If the *phenomena* are nothing else but *ideas*; God is a *spirit*, but matter an unintelligent unperceiving being. If they demonstrate an unlimited power in their cause; God is active and omnipotent, but matter an inert mass. If the order, regularity, and usefulness of them can never be sufficiently admired; God is infinitely wise and provident, but matter destitute of all contrivance and design. These surely are great advantages in physics.

(3DIII 257–258)

While materialists, Berkeley finds, rely on confused concepts and paradoxical explanations, the study of the lawful relations among ideas leads to explanations of phenomena that encapsulate a well-understood concept of God.

The passage just quoted above relies on facts about lawful relations among ideas, but it also mentions two other important premises, that phenomena are ideas, and that causes are active. These premises are supported by the ontological provisions of immaterialism, that the only things that exist are minds and ideas. Here in this passage Berkeley reminds his readers of the great advantages to metaphysics and also mathematics of this limited ontology. Such an ontology allows us to escape numerous dilemmas “concerning entity in abstract, substantial forms, hylarchic principles, plastic natures, substance and accident, principle of individuation, possibility of matter's thinking, origin of ideas, the manner how two independent substances, so widely different as *spirit* and *matter*, should mutually operate on each other” (3DIII 258). Immaterialists, on the other hand, can cut through this cornucopia of early modern metaphysical problems because they rely solely on spirits and ideas. The great advantages of these two entities are that we can thoroughly understand how they are related, since ideas depend upon independently existing spirits, and that each one is immediately and completely known to us, and hence devoid of mysteries.

The principles accepted by immaterialists, that there are minds, that there are ideas, and that these ideas are related to one another in a lawful manner, are, Berkeley is now arguing, exactly the principles that result in knowledge of God, of the natural world, and of

mathematics and metaphysics, whereas, in each case, materialism fails. Philonous's long speech ends by drawing a broad epistemological conclusion, that claims victory for his side in the issue that framed the *Dialogues*: it is materialists who are the greater skeptics, where immaterialists have knowledge. The conclusion reads as follows:

But what need is there to insist on the particular sciences? Is not that opposition to all science whatsoever, that phrensy of the ancient and modern *sceptics*, built on the same foundation? Or can you produce so much as one argument against the reality of corporeal things, or in behalf of that avowed utter ignorance of their natures, which does not suppose their reality to consist in an external absolute existence? Upon this supposition indeed, the objections from the change of colours of a pigeon's neck, or the appearances of a broken oar in the water, must be allowed to have weight. But those and the like objections vanish, if we do not maintain the being of absolute external originals, but place the reality of things in ideas, fleeting indeed, and changeable; however not changed at random, but according to the fixed order of Nature. For herein consists that constancy and truth of things, which secures all the concerns of life, and distinguishes that which is *real* from the irregular visions of the fancy.

(3DIII 258)

Berkeley has concluded the speech that lays out the advantages of immaterialism with a summary of the epistemological basis of his theory, showing why it does not, whereas rival approaches do, lead to skepticism. It is worth noting that, when Berkeley was talking in the first part of the speech about the advantages of immaterialism for the particular sciences, the rival theories he was taking up were those of philosophers, who were specifically wedded to matter as an ontological category. Here, as he moves on to look at “all sciences whatsoever,” that is, all knowledge, he broadens the nature of his target somewhat. He characterizes the problem that leads other views, but not his own, into skepticism as the supposition of absolute external existence. That it is not just philosophers that make this supposition is suggested by the fact that the specific examples he gives, the pigeon's neck and the oar, are problems that have been raised against a common sense trust in the senses. Common sense, like philosophers, takes ideas to be validated by “absolute external originals,” and so must be troubled when the shape of the oar I see proves not to be the stable shape of oar. Berkeley's position has been that we can cut short the philosopher's move from sensible things to material substance if we are not fooled by the undoubted fleeting and changeable nature of ideas, and seek to locate reality elsewhere. We will not be fooled if we can recognize that “the constancy and truth of things” is to be found “in the fixed order of Nature” under which the changes ideas undergo are revealed to be orderly and predictable. It is the Laws of Nature that govern our ideas that are stable and not some underlying ontological reality.

## Final Thoughts

It would seem at this juncture that nothing remains but for Philonous to declare victory, for Hylas to concede, and for everyone to go home. Berkeley however has a few more moves he

wants to make. The ostensible reason for the first stems from Hylas's unwillingness to concede that no further objections might ever occur to him. In response Philonous lays out various criteria that an objection, to be successful, ought to meet. We can imagine, I think, that this speech is addressed not so much to the perpetually obdurate (and non-existent) Hylas as to Berkeley's readers, both current and to come, who might be tempted to raise Hylas-like objections to the theory Berkeley is defending. Berkeley is proposing here that present and future critics of Berkeley should be prepared to ask themselves or to be asked these questions:

1. Are you sure that the objection you are raising can be answered by your alternative theory that you want to defend, in Hylas's case, materialism? No objection can be telling if your alternative does an even worse job of meeting it.
2. Have you begged the question, committed *petitio principii*? Don't assume the burden of proof must rest with the immaterialist. Don't assume that unknown substances or physical objects are the right way to identify real things without examining the truth of this assumption.
3. Have you correctly characterized the claim of your opponent, or have you committed *ignoratio elenchi*? Does your objection assume that Berkeley has denied the existence of real things? Does it assume the existence of a fully understandable alternative?

