

## The Fourth Dialogue between Hylas and Philonous - Introduction

The *Fourth Dialogue between Hylas and Philonous* provides a sequel to the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (1713) written by the Irish philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753). A slightly shortened version of the *Fourth Dialogue* has appeared in the magazine *Philosophy Now* (Issue 105).



Portrait of George Berkeley (1730) by John Smibert

The philosophical dialogue is associated in particular with Plato (427-347 BC). Whilst his dialogues purport to record actual conversations involving Socrates (469-399BC), Berkeley's protagonists are wholly fictional. Their names allude to opposing philosophical stances regarding the nature of reality. Hylas believes in the existence of both mind and *matter* (the Ancient Greek for matter being 'hyle') whilst Philonous believes in the existence of only one type of substance i.e. spirit or *mind* (the Ancient Greek for mind being 'nous').

In the *Three Dialogues* Philonous is clearly the mouthpiece for Berkeley. To his credit, Berkeley does not make the discussions overly one-sided. Hylas, although ending up in agreement with the immaterialist doctrine of Philonous, does put up a reasonably spirited defence of 'matter' and poses some awkward questions for Philonous, particularly in relation to the role of God in turning sinful intentions into realities.

In spite of the characters' names, the *Three Dialogues* are not set in Ancient Greece but in a college garden in the late 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> century (reference being made to a *microscope*). Quite possibly, Berkeley had in mind his own college – Trinity College, Dublin – of which he became a Fellow in 1707 and probably

envisaged Hylas and Philonous also as Fellows of their college. In the *Fourth Dialogue* I imagine them as fairly *senior* Fellows (particularly Philonous who suffers, we learn, from a weak bladder) – although not as senior as the two philosophers depicted by Rembrandt below!



The Two Philosophers Disputing (1628) by Rembrandt

The *Fourth Dialogue* retains Berkeley's college garden setting and its language reflects, to an extent at least, that of Berkeley, a few of its phrases being taken directly from his *Three Dialogues* or from his *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710). However, it also includes terminology not in currency at the time. For example, although Berkeley refers to 'sensations' and the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-76) to 'impressions', the term 'sense data' came into philosophical use only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The *Fourth Dialogue* as it stands, of course, is something that Berkeley would never have written. Hylas not only rejects immaterialism – exposing the incoherence of characterising sensory experience as the perception of 'ideas' – but also makes disparaging references to Berkeley himself (e.g. as Philonous' "pet philosopher") and ends up denying the credibility of any hypothesised 'god'.

The *Fourth Dialogue* highlights, in an accessible way I hope, key problems besetting Berkeley's immaterialist philosophy, an extended and more formal examination of which is provided in my paper *Stuff and Nonsense: Berkeley and Immaterialism*.

Roger Jennings January 2015

## The Fourth Dialogue between Hylas and Philonous

**Philonous:** Good morrow, Hylas. It is an unexpected pleasure to find you in the garden at so early an hour.

**Hylas:** I came in the hope of finding *you*. Having returned from my travels, I am keen to renew our former discussions.

**Philonous:** I would be delighted to pass the time of day with you – but, as for those discussions, what more is there to say? By the end of our last meeting you appeared to accept all my reasonings.

**Hylas:** Whilst abroad I have given them much thought and have come to realise their wholly tendentious nature.

**Philonous:** That is fighting talk, Hylas! Very well, fire away and we will see where our conversation leads us.

**Hylas:** Let me start by summarising your position, as I understand it. You assert that there exist nothing but *perceiving spirits* and *perceived ideas*. There are *finite* spirits, such as you and me, and an *infinite* spirit, namely God. The ideas we perceive through our senses are not of our own choosing and, therefore, must be implanted in us by God since material substance, if it existed at all, would necessarily be inert and incapable of generating them. We blend or combine together sensory ideas into *collections* comprising *objects*.

