

PRINCIPLES OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

George Berkeley

1. First Meditation: On what can be called into doubt

1. Anyone who surveys the objects of human knowledge will easily see that they are all ideas that are either actually imprinted on the senses or perceived by attending to ones own emotions and mental activities or formed out of ideas of the first two types, with the help of memory and imagination, by compounding or dividing or simply reproducing ideas of those other two kinds. By sight I have the ideas of light and colours with their different degrees and variations. By touch I perceive hard and soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance, and so on; and each of these also admits of differences of quantity or degree. Smelling supplies me with odours; the palate with tastes; and hearing conveys sounds to the mind in all their variety of tone and composition. And when a number of these are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name and thus to be thought of as one thing. Thus, for example, a certain colour, taste, smell, shape and consistency having been observed to go together, they are taken to be one distinct thing, called an apple. Other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and similar perceptible things; and these can arouse the emotions of love, hate, joy, grief, and so on, depending on whether they please or displease us.

2. As well as all that endless variety of ideas, or objects of knowledge, there is also something that knows or perceives them, and acts on them in various ways such as willing, imagining, and remembering. This perceiving, active entity is what I call mind, spirit, soul, or myself. These words dont refer to any one of my ideas, but

rather to something entirely distinct from them, something in which they exist, or by which they are perceived. Those two are equivalent, because the existence of an idea consists in its being perceived.

3. Everyone will agree that our thoughts, emotions, and ideas of the imagination exist only in the mind. It seems to me equally obvious that the various sensations or ideas that are imprinted on our senses cannot exist except in a mind that perceives them no matter how they are blended or combined together (that is, no matter what objects they constitute). You can know this intuitively [= you can see this as immediately self-evident] by attending to what is meant by the term exist when it is applied to perceptible things. The table that I am writing on exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I would still say that it existed, meaning that if I were in my study I would perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. Similarly,

‘there was an odour i.e. it was smelled; there was a sound it was heard; there was a colour or shape it was seen or felt.

This is all that I can understand by such expressions as these. There are those who speak of things that unlike spirits do not think and unlike ideas exist whether or not they are perceived; but that seems to be perfectly unintelligible. For unthinking things, to exist is to be perceived; so they could not possibly exist out of the minds or thinking things that perceive them.

4. It is indeed widely believed that all perceptible objects houses, mountains, rivers, and so on really exist independently of being perceived by the understanding. But however widely and confidently this belief may

be held, anyone who has the courage to challenge it will if I am not mistaken see that it involves an obvious contradiction. For what are houses, mountains, rivers etc. but things we perceive by sense? And what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations? And isn't it plainly contradictory that these, either singly or in combination, should exist unperceived?

5. If we thoroughly examine this belief in things existing independently of the mind it will, perhaps, be found to depend basically on the doctrine of abstract ideas. For can there be a more delicate and precise strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of perceptible things from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived? Light and colours, heat and cold, extension and shapes, in a word the things we see and feel what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas, or sense impressions? And can any of these be separated, even in thought, from perception? Speaking for myself, I would find it no easier to do that than to divide a thing from itself! I don't deny that I can abstract (if indeed this is properly called abstraction) by conceiving separately objects that can exist separately, even if I have never experienced them apart from one another. I can for example imagine a human torso without the limbs, or conceive the smell of a rose without thinking of the rose itself. But my power of conceiving or imagining goes no further than that: it doesn't extend beyond the limits of what can actually exist or be perceived. Therefore, because I can't possibly see or feel a thing without having an actual sensation of it, I also can't possibly conceive of a perceptible thing distinct from the sensation or perception of it.

6. Some truths are so close to the mind, and so obvious,

that as soon as you open your eyes you will see them. Here is an important truth of that kind:

All the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies that compose the mighty structure of the world, have no existence outside a mind; for them to exist is for them to be perceived or known; consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by (i.e. do not exist in the mind of) myself or any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all or else exist in the mind of some eternal spirit; because it makes no sense and involves all the absurdity of abstraction to attribute to any such thing an existence independent of a spirit.

To be convinced of this, you need only to reflect and try to separate in your own thoughts the existence of a perceptible thing from its being perceived; you will find that you cannot.