The implication of what Berkeley is laying out of course is that all objections brought against Berkeley's theory fall foul of one or another of these flaws. Be that as it may, Berkeley's criteria remain as a useful exercise for the would-be critic. Like the various suggestions Berkeley made at the beginning of his works about how they should best be read, they constitute a concluding set of useful pieces of advice to the reader.

The next move comes from Hylas, who follows up on Philonous's list of how objections go wrong by admitting this last error. He had taken Philonous's rejection of matter to mean that he was denying the existence of sensible things like trees and cherries. Hylas and Philonous proceed to disagree about the wisdom of retaining the word "matter," Hylas maintaining that it will make the theory easier to accept if we continue to speak of matter, but mean by it sensible things, while Philonous speaks in favor of rejecting the term, on the grounds, first, that it should never be used in philosophy since it carries with it the suggestion of independent substantial existence. Second, since it is only a philosophical term and not an ordinary one, if we ban its use it will not be missed. Hylas responds with a very interesting speech, capturing the ambivalence he professes to feel at this moment, by going back and forth on what might be intended by matter. At the end, however, he seems to reach a conclusion:

For after all, the controversy about *matter* in the strict acceptation of it, lies altogether between you and the philosophers; whose principles, I acknowledge, are not near so natural, or so agreeable to the common sense of mankind, and Holy Scripture, as yours. There is nothing we either desire or shun, but as it makes, or is apprehended to make some part of our happiness or misery. But what hath happiness or misery, joy or grief, pleasure or pain, to do with absolute existence, or with unknown entities, abstracted from all relation to us? It is evident, things regard us only as they are pleasing or displeasing; and they can please or displease, only so far forth as they are perceived. Further than that we are not concerned; and thus far you leave things as you found them. Yet still there is something new in this doctrine. It is plain, I do not now think with the philosophers, nor yet altogether with the vulgar. I would know how the case stands in that respect: precisely, what you have added to, or altered in my former notions.

(3DIII 262)

Hylas here agrees with Philonous that a dispute about matter is a dispute among philosophers. This would suggest that, since Philonous has been engaging in just such a dispute, Philonous is a philosopher, putting forward a new philosophical theory, one that Hylas might be willing to take up himself. Hylas here however moves in a different direction, praising Philonous for putting forward a theory that is not as remote from common sense as that of the materialists. In making this judgment, Hylas does not endorse the epistemological or metaphysical reasons that Philonous has most recently been putting forward, but instead starts talking about what, in the *Principles*, in the context of an explanation of why we refer the works of Nature to God, Berkeley calls “the never enough admired laws of pain and pleasure” (PHK 146). Berkeley is here putting into the mouth of *Hylas* a matter that is important to him. But what are Hylas, and Berkeley, getting at here? Here is a suggestion. Berkeley has throughout his works reminded us that the world we strive to understand is the world in which we act. To pay attention to what goes with what and what follows what, and ultimately to pay attention to the Laws of Nature, is useful to us when we are deciding what to do. And decisions about what to do have everything to do with the laws of pain and pleasure. We seek in our actions to acquire the pleasurable and avoid the painful. Finally, painful and pleasurable are an integral part of the way in which things are perceived by us, and have of course nothing to do with absolute existence, which is presumably stripped of painfulness and pleurability. The kind of knowledge Berkeley's philosophy has been describing and endorsing is also the kind of knowledge ordinary people use in the course of their lives. So, as far as the knowledge gathering of ordinary people are concerned, it is true to say to Berkeley that his account does “leave things as you found them.” But now what about Hylas's question? Is Berkeley's a new theory or isn't it? Hylas has given reasons for saying both yes and no. It leaves ordinary people where he found them but it does put forward a new philosophical theory.

Berkeley begins his answer in a way that seems totally unequivocal, if a little surprising. “I do not pretend,” he has Philonous say, “to be a setter-up of new notions” (3DIII 262). One might wonder, if Berkeley does not intend to be a setter-up of new notions, then what was he doing when he explained to us moments before why immaterialism was a superior theory

than materialism? Surely, at that moment he was encouraging us to adopt a new and different theory, just as he did in the *Principles*? In this speech, however, Philonous goes on to explain in what sense his notions are not new.

My endeavours tend only to unite and place in a clearer light that truth, which was before shared between the vulgar and the philosophers: the former being of opinion, that *those things they immediately perceive are the real things*; and the latter, that *the things immediately perceived are ideas which exist only in the mind*. Which two notions put together, do in effect constitute the substance of what I advance.