**Philonous:** A fair summary. Proceed.

**Hylas:** You maintain then that through our senses we perceive only ideas?

**Philonous:** Absolutely. Through sight, for example, we perceive ideas of light, shapes and colours.

**Hylas:** Then please look up into that apple tree and tell me how many visual ideas you perceive.



**Philonous:** Impossible. There are far too many.

**Hylas:** Very well. Identify just *one*. That large apple nearest to us, for example, – is that an idea?

**Philonous:** Perhaps you are trying to catch me out. It constitutes not a *single* idea but a *collection* of ideas.

**Hylas:** If neither you nor I have observed the apple before and thus have no memories of it, does this collection include only our *current* visual ideas?

**Philonous:** The sensory ideas we now experience are just a *sub-set* of the virtual *infinity* of ideas constituting the apple that exist in the mind of God.

**Hylas:** Including ideas that finite spirits have never, and might never, perceive such as those relating to its flesh, core and pips?

**Philonous:** Just so.

**Hylas:** Including all the *changing* ideas of size, shape and colour exhibited by the apple as it has grown on the tree?

**Philonous:** That must be the case.

**Hylas:** Does that not mean the collection constituting the apple includes *mutually incompatible* appearances – different shapes and sizes for example?

**Philonous:** In one of our previous conversations I explained that, *strictly speaking*, the collections of ideas formed by different senses and at different moments constitute *different* objects.

**Hylas:** You said – I made a note at the time – that “we do not see the same object that we feel; neither is the same object perceived by the microscope which was by the naked eye”. It follows that each moment the angle or distance of our view alters, we perceive *different* objects. Right now, indeed, you and I must perceive different objects as our angles of view differ.

**Philonous:** I appreciate the argument is complex.

**Hylas:** I would call it *incoherent*. But to return to my request, please identify just one visual idea that you currently perceive.

**Philonous:** Any patch of colour on any one of the apples provides an example of such an idea.

**Hylas:** But the apples display gradually changing colours that merge into one another and lack clear boundaries. Where does one visual idea stop and another start?

**Philonous:** Perhaps we have to accept that sensory ideas can have blurred boundaries.

**Hylas:** Or that representing things as ‘collections of ‘ideas’ perceived by the senses is *unintelligible*. Our visual *awareness*, surely, is not one of consciously blending countless colours and shapes into objects.

More generally, our *continuously changing* sensory experience is not divisible into discrete 'ideas'. The notes sung by the bird in that tree, for example, may change continuously in pitch, like a glissando on a violin. How many separate 'aural ideas' do we then perceive?



**Philonous:** I am not sure how to answer.

**Hylas:** Does the collection of ideas comprising the bird include aural ideas relating to its song?

**Philonous:** It includes *all* sensory ideas connected with the bird.

**Hylas:** Would you dissect a duck in search of its quack?

**Philonous:** That would be an act of sheer madness.

**Hylas:** And yet you judge the sounds made by birds to be *part* of them. Presumably you also consider tastes of apples – the apples ceasing to exist the instant they are eaten – to be *part* of them.

**Philonous:** I can only repeat that ideas imprinted on the senses are combined together to compose objects including things such as apples and birds.

**Hylas:** Do you consider that birds – unlike apples but like ourselves – exist not merely as collections of sensory ideas constituting their bodies but also as *spirits* composed of 'immaterial substance'?

**Philonous:** If nothing exists but perceiving spirits and perceived ideas, then anything capable of perception must be a spirit.

**Hylas:** Indeed, in our very first discussion you asserted that the senses are bestowed on *all* animals for their preservation and well-being in life. Thus animals such as whales, elephants, lions, tigers, horses, cows, sheep, pigs, dogs, cats, rats, mice, bats, birds, snakes, fish, frogs, slugs, snails, worms, bees, beetles, flies, fleas, ants and mites must possess spirits in which God imprints sensory ideas.

