

George Berkeley (1685-1753): Extracts from his *Principles and Dialogues*

The Principles of Human Knowledge (1710)

[The paragraph numbers are those of Part 1 of the *Principles* – which, together with an Introduction, is the only Part that Berkeley completed.]

1. It is evident to anyone 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 and operations of the mind; or lastly, *ideas* formed by help of memory and imagination... By sight I have the ideas of light and colours... By touch I perceive hard and soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance... Smelling furnishes me with odours; the palate with tastes; and hearing conveys sounds to the mind in all their variety of tone and composition. And as several of these are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name and so to be reputed as *one thing*. Thus, for example, a certain colour, taste, smell, figure, and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name apple; other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and the like sensible things – which as they are pleasing or disagreeable excite the passions of love, hatred, joy, grief, and so forth.

2. But beside all that endless variety of ideas or objects of knowledge, there is likewise something which knows or perceives them; and exercises diverse operations, as willing, imagining, remembering, about them. This perceiving, active being is what I call *mind, spirit, soul* or *myself*. By which words 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 being perceived.

3. That neither our thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by the imagination, exist without the mind, is what everybody will allow. And to me it is no less evident that the various *sensations, or ideas imprinted on the sense*, however blended or combined together (that is, whatever *objects* they compose), cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them. I think an intuitive knowledge may be obtained of this by anyone that shall attend to *what is meant by the term exist when applied to sensible things*. 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 were in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it... For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that is to me 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.

4. It is an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects, have an existence ... distinct from their being perceived ... yet whoever shall find it in his heart to call it in question may ... perceive it to involve a manifest contradiction. For what are the forementioned objects but the things we perceive by sense? And what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations? And is it not plainly repugnant that any one of *these*, or any combination of them, should exist unperceived?

6. All the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth ... have not any subsistence without a mind ... their being is to be *perceived or known* ... consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some Eternal Spirit – it being perfectly unintelligible ... to attribute to any single part of them an existence independent of spirit. To be convinced of which, the reader need only reflect, and try to separate in his own thoughts the *being* of a sensible thing from its *being perceived*.

7. It is evident there is not any other Substance than *spirit, or that which perceives*...

25. All our ideas, sensations, notions, or the things we perceive, by whatsoever names they may be distinguished, are visibly inactive – there is nothing of Power or Agency included in them. So that one idea or object of thought cannot produce or make any alteration in another ... whoever shall attend to his ideas, whether of sense or reflection, will not perceive in them any power or activity ... the very being of an idea implies passiveness and inertness in it ... it is impossible for an idea to do anything or, strictly speaking, to be the cause of anything.

26. We perceive a continual *succession* of ideas; some are anew excited, others are changed or totally disappear. There is therefore some Cause of these ideas, whereon they depend, and which produces and changes them ... this cause cannot be any quality, or idea, or combination of ideas ... It must therefore be a substance; but it has been shown that there is no corporeal or material substance: it remains therefore that the cause of ideas is an incorporeal active substance or Spirit.

27. 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*. Hence there can be no idea formed of a soul or spirit; for, all ideas whatever, being passive and inert, cannot represent unto us, by way of image or likeness, that which acts... Such is the nature of Spirit, or that which acts, that it cannot be of itself perceived, but only by the effects it produces.. the words *will, soul, spirit*, do not stand for different ideas or, in truth, for any idea at all, but for something which is very different from ideas, and which, being an Agent, cannot be like unto, or represented by, any idea whatsoever. 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 these words..

28. I find I can excite ideas in my mind at pleasure and vary and shift the scene as often as I wish. It is no more than willing and straightway this or that idea arises in my fancy; and by the same power it is obliterated and makes way for another.

29. But whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by Sense have not the like dependence on my will. When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it is not in my power to choose whether I shall see or no, or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my view; and so likewise as to the hearing and other senses, the ideas imprinted on them are not creatures of my will. There is therefore some other Will or Spirit that produces them.