(3DIII 262)

One thing is perfectly obvious. There is no sense in which the vulgar and the philosophers share *both* views. The philosopher does not think that “those things immediately perceived are the real things” and the vulgar don’t suppose that “the things immediately perceived are ideas, which exist only in the mind.” They share the views being endorsed in this passage only in the sense in which you and I share the last two cookies on the plate if we each take only one. One way, however, to understand how Berkeley sees his task is that he is getting the philosophers and the vulgar who previously only accepted one claim each to share these claims in the other sense, to agree to both. He does this by getting them to recognize that the position expressed in the other view, the one their own view rejects, is in fact true. We can see Berkeley carrying out this project throughout the *Dialogues*. First, he converts Hylas, originally speaking for common sense, who thinks that, by rejecting matter, Philonous is denying the reality of sensible things, to recognize the philosophers’ truth, that the things immediately perceived are ideas existing only in the mind. And then, having converted Hylas to philosophy, he convinces him of the vulgar truth that the things we immediately perceive are the real things. But, having gone through both steps, Hylas has not reverted to his original matter-bound common sense. He retains the philosophers’ truth of which he has been persuaded, but is converted finally to immaterialism. The notions Berkeley is endorsing may not be new, but in order to endorse both of them, as Hylas has been the dramatic example, some old notions need to be rejected.

In Hylas’s last speech of the *Dialogues*, he finally renounces his former ideas and declares that “a new light breaks in upon my understanding.” But how did we get here he wonders?

You set out upon the same principles that Academics, Cartesians, and the like sects, usually do; and for a long time it looked as if you were advancing their philosophical *skepticism*; but in the end your conclusions are directly opposite to theirs.

(3DIII 262)

Hylas here recapitulates Berkeley’s method. His goal in the First Dialogue is limited: he intends to persuade his readers of the truth of the principle he shares with philosophers, that we immediately perceive ideas existing only in the mind. As Hylas says here, the consequence of that first step is to lead to the acceptance of philosophical skepticism. But the position towards which Berkeley was heading was, Hylas says, “the direct opposite” of the philosophers. Which position is this? One very plausible possibility is that it is the one

philosophers do not share with the vulgar, that is, philosophers hold that things immediately perceived are *not* the real things. Berkeley's goal, then, is to get his readers to recognize the opposite, that things immediately perceived *are* the real things.

This means that Berkeley's anti-philosophical position is the one he shares with the vulgar. But in defending this position throughout the Third Dialogue, he introduces a number of considerations he does not share with the vulgar. First of course is his ontology, that the only things that exist are minds and ideas. Developing his ontological position, Berkeley argues, first, that, with respect to minds, minds are substances. This is going to mean that he will locate all the roles materialism assigns to material substances to mentality. The independent manner in which spiritual substances exist is by perceiving or knowing and understanding, and the manner in which dependent unperceiving things exist or are supported is by being perceived. What is implied here is a necessary relation between spiritual substances and unperceiving things, and so unperceiving things are best referred to as ideas. Finally, the agency ascribed to substances is not the pushes and pulls of inert matter, but volition or intention. We can understand the move that changes ideas into real things in terms of divine and human intentions. Thinghood is not identified in terms of stable material substances but rather in the relation of ideas to the Laws of Nature. We finite minds make ideas into things when we observe the lawful connections among ideas as provided by the Laws of Nature so that we can act with foresight in the world, motivated by the laws of pain and pleasure. And in turn, such an understanding and such activity is possible for us because ideas are created by their and our benevolent Maker according to the Laws of Nature. Finally, it is because we can come to recognize the workings of such a benevolent mentality in the world that we can come to recognize the existence and nature of its Creator. Everything we learn when we come to understand that things immediately perceived are the real things constitute, not common sense, but a novel philosophical theory, immaterialism.

Philonous, in his immediately previous speeches, has been explicitly defending what he is now calling immaterialism. But, in Philonous's last word, in which he puts forward his fountain metaphor, he seems to be taking a different tack.

You see, Hylas, the water of yonder fountain, how it is forced upwards, in a round column, to a certain height; at which it breaks and falls back into the basin from which it rose: its ascent as well as its descent, proceeding from the same uniform law of principle of *gravitation*. Just so, the same principles which at first view lead to *scepticism*, pursued to a certain point, bring men back to common sense.

(3DIII 262)

What are we to make of Philonous's claim there that he is bringing “men back to common sense?” He has not returned Hylas to common sense because Hylas has accepted at least one philosophical, non-common sense notion, that what is immediately perceived are ideas, and so his understanding of what it is to be a “real thing” has changed. It is helpful here to pick up on the phrase Hylas uses in his immediately preceding speech, about “philosophical scepticism.” This is the issue that has framed *Three Dialogues*. Hylas kicks things off by condemning philosophers who by “advancing such notions as are repugnant to plain and



commonly received principles” will have as a consequence that men “will be tempted to entertain suspicions concerning the most important truths which they had hitherto held sacred and unquestionable” (3DI 172). It is in response to these worries that Philonous proposes that they should “admit that opinion for true, which upon examination shall appear most agreeable to common sense and remote from skepticism” (3DI 172). Philonous is now claiming victory with respect to this epistemological challenge. Berkeley has argued throughout the Third Dialogue that his new understanding of real things as ideas doesn't take away anything from common sense, which is true, it merely redescribes the ontology of real things. This ontological position, Berkeley has used the Third Dialogue to argue, is a philosophical, not an ordinary, one, and as far as philosophy is concerned, Berkeley doesn't shy away from novelties. The return to common sense, then, does not stop there, but also allows Berkeley to develop a new and different philosophical theory, which, as far as philosophers are concerned, offers, in the first instance, a relief from the skepticism from which the vulgar never suffered. The final end of Berkeley's project is this epistemological goal. As he sees it, his new philosophy allows him to argue that we have certain and complete knowledge of the entities of our world, spirits and ideas, and because these ideas are orderly, spirits are able to identify regularities and Laws of Nature that give them knowledge allowing them to make their way in the world, and finally because of the nature of this complex, systematically ordered world, to arrive at a knowledge of the existence and nature of God. Berkeley's new philosophical theory provides an ontology, and an epistemology that enables him to draw this ultimate theological conclusion. There is nothing therefore in *his* philosophy that will, as Hylas initially feared, lead people to become suspicious of undoubted truths.

