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BERKELEY'S *Three Dialogues*

NEW ESSAYS

edited by Stefan Storrie

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Stefan Storrie

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List of Abbreviations

Berkeley

ALC = *Alciphron, or The Minute Philosopher*. In *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1948–57), vol. 3, 1–329. References to section number.

CGB = *The Correspondence of George Berkeley*. Ed. Marc A. Hight (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). References to page number.

DHP = *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. In *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1948–57), vol. 2, 147–263; and in *Philosophical Writings*. Ed. D. M. Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 151–242. References to page number.

DM = *De Motu*. In *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1948–57), vol. 4, 1–52; and in *Philosophical Works*. Ed. Michael R. Ayers (London: J. M. Dent, 1979), 255–76. References to section number.

LJ = *Philosophical Correspondence between Berkeley and Samuel Johnson*. In *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1948–57), vol. 2, 271–94. References to page number.

NB = *Notebooks*. In *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1948–57), vol. 1, 1–139; and in *Philosophical Commentaries*. Eds A. A. Luce and George Hasson Thomas (Ohio: Garland, 1989). References to section number.

NTV = *An Essay toward a New Theory of Vision*. In *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1948–57), vol. 1, 161–241; and in *Philosophical Writings*. Ed. D. M. Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1–66. References to section number.

PHK = *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*. In *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1948–57), vol. 2, 19–145; and in *Philosophical Writings*. Ed. D. M. Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 67–149. References to section number.

Siris = *Siris: A Chain of Philosophical Reflexions and Inquiries concerning the Virtues of Tar Water*. In *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds A. A. Luce and

T. E. Jessop, 9 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1948–57), vol. 5, 1–163. References to section number.

TVV = *The Theory of Vision Vindicated and Explained*. In *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1948–57), vol. 1, 251–77; and in *Philosophical Works*. Ed. Michael R. Ayers (London: J. M. Dent, 1979), 277–304. References to section number.

Works = *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*. Eds A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1948–57).

Arnauld

TFI = *On True and False Ideas*. Tr. Stephen Gaukroger (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).

Descartes

AT = *Œuvres de Descartes*. Eds Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 11 vols (Paris: J. Vrin, 1996).

CSM = *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*. Eds Robert Stoothoff, John Cottingham, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985–91).

Hume

THN = *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Eds David Fate Norton and Mary Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).

Locke

EHU = *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Ed. Peter. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

Malebranche

OCM = *Œuvres Complètes de Malebranche*. Ed. André Robinet, 20 vols (Paris: J. Vrin, 1958–67).

SAT = *The Search after Truth*. Tr. Thomas Lennon and Paul Olscamp (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1980).

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1

Introduction

Stefan Storrie

Published in 1713 when Berkeley was twenty-nine years old, the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* was the last of a trio of works, the others being the *New Theory of Vision* (1709) and the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Part I (1710), that cemented Berkeley's position as one of the truly great philosophers of the Western canon. The dialogues were Berkeley's most influential philosophical work in the eighteenth century, going through five editions compared to the *Principles*' two. It was also, unlike the *Principles*, quickly translated into French (1750) and German (1756, 1781) and therefore instrumental for spreading Berkeley's philosophical views on the continent.¹

The *Three Dialogues* is a dramatization of Berkeley's philosophy in which the two protagonists, Hylas and Philonous, debate the full range of Berkeleyan themes: the rejection of material substance, the nature of perception and reality, the limits of human knowledge, and his approach to the perceived threats of scepticism, atheism, and immorality. When Berkeley presented his first statement of his immaterialist philosophy in the *Principles* he was met with incredulity—how could a sane person deny the existence of matter?² Berkeley felt that a new approach was needed in order to bring people over to his novel point of view. This new effort was the *Three Dialogues*. In the Preface to the *Three Dialogues* Berkeley stated that its aim was to “treat more clearly and fully of certain principles laid down in the First [the *Principles*]”. The relevance of the *Three Dialogues* as a philosophical work will therefore be largely determined by how it relates to the *Principles*. The estimation of the former work has increased dramatically over the last twenty years, making this first collection of papers on the *Three Dialogues* most timely.