7. From what I have said it follows that the only substances are spirits—things that perceive. Another argument for the same conclusion is the following down to the end of the section. The perceptible qualities are colour, shape, motion, smell, taste and so on, and these are ideas perceived by sense. Now it is plainly self-contradictory to suppose that an idea might exist in an unperceiving thing, for to have an idea is just the same as to perceive: so whatever has colour, shape and so on must perceive these qualities; from which it clearly follows that there can be no unthinking substance or substratum of those ideas.

8. But, you say, though the ideas do not exist outside the mind, still there may be things like them of which they

are copies or resemblances, and these things may exist outside the mind in an unthinking substance. I answer that the only thing an idea can resemble is another idea; a colour or shape cannot be like anything but another colour or shape. Attend a little to your own thoughts and you will find that you cannot conceive of any likeness except between your ideas. Also: tell me about those supposed originals or external things of which our ideas are the pictures or representations—are they perceivable or not? If they are, then they are ideas, and I have won the argument; but if you say they are not, I appeal to anyone whether it makes sense to assert that a colour is like something that is invisible; that hard or soft is like something intangible; and similarly for the other qualities.

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18. Suppose it were possible for solid, figured, movable substances to exist outside the mind, corresponding to the ideas we have of bodies—how could we possibly know that there are any such things? We must know it either by sense or by reason. Our senses give us knowledge only of our sensations—ideas—things that are immediately perceived by sense—call them what you will! They do not inform us that outside the mind (that is, unperceived) there exist things that resemble the items that are perceived. The materialists themselves admit this. So if we are to have any knowledge of external things, it must be by reason, inferring their existence from what is immediately perceived by sense. But what reasons can lead us from the ideas that we perceive to a belief in the existence of bodies outside the mind? The supporters of matter themselves do not claim that there is any necessary connection between material things and our ideas. We

could have all the ideas that we now have without there being any bodies existing outside us that resemble them; everyone admits this, and what happens in dreams, hallucinations and so on puts it beyond dispute. Evidently, then, we are not compelled to suppose that there are external bodies as causes of our ideas. Those ideas are sometimes, so they could be always, produced without help from bodies yet falling into the patterns that they do in fact exhibit.

19. Even though external bodies are not absolutely needed to explain our sensations, you might think, the course of our experience is easier to explain on the supposition of external bodies than it is without that supposition. So it is at least probable there are bodies that cause our minds to have ideas of them. But this is not tenable either. The materialists admit that they cannot understand how body can act upon spirit, or how it is possible for a body to imprint any idea in a mind; and that is tantamount to admitting that they don't know how our ideas are produced. So the production of ideas or sensations in our minds can't be a reason for supposing the existence of matter or corporeal substances, because it admittedly remains a mystery with or without that supposition. So even if it were possible for bodies to exist outside the mind, the belief that they actually do so must be a very shaky one; since it involves supposing, without any reason at all, that God has created countless things that are entirely useless and serve no purpose.

20. In short, if there were external bodies, we couldn't possibly come to know this; and if there weren't, we might have the very same reasons to think there were that we have now. No-one can deny the following to be possible: A thinking being might, without the help of

external bodies, be affected with the same series of sensations or ideas that you have, imprinted in the same order and with similar vividness in his mind. If that happened, wouldn't that thinking being have all the reason to believe there are corporeal substances that are represented by my ideas and cause them in my mind that you can possibly have for believing the same thing? Of course he would; and that consideration is enough, all on its own, to make any reasonable person suspect the strength of whatever arguments he may think he has for the existence of bodies outside the mind.

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23. But, you say, surely there is nothing easier than to imagine trees in a park, for instance, or books on a shelf, with nobody there to perceive them. I reply that this is indeed easy to imagine; but let us look into what happens when you imagine it. You form in your mind certain ideas that you call books and trees, and at the same time you omit to form the idea of anyone who might perceive them. But while you are doing this, you perceive or think of them! So your thought-experiment misses the point; it shows only that you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind; but it doesn't show that you can conceive it possible for the objects of your thought to exist outside the mind. To show that, you would have to conceive them existing unconceived or unthought-of, which is an obvious contradiction. However hard we try to conceive the existence of external bodies, all we achieve is to contemplate our own ideas. The mind is misled into thinking that it can and does conceive bodies existing outside the mind or unthought-of because it pays no attention to itself, and so doesn't notice that it contains or thinks of the things

that it conceives. Think about it a little and you will see that what I am saying is plainly true; there is really no need for any of the other disproofs of the existence of material substance.