## notes

- <sup>1</sup> Berkeley, of course, later in the Third Dialogue, identifies a common sense object as a collection or congeries of ideas. But exactly how we can be said to immediately perceive a collection of ideas that is identical to a common sense object has been controversial, given the fleeting nature of ideas, and the fact that we do not at one time perceive all the collections of ideas that would presumably constitute something like a stone. For a selection of the literature on this topic, see: G. Pappas, “Berkeley and immediate perception,” in *Essays on the Philosophy of George Berkeley*, edited by E. Sosa (Reidel, 1987), 195–213; G. Pappas, “Berkeley and scepticism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59 (1999): 133–149; G. Pappas, *Berkeley's Thought* (Cornell University Press, 2000); G. Dicker, “The concept of immediate perception in Berkeley's immaterialism,” in *Berkeley: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, edited by C.M. Turbayne (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 48–66; G. Dicker, “Berkeley on immediate perception: once more into the breach,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 56 (October 2006): 517–535; G. Dicker, *Berkeleyan Idealism: A Critical Examination* (Oxford University Press, 2011); R. Glauser, “The problem of the unity of a physical object in Berkeley,” in *Reexamining Berkeley's Philosophy*, edited by S. Daniel (University of Toronto Press,

2007), 50–81; M. Atherton, “The objects of immediate perception,” in *New Interpretations of Berkeley's Thought*, edited by S. Daniel (Humanity Books, 2008), 107–119; M. Atherton, “‘The books are in the study as before’: Berkeley's claims about real physical objects,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 18 (1) (February 2008): 85–100.

2 In both cases, the italics are in the original.

3 This label appears in Jonathan Bennett, “Berkeley and God” (*Philosophy*, Vol. XL, [1965]: 207–221) and reprinted in *Locke and Berkeley*, edited by C.M. Martin and D.M. Armstrong (Anchor Books, 1968), 380–399.

4 There was a young man who said: “God  
Must think it exceedingly odd  
If he finds that the tree  
Continues to be  
When there's no one about in the Quad.  
REPLY: Dear Sir, Your astonishment's odd  
I am always about in the Quad;  
And that's why the tree  
Will continue to be  
Since observed by Yours faithfully, God.

5 For some recent discussions, see M. Frankel, “Berkeley and God in the quad,” *Philosophy Compass* 7 (6) (2012): 388–396; S. Bordner, “If we stop thinking about Berkeley's problem of continuity, will it still exist?” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55 (2) (April 2017): 237–260.

6 This title, the Parity Argument, is due to P. Cummins, “Hylas's parity argument,” in *Critical and Interpretive Essays*, edited by C.M. Turbayne (University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 283–294.

7 *Principles of Philosophy*, I, 8. Quotations from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge University Press, 1985).

8 “Cartesian” accounts of Berkeley's account of spirit can be found in C. McCracken “Berkeley's Cartesian concept of mind: The return through Malebranche and Locke to Descartes,” *The Monist* 71 (1988): 596–610; P.D. Cummins, “Berkeley on minds and agency,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Berkeley*, edited by K.P. Winkler (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 190–229; W. Beardsley, “Berkeley on spirit and its unity,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 18 (2001): 259–278; M. Atherton, “Berkeley's last word

on spirit,” in *Essays on the Concept of Mind in Early Modern Philosophy*, edited by P. Glombicek and J. Hill (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 115–229.

[9](#) See J. Bennett, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, Vol. 2, 165–167 (Clarendon Press, 2001).

[10](#) “Berkeley on the mind's activity,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (3) (July 1981): 222.

[11](#) This phrase occurs in both the gardener and the annihilation passages.

[12](#) This is a point also made by P. Fleming, “Berkeley's immaterialist account of action,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44 (3) (July 2006): 415–429.

[13](#) One very obvious example is PHK 113, when he talks about a man moving his feet when he walks down the street.

[14](#) I am grateful to Luca Ferrero for helping me to think of Berkeley's account of agency in these terms.

[15](#) Berkeley, in a later work, *Theory of Vision Vindicated*, makes a distinction between inferences, judgments we make, and suggestion, which happens to us in the course of sense perception. Since the discussion here occurs in the context of sense perception, it is reasonable to suppose that he intends to use “inference” interchangeably with “suggestion.”

[16](#) PC 361. This note is labeled “M” for Matter by Berkeley. In this note, Berkeley attributes the argument to Newton himself, although elsewhere he leaves those that make it unnamed.

[17](#) W.B. Yeats, “Blood and the moon,” in *The Poems: A New Edition*, edited by R.J. Finneran (Macmillan Publishing Co., 1983), 238.

[18](#) See G. Pappas, *Berkeley's Thought*, for a discussion of these issues. For some criticisms of this approach, see M. Atherton, “The objects of immediate perception,” in *New Interpretations of Berkeley's Thought*, edited by S. Daniels (Humanity Books, 2008), 107–119.

