

George Berkeley: Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous

Edited by
Michael B. Mathias

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DANIEL KOLAK, SERIES EDITOR

George Berkeley

Three Dialogues Between
Hylas and Philonous



EDITED BY MICHAEL B. MATHIAS

UNION COLLEGE

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Editor's Introduction

Having surveyed the philosophical landscape at the dawn of the 18th century, George Berkeley (1685-1753) concluded that philosophers had become trapped in a maze of their own making. He believed that philosophers entered the maze by making a certain fundamental assumption—namely, that matter exists. The leading metaphysical systems of his day, including those of René Descartes (1596-1650) and John Locke (1632-1704), described the physical world as a realm of objects or bodies composed of minute, insensible corpuscles of matter that exist independently of the human mind and are endowed only with scientific properties such as extension, mass, and mobility. According to this general worldview, which Berkeley referred to as ‘materialism’, the physical world *as it really is* exists independent of, and is radically different than, the physical world *as it appears to our senses*. According to materialism, a physical object, such as a teacup, is constituted of corpuscles of matter, which themselves have no color, odor, taste, or temperature. But a teacup certainly appears to have color on its surface, and the tea inside of it certainly appears to have a color, odor, taste, and temperature. This, according to the materialist, is simply because the corpuscles of matter that make up the teacup and the tea have the ability to affect our senses in certain ways in virtue of their extension, mass, and motion.

Materialism had acquired the status of orthodoxy by the early 18th century. But Berkeley feared that materialism would encourage skepticism and atheism, and, in turn, immorality. He also believed that this “modern way of explaining things” gives rise to intractable—indeed, insolvable—problems in philosophy, science, mathematics, and theology. These problems, Berkeley thought, form the walls of a maze with no exit, and his fundamental philosophical project involved showing philosophers the way out of the maze by showing them how they had gotten into it in the first place. The only hope for philosophy, Berkeley

believed, was to avoid entering the maze in the first place—to deny that matter exists.

Materialism had already been subjected to vigorous criticism by skeptical philosophers who argued that neither our senses nor reason provide sufficient justification for believing that matter exists. These skeptics concluded that we simply cannot know the true nature of the physical world, and, hence, we can only make guarded claims about how the world appears to be. One of the major preoccupations of the materialists in the 17th century, then, was combating this skepticism. Descartes and Locke invested considerable intellectual effort in constructing philosophical arguments to show that we have the capacity to know the material world for what it truly is. Though Berkeley believed that the materialists failed to meet the skeptics' challenges, he was unwilling to resign himself to skepticism.

Berkeley realized that the materialists and skeptics shared a fundamental assumption—namely, that the real world is distinct from the world we immediately experience with our five senses. Because they shared this assumption, Berkeley saw the materialists and skeptics as being trapped in the same maze. But where the skeptics rightly recognized that the maze is inescapable, the materialists wrongly believed that there is a way out of the maze. Berkeley's fundamental philosophical insight was that one can refuse to enter the maze in the first place—that is, one can deny that matter exists and, by doing so, deny that the real world is distinct from the world we directly perceive. By exposing these assumptions as false and even unintelligible, Berkeley intended to undermine materialism and skepticism at once. He aimed to show that we *cannot even conceive* of a material world existing independent of its being perceived, and, hence, the problems that arise from materialism, including the problem of skepticism, are not genuine philosophical problems at all. Rather, the materialists and skeptics were both struggling with what some recent philosophers have called “pseudo-problems”—problems that cannot be solved because the very concepts involved in formulating them are nonsensical. When it is recognized that materialism rests upon incoherent assumptions, the walls of the maze that grow up around it simply dissolve.

Berkeley's analysis led him to develop a fantastic and revolutionary alternative to materialism. Central to his metaphysics is the claim that the whole of reality consists of the minds of spiritual beings and ideas in those minds. Berkeley referred to his view as ‘immaterialism’, by which he intended to convey that the fundamental constituents of reality are immaterial—that is, the minds of spiritual beings and the ideas in those minds are not composed of matter. Berkeley's view is also frequently

referred to as 'idealism', which is intended to convey his view that ordinary physical objects exist only as collections of ideas in the minds of spiritual beings who perceive them. His view has often been summarized in the Latin slogan '*esse est percipi aut percipere*' ('to be is to be perceived or to perceive'). For a physical object, such as a teacup, to be is to be perceived, which means that the teacup exists only insofar as its constituent ideas are perceived. But if there are ideas that are perceived, there must also be minds that perceive them, and, for a mind, to be is to perceive.