**Philonous:** If they perceive such ideas that must be the case.

**Hylas:** And how are sensory ideas allocated by perceiving spirits between different collections comprising different things? In relation to that apple tree, for example, if I, you, a bird or any other sentient creature perceives, amongst a myriad of ideas, a tiny fleck of red, should it be allocated to a collection comprising the *skin* of a particular apple, a particular *apple* or the whole apple *tree*? Can a single idea be a member simultaneously of *different* collections?

**Philonous:** I accept there are some difficulties here.

**Hylas:** Let me add to those difficulties. Are we agreed that our own bodies, including all our sensory organs, are as much collections of ideas as the apples on that tree?

**Philonous:** What else can they be if nothing exists but perceiving spirits and perceived ideas?

**Hylas:** And are ideas passive and incapable of any active force, spirits alone possessing causative power?

**Philonous:** Indeed.

**Hylas:** So our sensory organs, as collections of ideas, cannot be the means by which our spirits – or, as we may also say, our minds – perceive sensory ideas?

**Philonous:** All such ideas are imprinted in our minds by God.

**Hylas:** So the reason our good friend Tuphlos has been blind from birth is not some defect of his eyes – which by your reasoning must, like *all* eyes, comprise functionless collections of ideas – but that God chooses not to imprint visual ideas in his mind. Why should God be so unkind?

**Philonous:** You must understand, Hylas, that God imprints sensory ideas in accordance with the Laws of Nature.

**Hylas:** But what is this 'Nature'? Surely not some spirit whose laws God must slavishly follow. God is meant to be the Supreme Spirit and the *Author* of Nature. Everything he does he must *choose*, fully aware of its consequences.

**Philonous:** Perhaps things which seem bad when considered in themselves have the nature of good when considered as part of the whole system of beings.

**Hylas:** Would you suggest the same in respect of our poor friend Nekros whose body became covered in pustules – which, according to you, comprise collections of ideas – and who, after much vomiting, – such outpourings also, according to you, comprising collections of ideas – died a protracted death, his mind full of God-imprinted ideas experienced by him as the extremes of pain and distress?

**Philonous:** I can provide no other answer.

**Hylas:** You provide words but no answer. Allow me to illustrate a further difficulty by prodding you in the collection of ideas we call your stomach with the collection of ideas we call my right forefinger.

**Philonous:** I wish you wouldn't.

**Hylas:** I wish only to make a philosophical point.

**Philonous:** I wish you would do so in a less annoying way.

**Hylas:** Please bear with me. Clearly we have *contradictory* wishes regarding the sensory ideas we currently perceive. We both perceive visual ideas relating to my prodding finger and you perceive tactile ideas relating to your stomach which excite ideas of annoyance within you – although all ideas are supposedly inactive and incapable of generating others. Do we, as immaterial spirits, have the power to imprint sensory ideas in our own and each other's minds?



**Philonous:** In a previous discussion, you may recall, I suggested that we have the use of limited powers, ultimately derived from God but immediately under the direction of our own wills, to produce motions in the limbs of our bodies.

**Hylas:** Does that not raise a problem? According to you, our own bodies and their component parts – including our sensory organs, limbs and vocal chords – comprise passive collections of ideas imprinted in our minds by God. Thus any intention to move our limbs or to speak can be realised *only* through him. According to a philosopher you admire, God *alone* “maintains that intercourse between spirits whereby they are able to perceive the existence of each other”.

**Philonous:** Wherein lies the problem?

**Hylas:** An obvious problem arises from the fact that different minds often want different things. Right now, surely, you do not wish to experience all the sensory ideas associated with the prodding of my finger. Why should God favour my wishes over yours?

**Philonous:** Perhaps it amuses him to indulge your rather unorthodox way of making a philosophical point.

**Hylas:** Would you think the same if I were to seize you by the throat and commence to throttle you? When we last met I asked if you were not aware that by making God the immediate author of all the motions in nature, you make him the author of murder, sacrilege, adultery and like heinous crimes. You sought to deflect my objection by saying that sin lies in the intention not the act, but this only heightens the problem of why God should be complicit in turning sinful intentions into realities.