[19](#) Percival to Berkeley. London, 26 August 1710, *Correspondence*, 43.

[20](#) *Correspondence*, 44–45.

[21](#) *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by T.L. Beauchamp (Clarendon Press, 2000), Section XII, Part 1, footnote 32, p. 116.

## chapter 11

### taking stock: berkeley's three books

Berkeley published the first three books we have been discussing in very quick succession, the *New Theory* in 1709, the *Principles* in 1710, and *Three Dialogues* in 1713. These three books, while differing from one another in form, and sometimes in content, nevertheless display considerable overlap with one another, covering much the same ground. What was Berkeley up to? It is not usual for an author to be quite so repetitive, and, indeed, Berkeley's own other works differ significantly from one another, ranging from religious apologetics to economic theory to the extraordinary *Siris*. We asked, did Berkeley rewrite his central works because he changed his mind about his theory or did he for some reason decide to re-present the same view three times over? The first possibility has some initial plausibility, since there is nothing unusual about philosophers changing their minds, even if not always in as quick succession as Berkeley's publication dates would suggest. There is, however, evidence that would rule against this hypothesis. First, Berkeley published new editions of each of these works, with editorial changes, between 1732 and 1734, more than 20 years after he published the original editions. The editorial changes do not significantly alter the argument of each volume, so it would seem that Berkeley stuck by the contents of each of the three books, and did not regard earlier works as supplanted by later ones. Furthermore, in his preface to the last work in this series, *Three Dialogues*, Berkeley advises readers of that book that they will find it helpful to also read the *New Theory* and the *Principles*. He explains that readers will find there that “divers notions advanced in these *Dialogues*, are farther pursued, or placed in different lights, and other points handled, which naturally tend to confirm and illustrate them” (3D, Pref. 169). Berkeley is clear that the earlier works supplement the later ones and are not replaced by them. On the assumption then that Berkeley did indeed intend to present the same theory three different ways, our final task is now to try to understand this intention and to account for the discrepancies and differences between the various works. My suggestion is going to be that we can understand these puzzling discrepancies by paying attention to the way in which Berkeley constructed the target of his argument in each book, against which he is proposing his own theory. The nature of his theory doesn't change, but the target does, and hence different issues necessary to support his own theory against his rival become salient.

Right off the bat, the *New Theory* presents the biggest problem. Even though Berkeley has explicitly endorsed its relevance to understanding later volumes, it seems to take up a very different enterprise than these later volumes, especially because it does not explicitly endorse or argue for the idealist ontology central to the *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*. Rather, in the *New Theory* Berkeley is only explicit about the mind-dependence of the visuals, although he does of course explore the nature of objects of sight and the consequences of this nature very thoroughly. As we have previously discussed, while the mind-dependence of objects of touch is compatible with the account developed in the *New Theory*, Berkeley never unambiguously

spells this out, preferring instead to focus on the heterogeneity of ideas of sight and touch. How is it that Berkeley can regard as a useful supplement a work that ignores his basic idealist ontology?

At this point, attention to Berkeley's target will prove helpful. Notoriously, Berkeley introduces the problem he will be initially addressing by saying "it is agreed by all ... that distance, of itself and immediately, cannot be seen" (NTV 2). The "all" referred to here are, of course, Berkeley's "optic writers," other theoreticians who make this claim because they have views about how what we immediately perceive differs from what we end up perceiving. They have a theory of visual processing in which we immediately perceive mind-dependent sensations, which frequently differ from what we end up perceiving. Berkeley and his interlocutors agree, then, when it comes to the mind-dependence of visual sensations, which forms the basis of their common problem about how we perceive distance by sight. Berkeley's task, as he has set things up, is to show that the solution he identifies as that of his target is misguided, but he has no need to address but can assume the mind-dependence of what is immediately perceived by sight. The members of Berkeley's intended audience are not realists who think we directly perceive what is out there. As subsequent commentary on the *New Theory* reveals, anyone who holds *that* view also thinks that the project of the *New Theory* cannot get off the ground.<sup>1</sup> In the *New Theory*, however, Berkeley himself expects his readership to be other philosophers who share his views about the mind-dependence of visual sensations immediately perceived.

While the philosophers addressed in the *New Theory* may share with Berkeley a common view about visual sensations, the ease with which Berkeley could sneak in his views about tangible ideas highlights another discrepancy between the *New Theory* and the *Principles*. In the *Principles*, Berkeley attacks at length the thesis that forms the negative side of his idealist ontology, the existence of mind-independent matter, or an absolutely existing reality. In the works on vision, however, Berkeley has a more limited target. As he makes clear in *Theory of Vision Vindicated*, he wants to isolate the question of "how the mind or soul of a man simply sees" (TVV 43) from other anatomical or optical considerations. The target he is addressing in the *New Theory* is just the psychological account of vision provided by his optic writers, who suppose that we arrive at what we perceive by means of inferences relying on necessary connections between our immediate sensations and what we end up perceiving. Of course these optics writers take their psychological theory to be plausible because they take their visual sensations to be the necessary results of an absolutely existing reality. But this part of the generally prevailing philosophy is not Berkeley's current target. His goal is to argue that the immediate objects of sight represent, not through necessary but through arbitrary connections. A discussion of the ontological status of the represented world is not required for Berkeley's purpose in the *New Theory*.