In the twentieth century the *Three Dialogues* was typically viewed as a mere rephrasing of the *Principles*; and what is more, a heavily rhetorical and simplified account of Berkeley's position. As a consequence the *Principles* was the main focus for attempts to

¹ For the early reception of Berkeley's works see Bracken (1959) and McCracken and Tipton (2000).

² We find Berkeley's good friend John Percival reporting on the reactions to the *Principles* in a letter from London, 26 August 1710, stating that those he spoke to about immaterialism thought Berkeley was either a madman or merely seeking attention through paradoxical claims (Rand 1914: 80).

understand and assess Berkeley's philosophy and the *Three Dialogues* was appealed to mostly to confirm what was stated in the former work. This approach was in large part due to the influence of the great Berkeley scholars T. E. Jessop and A. A. Luce. The former stated in his Introduction to the standard edition of the *Three Dialogues* that "the *Principles* remains, from a technical point of view, the fullest and most careful statement of his [Berkeley's] doctrine, the final compendium of it as well as the first essay". In relation to this work, the *Three Dialogues* is a merely "semi-popular introduction" (Works 2:150, 151). Luce, likewise, claimed that "*The Principles* is the complete and final expression of Berkeley's immaterialism; it takes precedence over all his other philosophical writings, and he never withdrew or modified the views therein" (Luce 1949: 48).

Two basic assumptions supported this view. Firstly, when presenting the first of his four "canons of Berkeleian exegesis", the primacy of the *Principles*, Luce explains that the "dialogue form is necessarily inexact. Many statements by Hylas, and not a few by Philonous, are purely transitional" (Luce 1967: 76). Luce does not explain why he thinks the dialogue form is "necessarily inexact" or what is philosophically problematic with having "purely transitional" passages in a philosophical work (if, indeed, there are such passages in the *Three Dialogues*). However, rather than challenging these unsubstantiated claims directly some words about the character and context of Berkeley's work as dialogue are in place.

One concern about the dialogue as a vehicle for philosophical thought is that all too often the dynamic between the protagonists is unfairly skewed. Typically the proponent of the author's view, the 'hero' of the work, holds forth on the topic while the 'villain' presents her views in brief and poorly argued passages, meekly giving up in the face of the least opposition from the other interlocutor. In such cases the dialogue is rightly seen as being largely rhetorical and polemical. It is true that most philosophical dialogues written at the time, such as Malebranche's *Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion* (1688) and Leibniz's *New Essays on Human Understanding* (1765, but written 1704) on the continent and Charleton's *Immortality of the Human Soul* (1657), More's *Divine Dialogues* (1668), Boyle's *Discourse of Things above Reason* (1681), and Nicholls's *A Conference with a Theists* (1696) in Britain, were following this Ciceronian model of writing displayed in *De Republica*, with one speaker holding forth on a subject and the other listening deferentially.³

³ William Nicholls was particularly clear in explaining the allure of the Ciceronian style that he chose to employ. As he wanted to reach those "whose Leisure or Education will not let them search so narrowly into these Disputes" he decided against the "just Dialogue, like those of Plato and Lucian; for that would have taken up a great deal more Paper to little Purpose, only to please a few curious Criticks". He also refrained from the "dry Method of scholastic Objection and Solution; where the Objection is posed without any Manner of Life, only in order to be refuted". Instead he "made use of the middle Way, in clothing the Objections is such a Dress, as two men that had a Man to convince one another, can be supposed to use. And this is the Pattern which the best Writers, Cicero, in his philosophical Tracts, has set for us" (1723: viii–ix).