**Philonous:** I can only repeat that God imprints sensory ideas in our minds in accordance with the Laws of Nature.

**Hylas:** And I can only insist that talk of Laws of Nature which, for some unknown reason, God chooses to impose upon himself is obscurantist claptrap.

**Philonous:** You become intemperate in your choice of words but at least have stopped emphasising them with a prodding finger. You criticise my immaterialist doctrine but offer no alternative.

**Hylas:** An alternative exists which is neither materialist nor immaterialist. Let us start by rejecting as unintelligible the notion that the objects of sensory perception are sensory ideas – or, as some might label them, ‘sensations’, ‘impressions’ or ‘sense data’. Such words designate nothing identifiable and their use evidences conceptual confusion.

**Philonous:** What then *do* we perceive through our senses?

**Hylas:** According to you, the senses are functionless collections of ideas so *nothing* is perceived *through* them. But let that pass. Through our senses we perceive all sorts of ‘things’ – apples, birds, fingers, trees, forests, hills, rivers, voices, clouds, sky, shadows and reflections, to name but a few. Crucially we are directly aware of ‘stuff’, for want of a better word, some of it identifiable as bounded objects. The existence of stuff – including the stuff of which we are ourselves composed – does *not* depend upon its being perceived and most, in fact, is *never* perceived. We conduct our entire lives on this basis. We do not doubt the existence of the unperceived bulk of things underlying their perceived surfaces or of objects shut away in cupboards and drawers or, indeed, of our own internal organs. We do not believe they *consist of*, and thereby exist only as, perceptions in the minds of finite spirits or of an infinite spirit. Belief that stuff exists independently of its being perceived is

fundamental to any *coherent* and *intelligible* view of the world we experience.

**Philonous:** Have you forgotten all that we previously discussed and agreed? Did we not agree that “things immediately perceived by sense exist nowhere without the mind”.

**Hylas:** I do remember and am now ashamed to have agreed with a proposition so conceptually flawed. The fallacy is to confuse the *thing* perceived with the *experience* of perceiving it. All perceptual experience, of course, occurs within the minds of perceivers. But perception *of what?* To say we perceive sensory ideas is to say ‘we perceive perceptions’, which tells us *nothing*. Sensory experience is essentially *of*, or *connected with*, stuff or things located, relative to the perceiver, in three-dimensional space. The content of such experience can be described intelligibly in no other terms.

**Philonous:** Are you trying to resurrect *matter* under the guise of stuff? Did we not agree that material substance, if it existed at all, would be inactive and incapable of causing thought?

**Hylas:** How strange for you to assert that something does *not exist* and then presume to say what it would be like if it *did*! You told me in our second discussion that to describe matter as active and capable of causing thought is to “play with words”. Why should I be playing with words if I attribute such properties to matter and not *you* when you deny such properties to something you consider non-existent?

**Philonous:** But is it *possible* for matter to cause thought?

**Hylas:** Not just *cause* but also *experience* thought. Is it not evident that configurations of stuff in the form of brains can *perceive, think and feel*? Only by rejecting our traditional categorisations of ‘material’ and ‘immaterial’ can we begin to make sense of the reality of which we form a part.

**Philonous:** You will tell me next that trees, stones and rivers are thinking beings!

**Hylas:** Of course not. Consciousness, as far as we are aware, is a feature only of organisms with central nervous systems and brains and these comprise a vanishingly small fraction of all stuff.

**Philonous:** Do you not reduce all that we experience as perception, thought and feeling to mere processes occurring within matter in the form of brains?

**Hylas:** I take nothing away from the reality of conscious experience. To envisage a causal connection between consciousness and brain processes is not to

reduce the former to the latter. A description of one cannot be substituted for a description of the other. What I experience when I look at or eat an apple, for example, is not reducible to a description of the associated activity in my brain – even assuming that either could be described fully. A description of the brain activity can say nothing about what the experience is actually *like*. We must also accept that conscious states, as real features of the real world, can themselves function causally – as when, for example, I took it into my head to prod you with my forefinger.