In this context, the new theory that Berkeley is introducing is not a metaphysical theory. It is, rather, an account of perceptual knowledge. He wants to replace one theory of what and how we see the world around us with his own new theory, as summarized in the crucial passage of that book, NTV 147, in which he concludes "that the proper objects of vision constitute an

universal language of the Author of Nature.” Although in both *Principles* and *Three Dialogues* Berkeley is more likely to talk of signs than of language, otherwise, the conclusions drawn in this paragraph are the familiar ones to be found in both these volumes: that our knowledge of nature is based on the habitual connections among ideas learned through experience, for the purpose of enabling us to act for our benefit with foresight. And, of course, the addition of the phrase “Author of” in the second edition of the *New Theory* made plain the conclusion worked out in more detail in the later works, that the way in which we come to understand nature constitutes a proof for the existence of God.

In sum, there is no reason to regard the use Berkeley makes of idealism and claims based on idealism to be significantly different in the *New Theory* from the other works, and the conclusions he draws there are very similar to those of the later works. The only significant difference is a silence in the *New Theory* about the existence of absolutely existing mind-independent matter. I have suggested we can account for this difference by observing that this thesis was not important to the theory of space perception Berkeley took as his target in the *New Theory*. One might imagine that, in publishing the *New Theory*, Berkeley was conducting himself in the same manner as Descartes when he published a successful piece of science in the *Optics*, before laying out the metaphysics on which the science was based in the *Meditations*. On this way of looking at things, I think it is less tempting to regard Berkeley as dissembling in the presentation of this theory. The *New Theory* establishes a theory of perceptual knowledge of nature, using the means Berkeley considers appropriate. He will extend this theory of knowledge of nature beyond the perceptual, which will require more elaborate metaphysical considerations, but no significant alterations in the general thrust of his theorizing.

The *Principles* certainly differs from the *New Theory* but is like *Three Dialogues* in explicitly endorsing an idealist ontology. Nevertheless, the *Principles* does differ from *Three Dialogues* in offering considerably less argumentation for this ontology. Indeed, as we have remarked, the opening sentence of the *Principles*, which supposes that the “objects of human knowledge” are ideas is frequently taken to beg the idealist question. But, as was the case with the similar claim in the *New Theory*, we must take into account Berkeley’s intended audience. He makes plain right from the first paragraph of the introduction to the *Principles* that the target of his work is philosophers. It is they who are putting us in danger of skepticism and not the ordinary folk who uncritically take themselves to be perceiving things. Berkeley is attempting to reform philosophy, and hence is addressing philosophers. And philosophers, as Berkeley spells out in PHK 56, and reiterates at great length in *Three Dialogues*, are those who have recognized that “the immediate objects of perception do not exist without the mind.” Berkeley is therefore beginning his book from the point of view he shares with philosophers and is providing arguments only as to whether the immediately perceived ideas can lead directly to or function as representations of mind-independent things.

There is another apparent, but frequently overlooked difference between the *Principles* and *Three Dialogues* that is worth taking note of. While the philosophers who form the target of the *Principles* are certainly metaphysicians who have a view about the nature and existence

of material substance, Berkeley does not limit himself strictly to this metaphysics. As he pursues his trajectory through the Replies and Objections, Berkeley increasingly focuses on what he would have called natural philosophers. The Replies in fact culminate in a demonstration that Berkeley's approach does a better job of explaining the phenomena than does the corpuscular philosophy endorsed by his interlocutors. It is in the course of making this claim that Berkeley develops his language analogy beyond the use to which it is put in the *New Theory*, suggesting that what had previously been taken to be relations of cause and effect ought instead to be understood as relations of sign to thing signified. Berkeley, as he did in the *New Theory*, is tying his work closely to developments in the new science. His interest in natural philosophy is also evident in the discussion of the consequences of his theory, where he pays close attention to both Newtonian physics and to mathematics, arguing that, in these cases, it is his approach to these different areas that can successfully provide a coherent account that avoids skepticism. Berkeley's project here in the *Principles* is to deliver a new theory, a new way of understanding nature, and a way that can carry theorists well beyond the immediately observable into the realms of theoretical physics, microbiology, and astronomy.

So, Berkeley does indeed regard himself as arguing for an idealist ontology. He also assumes that this task is easier than the one critics often assign to him, that of showing that since we are not perceiving qualities of an external world “out there,” what we perceive can only be ideas “in here,” in the mind. Berkeley does not doubt for a minute that knowledge begins with ideas and that we know we have them, a view he would have regarded as widely accepted. His project is to show that these ideas neither reflect a direct acquaintance with pieces of a mind-independent world, nor do they represent anything mind-independent. It is at this point, of course, that Berkeley's criticisms of the notion of mind-independent matter come into play. Berkeley's purpose in undercutting the ontology of the philosophers, which he thought gave rise to skepticism, is twofold. The first is to demonstrate that, on the basis of his ontology, we are in a position to arrive at a knowledge of the world around us that is not similarly prey to skeptical doubts. Berkeley draws this conclusion initially in the last few paragraphs of his summary presentation of his theory at the beginning of the *Principles*, where he points out that sensible ideas are excited in us according to rules or Laws of Nature, allowing us to learn from experience which ideas are likely to go together or to be followed by which others. Berkeley goes on to explain how the acquisition of knowledge by these means actually works. The regularities we experience, he says, “gives us a sort of foresight” so that we end up able to regulate our actions in order to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Berkeley has, in the *Principles*, made use of his idealist ontology to arrive at the same sort of account of the nature and success of our perceptual knowledge originally laid out in the *New Theory*.