Berkeley's dialogues are unique in their time in departing from this model. As Walmsley puts it in his study on Berkeley's rhetoric: "Berkeley depicts a tight, logical wrangling: not a placing of a right opinion against a wrong one, but a relentless questioning. Hylas' statements are carefully scrutinized for their meaning and consequences" (Walmsley 1990: 68). Like Plato's dialogues, the *Three Dialogues* employs the elenctic method, where a statement is put forward and then challenged through a set of questions with the view of leading the respondent to contradict her original statement. Berkeley was a master of this form of writing, prompting John Stuart Mill to state that his dialogues "entitle Berkeley to be regarded as the writer who, after Plato, has best managed the instrument of controversial dialogue" (Mill 1871: 519). It might therefore be thought that a dialogue, if it is as well written as the *Three Dialogues* is, can capture the essence of philosophical activity just as well, if not better, than any other mode of writing.

It is also not amiss in this context to point out that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries philosophical views were presented in a wide array of different styles, without the authors expecting any loss in rigour. The prime example was Descartes's *Meditations* (1641), his authoritative work in metaphysics, which was written in the meditative style most commonly associated with the kind of religious writing known as 'spiritual exercises'. In this context the most extreme experiment is Shaftesbury's three-volume work, the *Characteristics*, which was published in 1711 and so is sandwiched between the publication of Berkeley's *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*. It incorporated a wide variety of styles of writing, including the letter (*A Letter concerning Enthusiasm*), the dialogue (the *Moralists*, a *Philosophical Rhapsody*), the soliloquy (*Soliloquy, or Advice to an Author*), the essay (*Sensus Communis: An Essay on the Freedom of Wit*), the more traditional treatise (*An Inquiry concerning Virtue, or Merit*), as well as a scholarly commentary—on the preceding two volumes! (*Miscellaneous Reflections on the Preceding Treatises, and Other Critical Subjects*).

The second reason why the *Principles* was traditionally valued over the *Three Dialogues* is connected to Luce's project of showing that Berkeley's philosophy did not undergo any significant change from the *Principles* onwards.⁴ While few commentators today would disagree with Luce's main contention, that Berkeley did not abandon his immaterialism in his later works, the uncompromisingly static conception of Berkeley's position overstates the case. In the twenty-first century scholarship has to a large extent moved away from Luce's militantly static view and at the same time challenged the primacy of the *Principles* over the *Three Dialogues*. Most strikingly, many of the major monographs on Berkeley's philosophy published in the last fifteen years have argued that Berkeley's central argument for the immaterialist thesis in the *Principles* is importantly deficient because Berkeley largely assumes that sensible things are nothing but ideas. Berkeley, it is suggested, quickly came to realize this and therefore made it the central aim of the first of the *Three Dialogues* to present a

⁴ The main papers for this project are Luce (1937a, 1937b, 1943).

complete and convincing argument for his position (Stoneham 2002: 50, Dicker 2011: 149, and Rickless 2013a: 138).⁵ The current view in Berkeley scholarship, which is more natural, is that the *Three Dialogues* is a more mature work where Berkeley develops his views after three years of additional exposure to criticism and further contemplation on his philosophical position. Many papers in the present volume present good reasons to think that Berkeley's view did evolve in numerous and subtle ways. The present volume, which is the first ever collection of papers on the *Three Dialogues*, therefore comes at an exciting time in Berkeley scholarship.

The aim of this volume is to examine issues Berkeley raises in the *Three Dialogues*. This is not to say that the papers deal exclusively with that work. Rather this volume takes the *Three Dialogues* as a starting point. The *Principles* will always be an important point of reference for understanding Berkeley's philosophy, as will the *New Theory of Vision*. His later works *De Motu* (1721), *Siris* (1744), and to a lesser extent *Alciphron* (1732) are also discussed in various papers in this volume. The first eight papers have been arranged to broadly follow the general structure of the dialogues; the last four papers consider the work in its broader philosophical context.