30. The ideas of Sense are more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the Imagination; they have likewise a steadiness, order, and coherence, and are not excited at random, as those which are the effects of human wills often are, but in a regular train or series – the admirable connection whereof sufficiently testifies the wisdom and benevolence of its Author. Now the set rules or established methods wherein the Mind we depend on excites in us the ideas of sense, are called the *laws of nature*; and these we learn by experience, which teaches us that such and such ideas are attended with such and such other ideas, in the ordinary course of things.

31. 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 eternally 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. That food nourishes, sleep refreshes, and fire warms us; that to sow in the seedtime is the way to reap a 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, without which we should be all in uncertainty and confusion, and a grown man no more know how to manage himself in the affairs of life than an infant just born.

32. And yet this consistent uniform working, which so evidently displays the goodness and wisdom of that Governing Spirit whose Will constitutes the laws of nature, is so far from leading our thoughts to Him, that it rather sends them wandering after second causes. For, when we perceive certain ideas of Sense constantly followed by other ideas, and we know this is not of our own doing, we forthwith attribute power and agency to the idea themselves, and make one the cause of another, than which nothing can be more absurd and unintelligible. Thus, for example, having

observed that when we perceive by sight a certain round luminous figure we at the same time perceive by touch the idea or sensation called heat, we do from thence conclude the sun to be the *cause* of heat. And in like manner perceiving the motion and collision of bodies to be attended with sound, we are inclined to think the latter the *effect* of the former.

33. The ideas imprinted on the Senses by the Author of nature are called *real things*: and those excited in the Imagination being less regular, vivid, and constant, are more properly termed *ideas*, or *images of things*, which they copy or represent. But then our sensations, be they never so vivid and distinct, are nevertheless ideas, that is, they exist in the mind, or are perceived by it, as truly as the ideas of our own framing. The ideas of Sense are allowed to have more reality in them, that is, to be more strong, orderly and coherent than the creatures of the mind; but there is no argument that they exist without the mind. They are also less dependent on the spirit, or thinking substance which perceives them, in that they are excited by the will of another and more powerful Spirit; yet still they are *ideas*, and certainly no idea, whether faint or strong, can exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it.

36. There are spiritual substances, minds, or human souls which will or excite ideas in themselves at pleasure; but these are faint, weak, and unsteady in respect of others they perceive by Sense - which being impressed upon them according to certain Rules or Laws of Nature, speak themselves the effects of a Mind more powerful and wise than human spirits. These latter are said to have more reality in them than the former; by which is meant that they are more affecting, orderly, and distinct, and that they are not fictions of the mind perceiving them. And in this sense the sun that I see by day is the real sun, and that which I imagine by night is the idea of the former. In the sense here given of *reality*, it is evident that every vegetable, star, mineral, and in general each part of the mundane system, is as much a *real being* by our principles as by any other. Whether others mean anything by the term *reality* different from what I do, I entreat them to look into their own thoughts and see.

60. It will be demanded to what purpose serves that curious organisation of plants, and the animal mechanism in the parts of animals; might not vegetables grow, and shoot forth leaves and blossoms, and animals perform all their motions as well without as with all that variety of internal parts so elegantly contrived and put together; which, being ideas, have nothing powerful or operative about them, nor have any necessary connection with the effects ascribed to them? If it be a Spirit that immediately produces every effect by a *fiat* or act of his will, we must think all that is fine and artificial in the works, whether of man or nature, to be made in vain.

62. Though the fabrication of all those parts and organs be not absolutely necessary to the producing any effect, yet it is necessary to the producing of things *in a constant regular way according to the laws of nature*.

65. The connection of ideas does not imply the relation of cause and effect, but only of a mark or sign with the thing signified.

146. It is evident to everyone that those things which are called the Works of Nature ... are not produced by, or dependent on, the wills of men. There is therefore some other Spirit that causes them; since it is repugnant that they should subsist by themselves. If we attentively consider ... the surprising magnificence, beauty and perfection of the larger, and the exquisite contrivance of the smaller, parts of the creation ... and at the same time attend to the meaning and import of the attributes One, Eternal, Infinitely Wise, Good and Perfect, we shall perceive that they belong to the aforesaid Spirit 'who works all in all' and 'by whom all things consist'.