Berkeley has another ambition in the *Principles*, and that is to follow up on what is merely hinted at in the *New Theory*, namely, to show that his account of our natural knowledge constitutes evidence for the existence of God. He gestures at this conclusion in the introductory section of the *Principles*, but lays out his proof more explicitly at the end of the book. What occurs in the meantime, of course, is his demonstration that, thanks to the



systematic regularities and interconnections among our ideas, we are in a position to deliver a unified knowledge of the natural world, working with signs and their significations, and unhampered by a false belief in mind-independent essences on which our ideas are thought to necessarily depend. Thus in PHK 146, we find Berkeley arguing for God's existence both from the laws of pain and pleasure, but also from

the constant regularity, order, and concatenation of natural things, the surpassing magnificence, beauty, and perfection of the larger, and the exquisite contrivance of the smaller parts of the creation, together with the exact harmony and correspondence of the whole ...

Thanks to his account of natural philosophy, Berkeley is able to extend the account of natural knowledge in the *New Theory*, so that, as he imagines, the inevitable conclusion is that the cause of this interconnected knowable world deserves attributes like “one, eternal, infinitely wise, good, and perfect.” Berkeley has developed the account of perceptual knowledge laid out in the *New Theory* into a larger or more extensive account of the knowledge available to us that lays bare our grasp on the systematicity of the natural world, on the basis of which we can argue to the existence of a God with important characteristics, not an impersonal God of the Philosophers, but instead a God who has our best interests at heart.

Now, again, we have to raise the question, where does the final book of Berkeley's trio, *Three Dialogues*, fit in to this project? *Three Dialogues* does not, as does the *Principles*, culminate in matters of natural philosophy, but instead seems to move away from these matters to focus on common sense considerations and to defend our knowledge, not of astronomy and physics, but of tables and cherries. How can *Three Dialogues* fit in with the common philosophical project of the *New Theory* and the *Principles*? Once we pay attention to the full thrust of Berkeley's argument as it unfolds throughout the *Principles*, *Three Dialogues*, as it is often interpreted, begins to stick out like a sore thumb. Not only does Berkeley provide a much more elaborate argument concerning ideas, as is often pointed out, but to the extent that his epistemological interests are thought to focus on common sense objects, the account of knowledge being pushed there appears to be at odds with that of earlier volumes.

Again, in dealing with the apparent discrepancy, it is helpful to pay attention to the target of Berkeley's argument in *Three Dialogues*. What is distinctive about Berkeley's approach there is that he has, in effect, doubled the number of targets he is attacking. Perhaps realizing that he is limiting the audience for his ideas when he assumes that his readers all have the same familiarity with recent works in philosophy and natural philosophy as his colleagues at Trinity College, Dublin, Berkeley introduces a second target in *Three Dialogues*. He upgrades the “illiterate bulk of mankind” of the Introduction to the *Principles* to the person of common sense, the ordinary person-on-the-street, or as Berkeley frequently says, the vulgar, and, throughout *Three Dialogues* uses this figure as a foil in developing his argument, in addition to his previous target, the philosophers. What makes this structure a little complicated to follow is that both these targets are personified by a single character, Hylas. Nevertheless, the way in which Berkeley moves between these two targets can be traced, first in the First Dialogue, where, it will be recalled, Hylas begins by endorsing common sense

views and then, under Philonous's questioning, is converted to the position of the philosopher, and second, in the Third Dialogue, where Hylas takes over the questioning of the positive theory Philonous is introducing, alternating between the point of view of common sense and of philosophy.

The other important change in the way in which Berkeley structures his argument in *Three Dialogues* is that he moves the issue of skepticism to the beginning of the book, and places it front and center. In the *Principles*, Berkeley makes perfectly plain in the Introduction that the chief objection he has to current philosophical trends is that they have been conducive to skepticism. The ultimate goal of Berkeley's argument is to be epistemological. But there he carries out his argument, first by developing and explaining the nature and reach of his ontology. Only in the third section of that work, dealing with the consequences of his ontology, does Berkeley raise the skeptical consequences of the philosophy he has been targeting, using that as a reason for preferring his own non-skeptical theory. In *Three Dialogues*, on the other hand, the issue of skepticism provides the frame for the discussion: whatever theory that is least likely to lead to skepticism and, Berkeley adds, is closer to common sense, will be the preferred theory. This way of putting things, while embracing both of Berkeley's targets, has proved confusing. If Berkeley is here claiming to be taking as his project a full-throated defense of common sense, then he is certainly at odds with the *Principles*, which is dismissive of common sense, and in favor of substantial scientific theorizing.