The First Dialogue is an extensive discussion of the nature of perception. Berkeley first develops the view that sensing is an immediate form of perception and that sensible things are nothing but sensible qualities. He then goes through what was then seen as the full list of sensible qualities and argues for each that it is mind dependent, that is, that it has no existence without being perceived. In the final part of the dialogue Berkeley considers objections to his view and rejects alternative theories of perception.

Downing's paper (Chapter 2) assesses the merit of Berkeley's shift in terminology from 'ideas' in the *Principles* to 'sensible qualities' in the *Three Dialogues*. She argues that the conception of 'idea' belongs primarily to the representational theory in the philosophy of perception while the employment of the notion of 'sensible quality' leads to an incisive attack on the primary/secondary-quality distinction and specifically on the metaphysical underpinnings of the mechanistic 'new philosophy'. Moving from this broader characterization of the First Dialogue the next two papers consider the details of Berkeley's account of the content of perception. **Stoneham** (Chapter 3) notes that Berkeley seems to make two very different claims about what is sensed: firstly that the objects of sense perception are what is immediately perceived (narrow content), secondly that physical objects are among the objects of perception (rich content). Stoneham argues that the former claim takes precedence and that Berkeley's

⁵ This change in attitude towards the *Three Dialogues*, for which Stoneham's book was a watershed, is evident from an important review of that work, which begins as follows: "This is a puzzling book. On the one hand, Stoneham insists that 'we cannot appreciate the contributions made by philosophers like Berkeley without coming to terms with the full breadth and detail of his thought' (vi). On the other hand, his interpretive efforts are directed almost exclusively at the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*—a work Berkeley intended as a popular recasting of his doctrines and one that scholars generally regard as conspicuously lacking the 'full breadth and detail' of his philosophy" (Jesseph 2004: 571).

understanding of physical objects should be construed so that we need not perceive most of the ideas that constitute the object in order to perceive it. **Marušić's** paper (Chapter 4) considers a theory of perception that rivals Berkeley's own and that is a threat to his immaterialist principle. This is the act-object theory, which holds that there are two aspects of every perception, a sensation that is an act of mind and an object immediately perceived. Marušić considers a bold line of defence for Berkeley's theory based on the idea that sense perception does not require an action subject to the will. She concludes that for Berkeley the presence of a certain kind of object, a sensible quality or appearance, is sufficient for perception to occur. **Fields's** (Chapter 5) contribution in turn considers the ontological status of sensible objects. He brings up an apparent conflict between Berkeley's accounts of sensible objects as complexes of subjective experiences on the one hand and as stable and continuous objects existing in the mind of God on the other hand. Fields's solution is to view these two components as combined by significations prescribed by universal linguistic norms. This semiotic relation gives objective form and meaning to subjective ideas.

The Second Dialogue is primarily concerned with causation. In the first place, Berkeley presents his view of God as a cause of the sensible world. In the second place, he considers the possible causal role matter could be thought to play and rejects a number of rival notions, most centrally the Malebranchean conception of 'occasionalism', a view which is typically thought in certain ways to be close to Berkeley's own understanding of God's relation to the world and causal relations generally.

Rickless's paper (Chapter 6) offers a detailed account of the argument for the existence of God in the dialogue and compares it to the argument found in the *Principles*. While there is some overlap, the argument in the *Three Dialogues* is more detailed and employs more explicit premises, in particular, the impossibility of blind agency and the observed stability of the sensible world. **Lee's** paper (Chapter 7) takes a close look at the idea of God as continually creating the world, which was implicit in much of early modern metaphysics and a central feature of Malebranche's occasionalism. Lee argues that Berkeley's commitment to occasionalism is partial and 'contained'. While Berkeley understood physical bodies as continuously created by God, this is not the case for minds. Further, the idea of continuous creation is not a metaphysical starting point but a useful and consistent explanation of a diverse range of phenomena.