147. It is evident that God is known as certainly and immediately as any other mind or spirit whatsoever distinct from ourselves. We may even assert that the existence of God is far more evidently perceived than the existence of men; because the effects of Nature are infinitely more numerous and considerable than those ascribed to human agents. There is not any one mark that denotes a man, or effect produced by him, which does not more strongly evince the being of that Spirit who is the Author of Nature. For it is evident that in affecting other persons the will of man has

no other object than barely the motions of the limbs of his body; but that such a motion should be attended by, or excite any idea in the mind of another, depends wholly on the will of the Creator. He alone it is who 'upholding all things by the word of his power' maintains that intercourse between spirits whereby they are able to perceive the existence of each other.

151. It will, I doubt not, be objected that the slow, gradual, and roundabout methods observed in the production of natural things do not seem to have for their cause the immediate hand of an Almighty Agent. Besides, monsters, untimely births, fruits blasted in the blossom, rains falling in desert places, miseries incident to human life, and the like, are so many arguments that the whole frame of nature is not immediately actuated and superintended by a Spirit of infinite wisdom and goodness...

152. The defects of Nature are not without their use, in that they make an agreeable sort of variety, and augment the beauty of the rest of the creation.

153. As for the mixture of pain and pleasure which is in the world, pursuant to the general Laws of Nature, and the actions of finite, imperfect spirits, this, in the state we are in at present, is indispensably necessary to our well-being... If we enlarge our view, so as to comprehend... the nature of human freedom and the design with which we are put into this world, we shall be forced to acknowledge that those particular things which, considered in themselves appear to be evil, have the nature of good, when considered as linked with the whole system of beings.

Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous (1713)

[The references indicate the statements of Hylas and Philonous numbered sequentially within each *Dialogue*. Thus, for example, D1: P110 refers to the 110th statement made by Philonous within the *First Dialogue*.]

Philonous: It is not only possible but manifest, that there actually are animals, whose eyes are by nature framed to perceive those things, which by reason of their minuteness escape our sight. What think you of those inconceivably small animals perceived by glasses? Must we suppose they are all stark blind? Or, in case they see, can it be imagined their sight hath not the same use in preserving their bodies from injuries, which appears in that of all other animals?... Think you the senses were bestowed upon all animals for their preservation and well-being in life? Or were they given to men alone for this end?

[D1: P110 & P123]

Hylas: Properly and immediately nothing can be perceived but ideas. All material things therefore are in themselves insensible, and to be perceived only by their ideas...

Philonous: But how can that which is sensible be like that which is insensible? Can a real thing in itself *invisible* be like a *colour*; or a real thing which is not *audible*, be like a *sound*? In a word, can any thing be like a sensation or idea, but another sensation or idea?

Hylas: I must own I think not.

Philonous: Is it possible there should be any doubt in the point? Do you not perfectly know your own ideas?

Hylas: I know them perfectly; since what I do not perceive or know, can be no part of my idea.

Philonous: Consider, therefore, and examine them, and then tell me if there is any thing in them which can exist without the mind: or if you can conceive any thing like them existing in the mind.

Hylas: Upon inquiry, I find it 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*.

Philonous: You are therefore by your principles forced to deny the reality of sensible things, since you made it to consist in an absolute existence exterior to the mind. That is to say you are a downright sceptic. So I have gained my point, which was to show your principles led to scepticism.

[D1: H239 to P244]

Hylas: It is supposed that the soul makes her residence in some part of the brain, from which the nerves take their rise, and are thence extended to all parts of the body: and that outward objects, by the different impressions they make on the organs of sense, communicate certain vibrative motions to the nerves; and these being filled with spirits, propagate them to the brain or seat of the soul, which according to the various impressions thereby made in the brain, is variously affected with ideas...

Philonous: Besides spirits, all that we know or conceive are our own ideas. When therefore you say all ideas are occasioned by impressions in the brain, do you conceive this brain or no? If you do, then you talk of ideas imprinted in an idea, causing the same idea, which is absurd.

[D2: H5 to P11]

Philonous: You allow the things immediately perceived by sense to exist nowhere without the mind; but there is nothing perceived by sense, which is not perceived immediately: therefore there is nothing sensible that exists without the mind. The matter therefore which you still insist on, is something intelligible, I suppose; something that may be discovered by reason, and not by sense.