Stated without context, Berkeley's worldview strikes many as absurd. It is perhaps all the more surprising to find that Berkeley styles himself as the defender of a "vulgar"—the term as Berkeley uses it means "ordinary" or "everyday" and does not have the pejorative connotation that it does today—conception of the world, and as an opponent to a convoluted, philosophical conception of the world. Where the philosophers believe that the real world *is distinct from* the world we immediately perceive, ordinary people believe that the real world *just is* the world that we directly or immediately perceive. Where the philosophers believe that the objects constituting the real world *are distinct from* the things that we sense, ordinary people believe that the very things that we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell *are* the objects of the real world. Where the philosophers *doubt* their senses, ordinary people *trust* their senses. On all of these counts Berkeley sided with ordinary people in opposition to the philosophers. (The fact that Berkeley takes 'philosophers' to be synonymous with 'materialists' indicates the pervasiveness of the view he was attacking.) In his Preface to the *Three Dialogues* Berkeley says that after having been shown the way out of the "wild mazes of philosophy" (54) one feels the same sense of satisfaction and peace that one feels after returning home from a long and difficult journey. The end of Berkeley's philosophical project then is not to provide us with some new knowledge about the world that we did not have before setting out on our inquiries. Rather, his goal is to vindicate what he takes to be our ordinary, everyday conception of the world, and to show that we can know all that there is to know about the real world, once we come to recognize that there is nothing more to the real world than what we directly experience with our five senses.

More so today than ever, we look to science for an account of the fundamental nature of the physical world. Scientific materialism is at least tacitly adopted by most people, and we have become accustomed to believing that the "real world" as described by scientists is in many

respects very different from the world of everyday experience. Today we do not conceive the physical world in terms of corpuscles of matter, of course, but in terms of quarks, leptons, strings, and fields. Berkeley remains important and relevant today because he, perhaps more than any other modern philosopher, insists that we must be able to reconcile our scientific conception of the world with our everyday experience if that conception is to be intelligible to us.

The *Three Dialogues* is a concise and engaging introduction to Berkeley's philosophy and to philosophy in general. It is also a literary gem. The work records three imaginary conversations that occur in the garden of an unnamed college on three successive days. The characters are Hylas—a materialist whose name derives from the Greek for "matter"—and Philonous—an idealist whose name derives from the Greek for "lover of mind" and who serves as Berkeley's mouthpiece. Through the course of the *Three Dialogues* Philonous offers a sustained attack on Hylas' materialism and an exposition and defense of immaterialism.

BIOGRAPHY AND INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES

George Berkeley was born to an Anglo-Irish family in or near Kilkenny, Ireland on March 12, 1685. He entered Kilkenny College in 1696 and Trinity College, Dublin in 1700, where he was graduated with a B.A. degree in 1704 and an M.A. degree in 1707. Berkeley was elected fellow of Trinity College in 1707, and, though often absent, he would remain associated with the college until 1724 when he resigned to become Dean of Derry. He was ordained as an Anglican priest—a common practice for British academics at the time—in 1710. He traveled to London in 1713 where he befriended leading intellectual figures such as Jonathan Swift, Richard Steele, and Joseph Addison. Alexander Pope would credit Berkeley with "ev'ry virtue under heav'n." He toured the continent twice (1713-14 and 1716-20). At the end of the second continental tour Berkeley published *De Motu* (1721), a Latin tract on motion, which was written as a submission for an essay contest sponsored by the Royal Academy of Sciences at Paris.

Berkeley was not merely an academic, as a considerable portion of his life was devoted to philanthropy. In 1722 he resolved to establish a college in Bermuda for the sons of colonists and Native Americans, and this project would dominate his life for a decade. He secured a royal charter

for the college, raised substantial funds from private subscriptions, and was promised a monetary grant from the British Parliament. In 1728 Berkeley married Anne Forster, and soon after the wedding they sailed to America. They settled near Newport, Rhode Island, where Berkeley built a house—Whitehall, which still stands today—and waited for the promised grant to materialize. During this time Berkeley was in contact with some of the most important American intellectuals of the day. He also wrote the bulk of *Alciphron* (1732), a work composed of seven dialogues defending Christianity against freethinking and deism, while in America. In early 1731 Berkeley was informed that the promised Parliamentary grant would not be paid, and he and his family returned to London later that year. Before leaving America, Berkeley donated a considerable portion of his own personal library, and much of the money that he had raised for his college, to a nascent Yale College. Though Berkeley ultimately failed to establish his college in Bermuda, his considerable effort increased his reputation and is considered partially responsible for his appointment as Bishop of Cloyne in 1734. He acquired his moniker—“the good Bishop”—through his generous educational and charitable activities on behalf of Irish Protestants and Catholics alike. In 1752 Berkeley left Cloyne for Oxford to oversee the education of his son, George. He died on January 14, 1753 and is interred in the chapel of Christ Church College, Oxford.