In the Third Dialogue Berkeley responds to a large number of objections and in the course of doing so develops his position in philosophically substantial ways. **Hill's** paper (Chapter 8) is concerned with a problem about self-knowledge in Berkeley's philosophy. He presents an inconsistent triad: firstly, according to Berkeley the mind is essentially active, in the sense of being volitional. This makes it completely different from ideas, and therefore knowledge of the mind requires a mode of awareness different from sense perception. Secondly, when we perceive ideas we are entirely passive. Thirdly, the mind is a simple and undivided being, and so cannot be both active and passive. On Hill's view, Berkeley in the end denies the second statement. Berkeley's conception of the self, only fully developed in the 1734 edition of the *Three Dialogues*

and in *Siris*, is ultimately active in unifying sense experience. **Daniel's** paper (Chapter 9) turns to consider God's mode of knowledge of the world. As God cannot sense, as this indicates passivity and imperfection, how can God know what sensations such as pain are like? Daniel argues that God comprehends reality as a harmonious whole, while our perception of pain is the perception of a certain kind of disharmony. Pain is therefore not a discrete idea but a way of perceiving a relation between ideas. God then perceives all the ideas we do, but understands their relation in a different way from us.

The final four papers approach the *Three Dialogues* in a wider philosophical context. **Roberts** (Chapter 10) considers how Berkeley in the *Three Dialogues* can accept both a faculty of pure intellect and innate ideas while rejecting a faculty of abstraction. The solution, which draws heavily on Berkeley's later *Siris*, is to present a Neoplatonist reading of Berkeley, where the innate ideas of pure intellect are active constitutive principles of the self. **Storrie** (Chapter 11) presents a view of how Berkeley's own conception of idealism developed from the *Notebooks* up to the 1734 edition of the *Three Dialogues*. He argues that Berkeley progressively moved away from a semantic approach where idealism follows from the meaning of 'exist', to a defence based on the best available science at the time. **Pearce** (Chapter 12) presents the *Three Dialogues* as a controversial response to atheism. He argues that Berkeley employs an argument against matter which mirrors an argument that Anthony Collins had used against the leading Irish churchman William King, and that it implies the rejection of the orthodox conception of divine analogy. **Garrett** (Chapter 13) considers Berkeley's view on how the mind can contain ideas in relation to Hume's theory of the self. He argues that Berkeley and Hume shared a commitment to the existence of extended ideas or perceptions and then explores the different strategies the respective thinker uses to explain how the mind can include both extended and unextended things.

2

Sensible Qualities and Secondary Qualities in the First Dialogue

Lisa Downing

Berkeley's *Three Dialogues* is a work that has often been underestimated (in addition to the ways in which Berkeley himself, as a philosopher, has often been underestimated).¹ That the *Dialogues* is a popularization of Berkeley's philosophy, and, indeed, a potentially misleading one, was forthrightly asserted by the great Berkeley scholar A. A. Luce, whose first "canon of Berkeleian exegesis" reads as follows:

The *Principles* is the primary source. The *Three dialogues* is ancillary. The dialogue form is necessarily inexact. Many statements by Hylas, and not a few by Philonous, are purely transitional. The student should base his view of the idea of sense on what Berkeley says of it in the earlier, less readable, but more solid and systematic work. (Luce 1967: 76)

Here my modest aim is to bring out some ways in which the *Dialogues* are both different from the *Principles* and philosophically/historically illuminating. More specifically, I will suggest that by focusing on the First Dialogue's use of "sensible quality" rather than "idea" (something Luce flags as problematic),² we can draw out some important morals that allow us to better appreciate its actual accomplishments. Whereas the *Principles* is an attack on materialist mechanism primarily via its representative theory of perception, I will argue that the First Dialogue is an attack on materialist mechanism primarily via its primary/secondary-quality distinction. Viewing the First Dialogue in this light allows us to see it as more effective and insightful than we otherwise might, although it also requires us to acknowledge that Hylas is never as philosophically naïve as Berkeley sometimes seems to suggest.³ Indeed, if he

¹ Certainly it has been underestimated by my past self: I have been inclined to think that *The Principles* is the clearer and more straightforward work, which makes plainer how his idealism arises from critical reflection on his predecessors.

