



Principles of Human Knowledge & Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous

George Berkeley , Roger Woolhouse (Introduction)

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One of the greatest British philosophers, Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753) was the founder of the influential doctrine of Immaterialism - the belief that there is no reality outside the mind, and that the existence of material objects depends upon their being perceived. *The Principles of Human Knowledge* eloquently outlines this philosophical concept, and argues forcefully that the world consists purely of finite minds and ideas, and of an infinite spirit, God. A denial of all non-spiritual reality, Berkeley's theory was at first heavily criticized by his contemporaries, who feared its ideas would lead to scepticism and atheism. *The Three Dialogues* provide a powerful response to these fears.

Principles of Human Knowledge & Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous Details

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peiman-mir5 rezakhani says

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When Bishop Berkeley first published his theory of Immaterialism (also known as Idealism, not to be confused with idealising) he was mocked by many of the prominent thinkers of the day, including Samuel Johnson (of dictionary fame) who, when asked of his opinion kicked a rock and roared "I refute Berkeley

thus!" Centuries later, and with the advent of quantum physics (particularly the Copenhagen interpretation), it would appear that Berkeley may well have been ahead of his time.

In essence, his theory states that matter as we understand it is an illusion: it cannot be proven to exist and therefore, by arch-scepticism, it must be assumed not to exist at all. What we are left with is perception: the rock does not exist in and of itself, only my perception of the rock. As such, nothing exists unless it is perceived. Thus the ontological burden is placed upon the agent of perception (i.e. you and me) rather than on the object of perception itself.

There are, of course, elements of Berkeley's theory that we moderns may feel inclined to reject (such as his notion that God perceives everything, hence the world doesn't just collapse when nobody's looking). However, his central tenet that the act of perception is integral to reality remains a powerful idea, and one which we are only now beginning to fully comprehend.

Taymaz Azimi says

It is important to understand that Berkeley does not actually reject the possibility of external world/ physical objects. What he does is mentioning the matter of importance. I mean, existence is an important matter of our knowledge and existence is firstly what my mind perceives. Since we cannot be sure of the material existence of things and since our mind perceives whole things without necessity of externality, this externality is totally unimportant.

Fatemeh Rahmani says

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C says

On paper, this book should be a zero star for someone like me. As people know, I'm a militant atheist, materialist, Marxist, and I wear my politics and philosophy on my sleeve - sometimes even on other peoples' sleeves. And Berkeley is basically the stark opposite of me: a Christian, immaterialists, who undoubtedly held conservative views. Nonetheless, Berkeley was unequivocally a philosophical gangster in the streets, and a freak in the bed.

Seriously though, Berkeley gives every materialist, in his time, hitherto, a run for their money. As the introduction essays remarks, Lenin, and Engels, recognized Berkeley's philosophy was not easy to transcend.

And anyone who has read Engels's attempt to transcend it (I have not read Lenin's), knows he failed. According to my friend, Lenin failed too. For Berkeley only two things exist, minds/spirits, and ideas. Well God too, but his argument in favor of God's existence ultimately boils down to: atheist are repugnant, hallelujah.

Despite the extreme advances made in the cognitive sciences, and philosophy overall, returning to the empiricist tradition is always a treat. The writing is clear, the philosophy is simple, and their epistemological system is completely summarizable. Berkeley is no exception. He sets out to rid the world of abstractions, and abstract ideas, especially Platonic forms. Moreover, he wants to make necessary advancements upon Locke's philosophy of primary qualities (i.e., substance, extension, etc), and secondary qualities.

Locke believed when we perceived an object, we perceived secondary qualities, that is qualities that only exist for our mind, such as colors, sounds, tasted, etc.; and primary qualities, which existed independent of observation (e.g., extension, substance). Thus, a table tastes oakly to the human, but delicious to the termite. But to both creatures, the table is extended, and contains substance (the metaphysical glue holding the table together), or matter for the materialist. Berkeley points out that for an empiricist this is a complete contradiction. The empiricist never observes primary qualities, and it is impossible for these qualities to exist outside perception, because how could someone perceive of something existing outside perception? This is a complete contradiction.

If things only exist when they're being perceived, we are left flummoxed. Why is it that things always seems to be where we left them, and that there is consistency and order in the universe? Berkeley believes that there are natural laws, laws that unlike our perception have a will or volition of their own. Moreover, these objects remain consistent because there is one all eternal perceiver: GOD. In the first essay there is no serious argument for why God exist; only that atheist are repugnant beings, worthy of contempt. But isn't Berkeley's philosophy all the more fun when a God doesn't exist? I mean really, the fact that things don't exist when I don't perceive them, and I bring things into existence by viewing them, is substantially more interesting. Moreover, despite the fact that Berkeley says we perceive God in his work, he is essentially using God as the primary quality he rejects.