24. It takes very little enquiry into our own thoughts to know for sure whether we can understand what is meant by the absolute existence of perceptible objects outside the mind. To me it is clear that those words mark out either a direct contradiction or else nothing at all. To convince you of this, I know no easier or fairer way than to urge you to attend calmly to your own thoughts: if that attention reveals to you the emptiness or inconsistency of those words, that is surely all you need to be convinced. So that is what I insist on: the phrase the absolute existence of unthinking things has either no meaning or a self-contradictory one. This is what I repeat and teach, and urge you to think about carefully.

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26. We perceive a continual stream of ideas: new ones appear, others are changed or totally disappear. These ideas must have a cause something they depend on, something that produces and changes them. It is clear from 25 that this cause cannot be any quality or idea or combination of ideas because that section shows that ideas are inactive, i.e. have no causal powers; and thus qualities have no powers either, because qualities are ideas. So the cause must be a substance, because reality consists of nothing but substances and their qualities. It cannot be a corporeal or material substance, because I have shown that there is no such thing. We must therefore conclude that the cause of ideas is an incorporeal

active substance a spirit.

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28. I find I can arouse ideas in my mind at will, and vary and shift the mental scene whenever I want to. I need only to will, and straight away this or that idea arises in my mind; and by willing again I can obliterate it and bring on another. It is because the mind makes and unmakes ideas in this way that it can properly be called active. It certainly is active; we know this from experience. But anyone who talks of unthinking agents or of arousing ideas without the use of volition is merely letting himself be led astray by words.

29. Whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, however, I find that the ideas I get through my senses don't depend on my will in the same way. When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it isn't in my power to choose whether or not I shall see anything, or to choose what particular objects I shall see; and the same holds for hearing and the other senses. My will is not responsible for the ideas that come to me through any of my senses. So there must be some other will some other spirit that produces them.

30. The ideas of sense are stronger, livelier, and clearer than those of the imagination; and they are also steady, orderly and coherent. Ideas that people bring into their own minds at will are often random and jumbled, but the ideas of sense aren't like that: they come in a regular series, and are inter-related in admirable ways that show us the wisdom and benevolence of the series author. The phrase the laws of nature names the set rules or established methods whereby the mind we depend on that is, God arouses in us the ideas of sense. We learn

what they are by experience, which teaches us that such and such ideas are ordinarily accompanied or followed by such and such others.

31. This gives us a sort of foresight that enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life. Without this we would always be at a loss: we couldnt know how to do anything to bring ourselves pleasure or spare ourselves pain. That food nourishes, sleep refreshes, and fire warms us; that to sow in the spring is the way to get a harvest in the fall, and in general that such and such means are the way to achieve such and such ends we know all this not by discovering any necessary connection between our ideas but only by observing the settled laws of nature. Without them we would be utterly uncertain and confused, and a grown man would have no more idea than a new-born infant does of how to manage himself in the affairs of life.

32. This consistent, uniform working obviously displays the goodness and wisdom of God, the governing spirit whose will constitutes the laws of nature. And yet, far from leading our thoughts towards him, it sends them away from him in a wandering search for second causes that is, for causes that come between God and the effects we want to explain. For when we perceive that certain ideas of sense are constantly followed by other ideas, and we know that this isnt our doing, we immediately attribute power and agency to the ideas 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 infer that the sun causes heat. Similarly, when we

perceive that a collision of bodies is accompanied by sound, we are inclined to think the latter an effect of the former.

33. The (1) ideas imprinted on the senses by the author of nature are called real things; and those (2) that are caused by the imagination, being less regular, vivid, and constant, are more properly called ideas or images of things that they copy and represent. But our (1) sensations, however vivid and distinct they may be, are nevertheless ideas; that is, they exist in the mind, or are perceived by it, as truly as (2) the ideas that mind itself makes. The (1) ideas of sense are agreed to have more reality in them i.e. to be more strong, orderly, and coherent than ideas made by the mind; but this doesnt show that they exist outside the mind. They are also less dependent on the spirit or thinking substance that perceives them, for they are caused by the will of another and more powerful spirit, namely God; but still they are ideas, and certainly no idea whether faint or strong can exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it.