² "Berkeley was a *writer*, an artist in words, with an ear for their music. If he had always described the object of sense in terms of idea, the *Principles* would have been heavy going, and the *Dialogues* unreadable. *Idea* and *sensation* are his favourite terms; but he had others up his sleeve, which he uses from time to time, whether for mere variety, or to stress some special aspect of the particular object in view. When it comes to argument, *idea* is the touchstone and plumb-line" (Luce 1967: 77).

³ And thus that Berkeley does not obviously address a genuinely vulgar view.

were truly philosophically naïve, his views would not, by Berkeley's lights, need reform.⁴ Hylas needs to undertake his journey with Philonous because he has already ill-advisedly set out on it himself, without a trustworthy guide.

2.1 The *Three Dialogues*' Opening Three-Line Proof

Jumping into the First Dialogue, we should begin by considering an intriguing three-line proof that serves as Philonous's opening gambit:

PHILONOUS. 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, beside odours: or by the touch, more than tangible qualities.

HYLAS. We do not.

PHILONOUS. It seems therefore, that if you take away all sensible qualities, there remains nothing sensible.

HYLAS. I grant it.

PHILONOUS. Sensible things therefore are nothing else but so many sensible qualities, or combinations of sensible qualities.

HYLAS. Nothing else. (DHP 175)

This is Philonous's first serious argumentative push, and the three-line proof we should find here is this one:

- (1) All sensible things are immediately perceived by sense.
 - (2) Only sensible qualities (light, colors, figures, sounds, tastes, odors, tangible qualities) are immediately perceived by sense.
- Therefore, (C) The only sensible things are sensible qualities.

Structurally, this looks somewhat similar to the *Principles*' three-line proof in PHK 4,⁵ but on closer inspection the differences are more striking. Perhaps most importantly,

⁴ I have borrowed this point from conversation with David Hilbert.

⁵ "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. But with how great an assurance and acquiescence soever this principle may be entertained in the world; yet whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question, may, if I mistake not, 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?" (PHK 4).

The three-line representation of this proof looks like this (see Winkler 1989: 138):

- (1) We perceive sensible objects (e.g. houses, mountains, rivers).
- (2) We only perceive ideas.

Therefore, (C) sensible objects (e.g. houses, mountains, rivers) are ideas.

note that while in the *Principles*, “sensible objects” are identified as rivers and houses, in the *Dialogues*, no examples are given of sensible things. “Sensible thing” just means “whatever is perceived by sense,” or, perhaps better, “whatever is perceived by sense, strictly speaking.” If the sensible things of the *Dialogues* were the sensible objects of the *Principles*, then we would have an exciting conclusion that parallels the conclusion of the three-line proof of idealism in the *Principles*—that houses and rivers are just light, colors, tangible qualities, etc. But we do not, because they are not. (And, of course, if sensible things were sensible objects (houses and rivers), premise (1) would be in direct conflict with the indirect realist theory of perception that Berkeley attributes to his philosophical opponents in the *Principles*, and so would be an unacceptably contentious starting point.)

How, then, should we understand premise (1)? It amounts to the following claim: Strictly speaking, we can *only* perceive by sense what we perceive *immediately* by sense. This looks not very substantive, and not very controversial, but it is also a long way from naïve. Instead, it employs a technical philosophical distinction between mediate and immediate perception, which Philonous has to introduce and argue Hylas into.⁶ The distinction between mediate and immediate perception is introduced by means of an example: In reading a book, we *immediately* perceive letters, which *mediately* suggest “notions of God, virtue, truth, &c.” The most clear and substantive claim that Philonous gets Hylas to accept in setting up (1) is that the senses make no inferences, that is, what is inferred on the basis of something immediately perceived is not itself, strictly speaking, perceived. If that is accepted, then it seems that (1) is already accepted.