Overall, great book.

Thiruman Archunan says

The outstanding work. One of my favourite books. It is difficult to read. I used to read frequently about in 2003.

Alex Milledge says

I believe that Berkeley has a point that all qualities of an object are sensed, but i do not necessarily we agree that we need a God as a validator of our impressions or assign that God is the cause of our impressions. That is very Cartesian, as well as very wrong. Believing in that will lead us to think that God is complete existence, and that to speak of not believing in God would be non-existence and therefore meaningless.

Xander says

In these two little works George Berkeley takes up his gloves and tries to resurrect our faith in the existence of reality. He does this, by offering us his own philosophy, as a remedy to the wrongdoings of Descartes, Malebranche, Locke and colleagues.

Berkeley argues that the 17th century 'new philosophy' inevitably leads to sceptical and atheistic beliefs. These philosophical systems and their metaphysical principles are, according to Berkeley, incoherent and inconsistent. As an Anglican christian and a philosopher, he thought it his duty to offer his contemporaries an alternative to the aforementioned ones.

To understand the radical proposition of Berkeley, it is necessary to view in the context of his time. Descartes tried to build a new system of certain knowledge on metaphysical principles, and thought (ultimately) that we can grasp reality by rationality. Locke didn't accept these innate principles but tried to develop a system based on empiricist principles: we perceive objects via our senses, these create ideas in us and via reflection on these ideas we combine and associate these ideas into complex, new ideas. But both the rationalist Descartes as the empiricist Locke agreed that there was an objective reality to grasp, in the first place.

The scepticism Berkeley hints at, lies in the fact that Locke has to admit that we will never be able to fully understand reality, while Descartes puts all his metaphysical faith in the hands of a good God (who wouldn't deceive us, therefore the world as we perceive is real - uhm, right...). In both systems of knowledge we may legitimately doubt every proposition and with this become sceptics ourselves. This leads to the inevitable question: does God even exist? This is what Berkeley, as a devout Anglican, sees as the threat of rationalism and empiricism - scepticism leading to atheism.

How does Berkeley work his way around these pitfalls? Well, to begin with, he does not accept that reality objectively exists. Doing this, he can safely circumnavigate the problems of Locke. According to Berkeley we perceive ideas and this is the only thing that is certain. There are finite immaterial minds (us) and an infinite mind (God), nothing more, nothing less. (This smells like Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, without the Cartesian dualism of matter and soul). These minds have ideas about perceptions, but there's no object that 'creates' these perceptions, therefore Berkeley doesn't need to prove that a material world exists. This is his famous 'Immaterialism'.

As he himself explains: "I do not pretend to be a setter-up of new notions. My endeavors 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." (p. 207).

Combining these two notions, we get: the only things that exist in the mind are the real things. In other words: every subject (i.e. human intellect) creates its own reality by perceiving ideas. The mountain we see is real, because we perceive this mountain; not because this mountain is part of an objective reality, for us to be perceived.

It doesn't take a genius to see the problematic point in Berkeley's argument, and the most ironic illustration is the anecdote about Berkeley's own life. When visiting Jonathan Swift (a friend of Berkeley), Berkeley

knocks on Swift's door. Swift leaves his door closed and tells Berkeley to perceive an open door so he can come in.

This is a funny example, because it illustrates most vividly the absurdity of Berkeley's position. By trying to destroy the 'sceptical and atheistic' systems of knowledge of his precursors, he erects a system that is at its core so absurd, that it collapses in such a simple way. Is the moon there when I'm not looking? Does a bomb, that explodes in the woods with no one around to notice, make noise?

Berkeley tries to counter this inevitable critique by positing that God, as an infinite immaterial mind, exists; that the same logic applies to God's mind (perceptions exist and are 'the reality'); and that because of the infinity of God's mind, anything exists at all times in - God's mind. Therefore, according to Berkeley, when we are not looking at the chair, the chair does exist in God's mind, so the chair exists. Period.

Well, that doesn't sound convincing right? This is the same as Descartes positing the infinite goodness of God as an argument for the existence of objective reality. You cannot build a system of certain knowledge on principles of faith, because that is the one thing that you're trying to avoid. I think Bishop Berkeley was a bit too overzealous in his effort to do away with Cartesian dualism and the empiricist materialism of Hobbes and Locke.