The three works for which Berkeley is most well known, and which secure his position as one of the major figures in the history of early-modern philosophy, were written and published when he was a very young man. He was only 24 when *An Essay towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709) was published. In it Berkeley examined issues related to visual perception and the relationship between sight and touch. Though this work went some way toward preparing the ground for his immaterialism—it concluded that “the proper objects of sight neither exist without the mind, nor are the images of external things”—it stopped short of claiming that there is no such thing as matter in the external world. Berkeley first advanced and defended his immaterialism in a systematic fashion in *A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710). The introduction to this work contains a famous and unyielding attack on abstract general ideas such as ‘pure extension’ and ‘absolute space’, which Berkeley saw as central to the materialists’ description of the physical world. In the body of the work Berkeley argued that matter does not exist; that ordinary physical objects are simply collections of ideas; and that God produces these ideas in our minds. Significant por-

tions of the work are devoted to anticipating and answering possible objections to immaterialism and to explaining how immaterialism allows us to resolve a variety of metaphysical, epistemological, scientific, mathematical, and theological puzzles.

Few people read Berkeley's *Principles*, and those who did tended not to understand it. The most common misunderstanding of the work still plagues Berkeley's philosophy today. Despite his best efforts, readers then and now tend to believe that in denying the existence of *matter* Berkeley must also be denying the existence of *physical objects*. So, Berkeley's immaterialism was thought to be a form of skepticism. One fundamental motivation for writing his third major work, the *Three Dialogues* (1713), was to attempt to correct this misunderstanding. Berkeley tells us in the Preface to this work that after the poor reception of the *Principles* he found it "requisite to treat more clearly and fully of certain principles laid down in the First [Part of the *Principles of Human Knowledge*] and to place them in a new light, which is the business of the following *Dialogues*." The *Dialogues*, then, had the same fundamental design as the *Principles*—it set out to show that mind-independent matter does not exist and that the resulting immaterialism does not lead to skepticism about physical objects. But where the *Principles* was written primarily for other scholars, the *Dialogues* was intended to be a popular introduction to immaterialism. Berkeley 'places immaterialism in a new light' by employing a dialogue form reminiscent of Plato (c. 428-347 B.C.E.). In the *Dialogues* Berkeley's characters adopt an easy conversational style. Philonous, who seems to be the senior of the two characters, guides Hylas through the conversations, carefully explaining philosophical concepts whose meanings were taken for granted in the *Principles*. Hylas freely asks questions when a concept or position is unclear to him, and Philonous provides helpful examples that illustrate and clarify these concepts and positions. Despite their pedagogical design, the conversations seem very natural.

There are no significant differences in doctrine between the *Principles* and the *Dialogues*. The intention of the latter work was simply to provide a clearer exposition of the views already presented in the *Principles* in order to make those views accessible to a larger audience and to correct common misunderstandings of immaterialism. There is certainly a noticeable difference in emphasis between the two works, though. Because the *Dialogues* had a more populist aim, Berkeley repeatedly stresses in this work the affinity that he sees between his views and those of ordinary people. Absent from the *Dialogues* is any extended attack on

abstract ideas corresponding to that in the Introduction of the *Principles*. There is, however, a considerable expansion of his critique of the primary-secondary quality distinction. Berkeley also expands and recasts his views on the subjects of mind and God, and he attempts to make clear the differences between his views and those of other thinkers.

The pioneering Berkeley scholar A.A. Luce conjectured that “copies of Locke’s *Essay* and of Taylor’s translation of Malebranche’s *Recherche* must have been on [Berkeley’s] study table, with a volume or two of Bayle’s *Dictionary*” as he composed his earliest philosophical thoughts.¹ It is now generally accepted that Berkeley’s philosophical agenda and thinking were shaped primarily by John Locke, Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), and Pierre Bayle (1647-1706). In his monumental *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke developed and defended the empiricist position that all of our knowledge derives from the ideas we come to have through experience. The *Essay* also provided a classic exposition of the scientific materialism that Berkeley set out to refute. While he was deeply committed to Locke’s empiricism, Berkeley completely rejected Locke’s view that the real world is composed of material bodies that exist independent of their being perceived. Indeed, Berkeley believed that this understanding of the real world is wholly inconsistent with empiricism. A consistent empiricist, Berkeley believed, is led to immaterialism.