What about (2)? (2) looks like fairly standard, but quite philosophical, doctrine—the view that each sense has its own proper objects, and those objects, a set of sensible qualities, are what it, strictly speaking, perceives. Though we can find some subtleties lurking here, if we look. As is typical of his contemporaries, Berkeley makes clear what he means by “sensible qualities” by means of a list. The list is mostly made up of what Berkeley’s contemporaries would call secondary qualities, but also includes figure, which is a primary quality. In addition, primary qualities are presumably included under the blanket term “tangible qualities.” Further, it is true to say that most of these qualities would count as proper sensibles, that is, proper objects of a single sense, for an Aristotelian, but that figure is a common sensible. For Berkeley, however, as his *New Theory of Vision* (121–7) makes clear, there are no common sensibles, that is, no qualities that are, strictly speaking, perceived by more than one sense, for visible figure and tangible figure are heterogeneous.⁷ Nevertheless, that the items on this list are what the senses directly perceive, what they are tuned to detect, looks like more or less mainstream philosophical doctrine.

⁶ Thus, it is not accurate to say the three-line proof is the *very* beginning of Berkeley’s argumentation in the *Dialogues*, but it is the first big, stage-setting argument.

⁷ See also TVV 15–16, Atherton 1990: 173–4.

The argument's conclusion, "Sensible things therefore are nothing else but so many sensible qualities, or combinations of sensible qualities," which at first hearing might seem to express the exciting thesis that houses and mountains are mere combinations of sensible qualities, turns out to be unexciting in a way that reflects its premises: Strictly speaking, all we can sense are the sensible qualities: light, colors, figures, sounds, tastes, odors, tangible qualities, etc. If anything especially controversial has been admitted so far, it seems that it has been smuggled in with the underexplained distinction between mediate and immediate perception. As just noted, Hylas has been brought to understand what immediate perception is by analogy and also by contrast: we don't immediately perceive what we infer on the basis of immediate perception. This leaves us supposing that anything other than the sensible qualities, which we might have wanted to say that we perceived, would have to be something inferred by reason from perception.⁸

Despite the modesty of (C), it really does set the argumentative stage for the rest of the First Dialogue. Hylas's goal, as established by the opening sections of the dialogue, is to defend the existence of matter, that is, stuff whose existence is not dependent on minds, without impugning the reality of sensible things. Having concluded that the sensible things are all sensible qualities, his next move is to try to defend the thesis that these sensible things/qualities are in fact mind-independent, that they "have a subsistence exterior to the mind, and distinct from their being perceived." Philonous, then, undertakes to show that these sensible things/qualities, the things immediately perceived by sense, could not be mind-independent. In one way of regimenting the terminology of the time, Hylas is trying to show that all sensible qualities are primary, whereas Philonous is trying to show that they are all secondary.

2.2 Sensible Qualities and Secondary Qualities: Some Issues

Thus, because Hylas, at this initial stage, wants sensible things to be mind-independent, this leaves him attempting to defend the view that light, colors, figures, sounds, tastes, odors, tangible qualities exist outside the mind. We should be suspicious here: Has Berkeley already saddled him with an implausible, indefensible position? In the early eighteenth-century context, this might look like a hopeless starting point, since it had already become philosophical commonplace that we are mistaken in projecting colors, sounds, tastes, odors onto the material world. Such qualities, many held, should be referred in some way to the mind, like ticklings and pains. That this was already standard doctrine is conveyed in textbooks and summaries of the state of philosophy/natural philosophy, such as Algarotti's early eighteenth-century text, *Sir Isaac Newton's*

⁸ Though there is also an underexplained mention of "suggestion," which might seem to allow for a non-rational process. It is used in connection with the example of reading, though, which is surely rational to begin with, if later habitual.