Hylas: You are in the right.

Philonous: Pray let me know what reasoning your belief of matter is grounded on; and what this matter is in your present sense of it.

Hylas: I find myself affected with various ideas, whereof I know I am not the cause; neither are they the cause of themselves or one another, or capable of subsisting by themselves, as being altogether inactive, fleeting, dependent beings. They have therefore some cause distinct from me and them: of which I pretend to know no more, than that it is *the cause of my ideas*. And this thing, whatever it be, I call matter...

Philonous: And doth not matter, in the common current acceptation of the word, signify an extended, solid, moveable, unthinking, inactive substance?

Hylas: It doth.

Philonous: And hath it not been made evident, that no such substance can possibly exist? And though it should be allowed to exist, yet how can that which is *inactive* be a *cause*; or that which is *unthinking* be a *cause of thought*? You may indeed, if you please, annex to the word *matter* a contrary meaning to what is vulgarly received; and tell me you understand by it an unextended, thinking, active being, which is the cause of our ideas. But what else is this, than to play with words... I do by no means find fault with your reasoning, in that you collect a cause from the phenomena: but I deny that the cause deducible by reason can properly be termed *matter*.

[D2: P23 to P27]

Hylas: But according to your notions, what difference is there between real things, and chimeras formed by imagination, or the visions of a dream, since they are all equally in the mind?

Philonous: The ideas formed by the imagination are faint and indistinct; they have besides an entire dependency on the will. But the ideas perceived by sense, that is, real things, are more vivid and clear, and being imprinted on the mind by a spirit distinct from us, have not a like dependence on our will. There is therefore no danger of confounding these with the foregoing: and there is little confounding them with the visions of a dream, which are dim, irregular, and confused. And though they should happen to be never so lively and natural, yet by their not being connected and of a piece with the preceding and subsequent transactions of our lives, they might easily be distinguished from realities.

[D3: H22 to P23]

Hylas: Since ... you have no idea of the mind of God, how can you conceive it possible, that things should exist in his mind?

Philonous: I own I have properly no idea either of God or any other spirit; for these being active, cannot be represented by things perfectly inert as ideas are. I do nevertheless know that I, who am a spirit or thinking substance, exist as certainly as I know my ideas exist. Further, I know what I mean

by the terms *I* and *myself*; and I know this immediately and intuitively. ... The entire notion I have of God is obtained by reflecting on my own soul, heightening its powers, and removing its imperfections. I have therefore ... some sort of an active thinking image of the Deity. And though I perceive him not by sense, yet I have a notion of him, or know him by reflection or reasoning. My own mind and my own ideas I have immediate knowledge of; and by the help of these do mediately apprehend the possibility of the existence of other spirits and ideas. Further, from my own being, and from the dependency I find in myself and my ideas, I do by an act of reason necessarily infer the existence of a God, and of all created things in the mind of God.

[D3: H16 to P17]

Hylas: You are not aware, Philonous, that in making God the immediate author of all the motions in nature, you make him the author of murder, sacrilege, adultery, and the like heinous crimes.

Philonous: ... 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... 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. Lastly, I have nowhere said that God is the only agent who produces all the motions in bodies. It is true, I have denied there are any other agents besides 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 their own wills, which is sufficient to entitle them to all the guilt of their actions.

[D3: H25 to P26]

Hylas: You say you believe your senses; and seem to applaud yourself that in this you agree with the vulgar. According to you therefore, the true nature of a thing is discovered by the senses. If so... why is not the same figure and all sensible qualities, perceived 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?

Philonous: Strictly speaking, Hylas, 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. But, in case every variation was thought sufficient to constitute a new kind of individual, the endless number or confusion of names would render language impracticable. Therefore to avoid this as well as other inconveniences which are obvious upon a little thought, men combine together several ideas apprehended by diverse senses, or by the same sense at different times, or in different circumstances, but observed however to have some connection in nature, either with respect to co-existence or succession; all which they refer to one name, and consider as one thing.

[D3: H50 to P51]

Philonous: I do not pretend to be a setter-up of new notions. 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 the 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.

[D3: P90]