In the Introduction to his *Essay* Locke wrote:

...it may be of use to prevail with the busy mind of man to be more cautious in meddling with things exceeding its comprehension; to stop when it is at the utmost extent of its tether; and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things which, upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities. (Intro. §4)²

Locke intended this to be a corrective to the to metaphysical pretensions of rationalists such as Descartes, Benedict de Spinoza (1632-1677), and G.W. Leibniz (1646-1716), whose far-reaching philosophical systems were built on the assumption that human reason is capable of providing us with knowledge of things extending well beyond our experience. Berkeley, like Locke, was sharply critical of speculative metaphysics, but he discerned in Locke a tendency to engage in the very sort of speculation that he himself criticized. At the opening of the *Principles*, in language that clearly echoes Locke, Berkeley insinuated that Locke’s own materialist assumptions require that we “sit down in a forlorn skepticism” (Intro. §1). This is because Locke’s material world is—to use

Locke's own words—"beyond the reach of our capacities" and, hence, 'exceeds our comprehension.' Locke's metaphysical principles, Berkeley believed, lead us directly to skepticism.

Berkeley read Nicolas Malebranche's *De la recherch   de la v  rit  * (*The Search after Truth*, 3 vol., 1674-75) as a young student, and he apparently met Malebranche on his first tour of the continent.³ (According to Berkeley's early biographer Joseph Stock, the meeting between Berkeley and Malebranche was so heated that it led to Malebranche's death. The story is clearly apocryphal, though, since Malebranche died two years after Berkeley's visit.) Malebranche was the most important Cartesian philosopher of the second-half of the 17th century, though he rejected a number of theses that Descartes himself defended. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes argued that material bodies exist; that these material bodies cause many of our ideas; and that we can be sure that these ideas accurately represent the material world, since God "guarantees" the veracity of our sense experience. Malebranche believed that these claims are inconsistent with other, more fundamental, aspects of Descartes' philosophy. He argued that neither sense nor reason could conclusively establish that material bodies exist—though he also maintained that we have a natural propensity to believe that matter exists and that faith in the Scriptures requires this belief. He also argued that matter is causally inert, and, hence, Malebranche denied that material objects can cause any of our ideas. He is perhaps the best known proponent of *occasionalism*—the doctrine that physical events are really only "occasions" upon which God, the one true cause of all things, produces effects—though the view had been developed by Arab philosophers in the middle ages and was defended by many of Malebranche's contemporaries. So, Malebranche maintained that we do not *really* perceive material things at all, though faith leads us to believe that such things really do exist. Our perceptions, he argues, really involve God's uniting our souls to His, thereby causing us to perceive His ideas of things. Malebranche quite literally believed that "we see all things in God."

Much to his consternation, many readers of the *Principles* took Berkeley to be Malebranche's disciple. And though Berkeley would insist in the *Dialogues* that "upon the whole, there are no principles more fundamentally opposite than [Malebranche's] and mine" (99), there are certain parallels evident in their views that made such a misinterpretation possible. Like the French philosopher, Berkeley adhered to a broadly Cartesian view of the mind. More importantly, Malebranche's skeptical doubts about providing a rational justification for belief in the existence

of matter paved the way for Berkeley's dismissing matter altogether. In addition, Berkeley agreed with Malebranche that only a spirit or mind can be causally efficacious, though he would allow that *finite* minds are also active causes. Berkeley and Malebranche also agreed that God is the direct cause of our ideas of sensible things, but Berkeley did not believe that this involves God's uniting our souls with His. Berkeley justly insists that the similarities between his and Malebranche's thought are superficial. Though Berkeley often tends to express his views using language similar to that of Malebranche, these similarities of phrasing mask significant doctrinal differences.

Pierre Bayle was the most important skeptical philosopher between Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) and David Hume (1711-76). In his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (*Historical and Critical Dictionary*, 1697), Bayle concluded that philosophical reasoning inevitably leads to universal skepticism, but that nature compels us to accept certain beliefs on faith. Berkeley regarded Bayle's skeptical conclusion as wholly unacceptable, and when he tells us in the subtitle to the *Dialogues* that the work is written "in opposition to skeptics and atheists" we should understand that Bayle is included in this number. But Bayle's influence on Berkeley was not solely negative. Berkeley found useful many of the arguments that Bayle had employed to reach his skeptical conclusions. For example, in his articles on Pyrrho of Elis and Zeno the Eleatic, Bayle advanced some of the very arguments against material bodies and the primary-secondary quality distinction that Berkeley would later employ in the *Principles* and *Dialogues*.⁴ Because Berkeley made use of many of the same arguments that Bayle had utilized to reach his skeptical conclusions, many of Berkeley's contemporaries mistakenly thought that he too was an advocate of skepticism.