**Philonous:** Are you or are you not a *materialist*?

**Hylas:** I have already argued that we must discard outworn and unworkable concepts and categories. If a materialist is someone who views matter as inert stuff incapable, in any configuration, of causing or experiencing consciousness then I am certainly not a materialist. I endeavour simply to identify a model of reality that squares with all that we experience.

**Philonous:** Have I not identified such a model? By jettisoning matter, my immaterialist doctrine avoids the contradictions inherent in ‘dualism’ – the supposed separate but linked existence of mind and matter.

**Hylas:** But what you are left with is incoherent. You claim that you exist as a spirit or ‘thinking substance’. What is the nature of this substance? If a soul, spirit or mind is, in the words of your favourite philosopher, “indivisible, incorporeal and unextended”, how can ideas be imprinted in it, stored within it or generated by it? Is the *esse* of mental substance *percipere*? In other words, does it exist only by virtue of *perceiving* ideas, the *esse* of which conversely, according to you, is *percipi* – existing only by virtue of *being perceived*? Do you, I and all sentient beings exist only as dimensionless and positionless chunks of ‘mind-stuff’?

**Philonous:** We can have no idea of the nature of spirits as they are *active* beings and cannot be represented by *passive* ideas. We can, however, form a *notion* of ourselves through intuition and of God through reflection and reasoning.

**Hylas:** If nothing exists but perceiving spirits and perceived ideas what is the status of ‘notions’? Leaving that aside, when did you, a *finite* spirit, start to exist and to receive God-implanted sensory ideas?

**Philonous:** I assume my spirit was created by God either when I was born or at some stage inside my mother’s womb.

**Hylas:** Don’t you mean ‘inside’ the collection of ideas comprising the womb of the dimensionless and

positionless spirit constituting your mother?

**Philonous:** Are you being facetious?

**Hylas:** I make, perhaps in a flippant way, a *serious* point intended to bring home to you the incoherence of your immaterialism. Do you accept, at least, that the sensory ideas implanted in our dimensionless and positionless spirits give us the experience of living in a world of stuff and objects – including our own bodies – that appear to have both dimension and position?

**Philonous:** I do not deny that these are genuine features of the world *constituted* by such God-implanted sensory ideas.

**Hylas:** A feature of this world is that our senses and bodies deteriorate as we grow old. You, for example, complain about the increasing weakness of your bladder. Such changes, according to you, can arise only from changes in the sensory ideas that God chooses to implant in our minds.

**Philonous:** I can suggest no other cause.

**Hylas:** What about ‘death’? The duration and unpleasantness of the *process* of dying must be determined by the succession of sensory ideas that God chooses to imprint in our spirits. But what does *actual death* involve for *immaterial* spirits? Even if God stops feeding sensory ideas into them – as presumably he does when they sleep – they remain capable of perceiving ideas of thought, emotion, memory and imagination. Does God merely replace the imprinting of sensory ideas relating to this world with ones relating to a ‘heaven’ or a ‘hell’?

**Philonous:** Such mysteries are beyond our comprehension.

**Hylas:** Which is to say you have no idea! Invoking a Supreme Spirit to explain both the *involuntary* nature of our sensory experience and *what* determines *which* of our often *conflicting* intentions get to be realised in the form of such experience, leads to conceptual confusion and absurdity. Those who advocate ‘immaterialism without God’ and claim that ‘we’ – together, presumably, with other perceiving creatures such as that bird – somehow ‘create our own reality’ simply ignore such crucial issues and become mired in even greater confusion and absurdity.