Hylas makes his appearance as a person of common sense as he and Philonous discuss the status of sensible things. Hylas makes two common sense assertions: "To exist is one thing and to be perceived is another" and "Whatever degree of heat we perceive by sense, we may be sure the same exists in the object that occasions it" (3DI 175). As I have urged previously, the issue between Hylas and Philonous is not: There is heat but does it exist "out there" or "in here"? This is a philosophical not a common sense issue. As a person of common sense, Hylas knows he is perceiving, but he thinks the heat he perceives is the heat that goes on existing out there in the world. Berkeley, that is, has set himself the task of showing the reasons why philosophers have abandoned common sense in order to assert that, as Berkeley puts it, "the things immediately perceived are ideas which exist in the mind" (3DIII 262). The purpose of this extended section of the First Dialogue is to move Hylas, and with him more commonsensically inclined readers, to the introductory philosophical position of the *Principles*. It would be Berkeley's hope, presumably, that readers of this piece of the dialogue would no longer suppose, like Dr. Johnson, that they could refute Berkeley's theory by kicking a stone. It should also be noted that by the end of the First Dialogue, Hylas is prepared to reject his original commonsense position, and instead to assert that "no idea can exist without the mind" (3DI 206). It has not been at this point in the argument Berkeley's goal to endorse common sense. On the other hand, since Hylas has moved on to the philosophical position that the material archetypes of sensible ideas are insensible, he has laid himself open to the charge Philonous immediately makes, that Hylas is now a skeptic.

At the beginning of the Third Dialogue, Hylas is himself ready to admit that he is a skeptic, and it is Philonous who claims that he is "of a vulgar cast, simple enough to believe my

senses, and leave things as I find them” (3DIII 229). But as I have argued, this is not Philonous's last word about the position he is developing. Berkeley structures the Third Dialogue around his claim to be both agreeing with the philosophers, who hold we immediately perceive ideas, and with persons of common sense, who suppose we immediately perceive real things. Berkeley puts in Hylas's mouth objections to Philonous coming from both camps. In general, it should be noted that the response Berkeley gives Philonous to the objections stemming from common sense is that the position of the philosophers is even more removed from common sense. More interesting still is the way Berkeley defends his own position, that the ideas immediately perceived are the real things, against that of the philosophers. Early on in the Third Dialogue, Berkeley adds to this formulation the further claim that the ideas that are real things are not just perceived by us but are exhibited to us according to the Laws of Nature. Throughout this Dialogue Berkeley establishes and refines his account of the role of the Laws of Nature. Most striking are some passages following Hylas's challenge on behalf of philosophers who have explained the phenomena by appeal to matter. Philonous's response, after pointing out the incoherence of any appeal to matter, is to observe that the philosophers Hylas admires have actually been doing something different, “for by observing and reasoning upon the connexion of ideas, they discover the laws and methods of Nature, which is a part of knowledge both useful and entertaining” (3DIII 243). Indeed, as Berkeley goes on to explain in the following pages, no one actually discovers the reality of things by uncovering a hidden nature, but instead their “aim is only to know what ideas are connected together, and the more a man knows of the connexion of ideas, the more he is said to know of the nature of things” (3DIII 245). Indeed, a far more active picture emerges of what goes on when we know real things, than simply immediately and passively perceiving them. It is extremely important to Berkeley's argument that God supplies the conditions under which we know real things, but it is we ourselves who must observe the connections among ideas, so as to distinguish the real from the fanciful. Towards the end of the Third Dialogue, Berkeley gives Philonous a long speech, demonstrating the superiority of his own what he now calls “immaterialism” against his rival philosophers that concludes that reality is to be found in ideas, which, while themselves fleeting and changing, lead to a stable truth through the fixed Laws of Nature. Despite a very different approach to Berkeley's theory, *Three Dialogues* does not introduce new doctrine. The description Philonous gives of his project in *Three Dialogues* captures what Berkeley has been up to all along. “I am not,” he says, “for changing things into ideas, but ideas into things” (3DIII 244). But, of course, it is when we recognize the nature of and the conditions under which we humans turn ideas into things that we can also recognize that we live in a world created by God, which can be known absolutely by our God-given faculties.

Berkeley did indeed in his three books structure his argument in three different ways. It can be surmised that he was acutely aware of the difficulties of convincing others of the truth of his theory, and was prepared to think and re-think the best way of putting his arguments persuasively. Given the care that Berkeley put into the construction of his arguments, it is important, as he urges, to follow each through from beginning to end. What emerges is that, despite obvious differences in presentation, there are clear themes and clear goals throughout. Berkeley considered each of his three books to be defenses against the philosophically

induced skepticism that he took to have serious theological and moral consequences. He wanted to show that, by dispensing with the ontological commitment to absolute existence, we would be able to locate a correct understanding of reality within the resources provided to us, namely, “ideas, fleeting indeed, and changeable; however, not changed at random, but according to the fixed order of Nature” (3DIII 258). To Berkeley, it is the conjunction of fleeting ideas and the fixed order of nature, together with the “never enough admired laws of pain and pleasure” (PHK 146) that constitute the means by which “we are principally guided in all the transactions of life” (NTV 147). And furthermore, and most importantly, for Berkeley, by contemplating “the whole system immense, beautiful, and glorious beyond expression and beyond thought” (3DII 211), we will learn to honor both its and our maker.

## note

[1](#) For an excellent expression of this point of view, see G. Pitcher, *Berkeley*. (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), chapter 2.

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