I think we should agree with David Hume that the causal chains of our perceiving objects and us forming ideas about these objects are so long and unintelligible to us, that we should just agree that we simply don't know if there's such a thing as objective reality. But like Hume, we should just continue with our lives and do as if there was such a thing as reality.

Besides the above mentioned content of both books (i.e. Berkeley's philosophy), I want to mention that I didn't like reading both (short) works. The Dialogues were the more rewarding part, but besides Plato (and maybe Galilei) I don't know of any writer who succesfully translated philosophical or scientific topics into readable dialogue. As for ,the Principles, they are just abstract and dry material, nothing attractive about that. You also need a lot of prior knowledge about the philosophical context of Berkeley's time. So I cannot really recommend this book.

Foad says

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More here: <http://oystermonkey.blogspot.com/2014...>

For philosophy, this is fairly easy reading, with the dialogue being far more enjoyable than the Principles. My relative dislike of the book comes from its almost total preoccupation with metaphysical questions, which is obviously the point, but I have come to realize is not my favorite branch of philosophy. But within that purview it serves as a powerful critique of previous metaphysical systems, and managed to get me thinking about metaphysical questions more than pretty much any other metaphysical philosophy I've read

thus far. His whole argument about "ideas only being about ideas" and the consequences that stem from it is interesting to follow and mull over. I don't find his overall philosophy compelling and uplifting the way I did with Spinoza because it seems so forced into a tightly Biblical worldview, but I like the concept of "subjective idealism." I need to read more about exactly how he misinterprets Locke and in what ways his philosophy is relevant today (this seemed less useful in a reading-backwards context than Locke). Some of the footnotes raised some interesting metaphysical ideas that I don't think I fully grasped that are probably worth studying more. Also enjoyed his preoccupation with definitions, further emphasizing their importance to me (though I think at times he is guilty of some of the semantic arbitrariness he confuses others of).

Sam Eccleston says

This is probably one of the most eccentric theories in all of philosophy. Initially it seems completely implausible, but Berkeley's genius is such that an idea with apparently little to recommend it becomes a live option by the end of the book. The genius of the argument is in its simplicity; it could be expressed in probably a page or two of prose at the most. Thus, much of the book is dealing with rebuttal of potential criticism. This can become somewhat repetitive, as many of the criticisms can be answered in the same way, and some of it deals with issues which at the time were at the forefront of scientific thought but which are no longer entirely relevant, but despite this there are many interesting asides along the way.

It would be fascinating to read a companion volume updating Berkeley's arguments for the post-quantum picture of the world; I am sure there is such a thing available somewhere.

Dominic Foo says

I first encountered Berkeley when I was in JC1, beginning my first journey into philosophy. Of the three key figures of British empiricism, Berkeley is the one most infamous for his outrageous thesis that matter does not exist and that everything is merely a system of sensations or mental ideas. I admit, I was actually quite attracted to this system back then, but Berkeley never really quite fleshed it out in a full system and so there wasn't really much for me to work on.

Berkeley's immaterialism postulates that "to be is to be perceived", and that reality is fundamentally a system of ideas, regulated by God. Think of it as everyone living in a massive Matrix except that the central computer is the divine mind regulating the whole system and feeding sensations directly into our souls. While outrageous and counter-intuitive when he first postulated it, but one might say that he has been amply vindicated by contemporary physics. The passage of time, for example, is essentially relative to the velocity of the observer, ultimately governed by a four-dimension "block" universe. Quantum mechanics speaks of particles existing in "clouds of probability" and only collapses back into concrete reality only when actually observed. (I'm not exactly sure of the details, my basic physics is a little rusty here) Thus, Berkeley's denial of materialism is simply a denial of the existence of "absolute" matter with fixed extensions, temporal passage and solidity, and that the phenomena which we experience is simply part of a broader and more complicated system which necessarily involves the observer, at least, according to special relativity.

Berkeley of course would precede the transcendental idealism of Kant and ultimately Hegel himself. Berkeley's immaterialism postulated a very interesting definition for distinguishing between "appearance" and "reality", since in his scheme, EVERYTHING is supposedly merely sensations or appearance. He argued

that the images which we produced by our will, e.g. by imagination, is "not as real", as sensation which simply are effected upon us independently of our will. Thus, it is highly suggestive that the *will* ultimately is the pivot upon which reality is distinguished from appearance, and that reality is "external" to our will, objective, what we experience whether we like it or not, and appearance or illusion or "lesser" reality are simply the systems or thoughts produced by our wills. This distinction would later wonderfully exercise the minds of the continental philosophers.