Though Berkeley would draw heavily from Locke, Malebranche, and Bayle, he believed that they were each trapped in different corridors of the same philosophical maze. Locke had become trapped in the maze by wholeheartedly defending the early-modern dogma of matter. What is more, Berkeley believed that Locke altogether failed to recognize that he was trapped in this maze, because he failed to properly employ his empiricist principles to critique this dogma. Malebranche and Bayle had at least recognized that no rational justification of materialism is possible—that it is beyond our capacity to find our way out of this maze once we enter it. Nonetheless, they had in their own ways resigned themselves to being trapped in the maze. Malebranche believed that it was necessary to retain belief in matter for theological reasons, and his Occasionalism was

designed to reconcile his skepticism about matter with this belief. Bayle believed that nature compels us to believe that matter exists, despite the fact that we cannot rationally justify this belief. Berkeley believed that all three had failed to see that one need not—indeed, *should* not—enter the maze in the first place—one can and should deny the existence of matter altogether and thereby avoid skepticism and a multitude of other problems.

THE PROGRAM OF THE *THREE DIALOGUES*

There are both critical and constructive aspects to Berkeley's program in the *Three Dialogues*. The critical aspect involves his refutation of materialism. Berkeley intends to show that the concept 'matter' is either self-contradictory or utterly meaningless, depending upon the proposed definition, and that the fundamental assumption that the physical world exists independent of its being perceived is incoherent. The constructive aspects of his project involve his exposition and defense of immaterialism, and it is these aspects of his program that Berkeley emphasizes in the lengthy subtitle of the *Dialogues*. It is a book:

The design of which is plainly to demonstrate the reality and perfection of human knowledge, the incorporeal nature of the soul, and the immediate providence of a deity: In opposition to skeptics and atheists. Also, to open a method for rendering the sciences more easy, useful, and compendious. (51)

Once we realize that there is no more to the physical world than what we immediately perceive with our five senses, we see that we can have knowledge of the existence and nature of real things. Moreover, immaterialism provides the foundation for two central tenets of traditional Christian theology—God's existence and the immortality of the soul. Immaterialism, then, provides us with the resources to refute both skepticism and atheism, according to Berkeley. To appreciate both the critical and constructive aspects of Berkeley's program we need to consider the main tenets of materialism and also why Berkeley believes that this view invariably leads to skepticism and atheism. We also need to consider the main tenets of Berkeley's own immaterialism and why he believes that his view provides us with the resources needed to refute skepticism and atheism. Finally, we must consider what implications immaterialism has for our understanding of empirical science.

Materialism and the Scientific Worldview

Today philosophers use the term ‘materialism’ to refer to a general metaphysical view which holds that all entities and phenomena are composed of, or are reducible to, matter or material forces. Because materialists deny the independent existence of spiritual beings and forces and maintain that everything that exists is made up of one fundamental type of “stuff”—matter—materialism so understood represents a form of monism. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), an important precursor to Berkeley in the British empiricist tradition, is typically regarded as a proponent of materialism in this sense. But while he surely opposes *material monism*, Berkeley also regards *dualists*, such as Descartes and Locke—who maintain that both material *and* spiritual substances exist independently of one another—as materialists. On Berkeley’s view anyone who allows that matter exists independent of mind is a materialist in the relevant sense. So Hylas, the proponent of materialism in the *Dialogues*, represents a variety of different philosophers, who despite the significant differences between them share in common the view that matter exists independent of mind. (Note that Berkeley’s immaterialism represents a form of *mental monism* in that it holds that all entities and phenomena are composed of, or are reducible to, immaterial spirits or minds, or ideas in those minds.) I will follow Berkeley here and use the term ‘materialism’ to refer to any view that allows that matter exists independent of mind. As noted earlier, John Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding* provides the classic exposition of the materialism that Berkeley is attacking, and in the following discussion I will rely primarily on his account, noting important differences between his view and that of others when relevant.

Materialists like Locke are *realists* about matter and material objects, since they maintain that matter and objects composed of matter really exist independent of our minds and of our perceiving them. As Hylas insists in the First Dialogue, material objects have “a real absolute being, distinct from and without any relation to their being perceived” (61). Berkeley attributes to the materialist the view that material objects and their properties exist “without the mind” (61). This phrase is not intended simply to convey that material objects are spatially located outside of the mind, though they are according to the materialist, but that their existence in no way depends upon their being perceived by someone. To say that material objects exist “without the mind” is to say that there is no necessary connection between a material object’s existing and its being perceived. Hylas expresses this point by saying, “To *exist* is one