**Philonous:** How do you defend your own ‘realist’ approach, if I may call it that, against the charge of absurdity?

**Hylas:** Any approach to reality – including yours – can be judged by its ability to account for the facts of experience and by its own *internal coherence* – that is, whether it hangs together on its own terms. The

existence of naturally sentient configurations of stuff in the form of brains is wholly consistent with our experience as perceiving, thinking and feeling beings. And the existence of *all* stuff independent of its perception is the only coherent explanation of our *inability* to alter the content of our sensory experience by simply *willing* it to change.

**Philonous:** How, if stuff exists independently of its being perceived, do you account for its *diverse appearance* to different perceivers at the same moment or to the same perceiver at different moments?

**Hylas:** By distinguishing, as you fail to do, between the appearances of things and the things themselves. Such differences are *wholly* consistent with a world of independently existing stuff capable of impinging in different ways upon the senses of different perceivers, themselves comprising complexly structured stuff. Only if such differences *didn’t* occur would there be a problem. It is an obvious fact that our sensory experience is *perspectival*. It *varies* between perceivers depending upon their relative position, the nature and acuity of their senses, their brain functioning and, crucially, upon the *direction and focus of their attention* – without which attention much of their surroundings simply passes unnoticed. The supposed imprinting by God of ‘sensory ideas’ in ‘immaterial spirits’ fails to provide a coherent and credible explanation of such everyday features of our perceptual experience.

**Philonous:** Do you deny the existence of minds or spirits?

**Hylas:** I define ‘a mind’ as ‘a cognitive system realised within a brain’. In *that* sense, minds clearly exist. I do *not*, however, conceive of minds or spirits as ‘ghosts’ tethered to bodies during life but free-floating after death – although many do cling to this superstition. The functioning of complexly structured brains provides a coherent explanation of phenomena such as sleep, dreams, subconscious behaviour, hallucinations, mental disorders, memory loss and personality change. These are *inexplicable* in terms of immaterial spirits conceived as “simple, undivided, active beings”. The imaginative powers of our brains, of course, allow us to conceive all sorts of things – including gods, souls, spirits, angels, devils, demons, ghosts, ghouls, goblins and fairies at the bottom of the garden – and, if sufficiently credulous, we may attribute to them independent external existence. Although existing only as figments of our imaginations, such ‘beings’ can have immense power to affect our real world behaviour. Many people have killed or died for their own particular ‘god’.

**Philonous:** Do you deny the existence of God?!

**Hylas:** I deny that *any* of the *variously* postulated gods – including those conceived in vaguely human and male form – are remotely credible. Have I not already demonstrated the incoherent consequences of hypothesising a God who determines our sensory experience and selectively realises our intentions?

**Philonous:** You appear to have joined the wretched sects of Atheists! I am so disturbed and confused by what you have said that I feel unable to continue our discussion. Let us meet again when I have had time to gather my thoughts and regain my equanimity.

**Hylas:** By all means. For now, just observe that pond, shifting the focus of your attention from one thing to another – the whole pond, the water trickling into it, the bubbles and ripples on its surface, the college cat, her tail, a leaf, a hole in a leaf, the gravel path, one of its pebbles, the reflections of leaves, clouds and sky ... and so on.

Now, which makes more sense? That such ‘objects’ – along with our own bodies – consist of ‘sensory ideas’, all of which are continually perceived by a ‘god’ and individualised subsets of which are variously fed by ‘him’ into dimensionless and positionless ‘spirits’ such as you, me and the cat to give each its own unique experience of embodiment, position, motion and changing focus of attention? *Or* that such experience is a natural feature of complexly structured stuff in the form of brains that receive sensory stimuli from other stuff and generate representations of it? As you gather your thoughts, take heed of what your pet philosopher called the “delusion of words”. Ironically, he ignored his own warning, adopting uncritically the language of ‘ideas’, drawing “consequences from consequences” and becoming irrecoverably “entangled in difficulties and mistakes”. I will leave you to your musings and hope, when we meet again, to recall you to your senses and to the real world. Farewell for now.

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