Paradoxically, Berkeley insists that his conception is simply common sense! He argued that we do not need mysterious unperceived matter and that we, literally, get what we see directly without the need to postulate anything beyond our perception. In this, Berkeley is merely following in the philosophical tradition of nominalism/empiricism, which has an entirely respectable pedigree in Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, etc, all also somewhat nominalistic and empiricists.

The focus upon "common sense", upon particulars as opposed to universals and the dislike of grand philosophical systems often have the paradoxical effect of churning out highly subtle and sophisticated systems, albeit unintended. By focusing on concrete particularity and denying universals or unifying abstract ideas as he calls it, he takes a surprising somewhat "postmodern" turn whereby the meaning of notations and terms is not found in it referring to some unified universal or abstract ideas, but in its actual concrete use by people in all its empirical messiness and plurality, in other words, how people actually use the terms to talk about a wide range of phenomena which may or may not have a systematic or unifying sense, but becomes highly contextualised.

In mathematics for example, Berkeley's nominalism anticipates the later "formalists" on mathematics in that he argues that there are no platonic mathematical entities or mental constructs, simply the bare meaningless notations which we manipulate according to rules. Thus, every mathematical demonstration is merely a manipulation of certain defined rules concerning those notations. The closest analogy would be a game of chess. He explains that when a geometer makes demonstrations about a triangle which he has drawn on the board, he is not talking about some invisible platonic perfect triangle but simply about the triangle on the board and focusing on certain aspects of it to make deductions via the use of precise mathematical notations. This is in keeping with the nominalist postulate that everything which exists is particular and that there are no abstract objects, simply the concrete diagrams and notations.

Karl Hallbjörnsson says

Horribly wrong, shot through with logical impossibilities, based on flimsy premises and all around silly.

This dude tries, first off, to refute the concept of an abstract idea, which he thinks he does by saying that when we suppose we think of an abstract idea we really do think of a concrete idea, one which we then supposedly connect every single instance pertaining to the "abstract" (all sorts of triangles, for example, thus relate to a concrete image of some single mode of triangularity — this is called nominalism) but in doing this he merely shifts the abstract set of triangles (containing every triangle and none) from the name "triangles" to having some other name, be it "equilateral triangle" or what have you. Obviously this just renames the set of triangles itself while conserving the core abstract idea of a set underneath. In the words of the Donald Trump: Sad!

Then he tries to convince us that in fact there is no material reality underlying the sensations and ideas thereof, but rather that there is an almighty God that through his eternal and all-encompassing perception

maintains the existence of everything. The only substance is the soul, or that which impressions are pressed upon, and this substance can only have affects by way of impressions which are effectively ideas. Of course, this fucking stupid thesis rests entirely on his premise of there being an almighty Christian benevolent God ready to uphold the universe of ideas through his gaze, if we collapse the God-function the whole system implodes in on itself. Now, let us suppose that we yield to his premise of God being the ultimate perceiver, then what? The logical conclusion is that there is literally no real reason to stay alive, since everything I experience are ideas impressed upon me by God, my wife, my possessions, the universe in its entirety, and I am the only real substance extant. — this means that I am already 100% in God, and there is no reason for me not to introduce the idea of my temple to an idea of a handgun and pulling the ideal trigger. But then again, this is impossible, since there is no material reality and thus I'm unable to die! I'm now stuck in some eternal limbo of undeath, forced to potentially relive every single idea of Gods making until the impossible end of ideal space-time.

I'm still unsure about some things: how can matter be non-existent if it is an idea impressed upon us by almighty God? Does that mean that the idea does not and can not exist? What does that mean for the existence of the almighty deity? What is an almighty deity that cannot create matter, that cannot even conceive of matter?

No, this volume is a bad joke. I strongly advise against reading this complete horseshit. It honestly kind of angers me that this is so celebrated on here and in academia. Fuck you, Berkeley, you bastard

Shoshi says

Rarely have I read a text that made me want to read a previous book again, just to make sure I got it right. This one did. Throughout Berkeley attempts to refute Locke for his An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. However, from my reading of Locke it sounded like Berkeley argued for the same things as Locke. Perhaps he disagreed with Locke's writing style? Found it so grating that he had to write a treatise in his own voice? Maybe soon I'll have the time again to reread both.