34. Before we move on, I have to spend some time in answering objections that are likely to be made against the principles I have laid down. I shall answer twelve of them, ending in 72; and further objections will occupy 73-84. My answer to the first of the twelve will run to the end of 40. If fast-thinking readers find me too long-winded about this, I hope they will pardon me. My excuse is that people arent all equally quick in getting a grasp on topics such as this, and I want to be understood by everyone. First, then, this will be objected:

By your principles everything real and substantial

in nature is banished out of the world, and replaced by a chimerical [= unreal or imaginary] system of ideas. All things that exist do so only in the mind according to you, that is, they are purely notional. Then what becomes of the sun, moon, and stars? What must we think of houses, rivers, mountains, trees, stones even of our own bodies, for that matter? Are all these mere illusions, creatures of the imagination?

To all this and any other objections of the same sort I answer that the principles I have laid down don't deprive us of any one thing in nature. Whatever we see, feel, hear, or in any way conceive or understand remains as secure as ever, and is as real as ever. There is a real world, and the distinction between realities and chimeras retains its full force. This is evident from 2930 and 33, where I have shown what is meant by real things in opposition to chimeras or ideas made by us; but by that account real things and chimeras both exist in the mind, and in that sense are alike in being ideas.

35. I don't argue against the existence of any one thing that we can take in, either by sense or reflection. I don't in the least question that the things I see with my eyes and touch with my hands do exist, really exist. The only thing whose existence I deny is what philosophers call matter or corporeal substance. And in denying this I do no harm to the rest of mankind that is, to people other than philosophers because they will never miss it. The atheist indeed will lose the rhetorical help he gets from an empty name, matter, which he uses to support his impiety; and the philosophers may find that they have lost a great opportunity for word-spinning and

disputation.

36. If you think that this detracts from the existence or reality of things, you are very far from understanding what I have said in the plainest way I could think of. Here it is again, in brief outline. There are spiritual substances, minds, or human souls, which cause ideas in themselves through acts of the will, doing this as they please; but these ideas are faint, weak, and unsteady as compared with other ideas that minds perceive by sense. The latter ideas, being impressed on minds according to certain rules or laws of nature tell us that they are the effects of a mind that is stronger and wiser than human spirits. The latter are said to have more reality in them than the former: by which is meant that they are more forceful, orderly, and distinct, and that they aren't fictions of the mind that perceives them. In this sense, the sun that I see by day is the real sun, and what I imagine by night is the idea of the former. In the sense I am here giving to reality, it is evident that every plant, star, rock, and in general each part of the system of the world, is as much a real thing by my principles as by any others. Whether you mean by reality anything different from what I do, I beg you to look into your own thoughts and see.

37. You will want to object: At least it is true that you take away all corporeal substances. I answer that if the word substance is taken in the ordinary everyday sense standing for a combination of perceptible qualities such as extension, solidity, weight, etc. I cannot be accused of taking substance away. But if substance is taken in a philosophic sense standing for the support of qualities outside the mind then indeed I agree that I take it away, if one may be said to take away something

that never had any existence, not even in the imagination.

38. But, you say, it sounds weird to say that we eat and drink ideas, and are clothed with them. So it does, because the word idea isn't used in ordinary talk to signify the combinations of perceptible qualities that are called things; and any expression that differs from the familiar use of language is bound to seem weird and ridiculous. But this doesn't concern the truth of the proposition, which in other words merely says that we are fed and clothed with things that we perceive immediately by our senses. The hardness or softness, the colour, taste, warmth, shape and such like qualities, which combine to constitute the various sorts of food and clothing, have been shown to exist only in the mind that perceives them; and this is all I mean by calling them ideas; which word, if it was as ordinarily used as thing, would sound no weirder or more ridiculous than thing does in the statement that we eat and drink things and are clothed with them. My concern isn't with the propriety of words but with the truth of my doctrine. So if you will agree with me that what we eat, drink, and clothe ourselves with are immediate objects of sense that cannot exist unperceived or outside the mind, I will readily agree with you that it is more proper more in line with ordinary speech to call them things rather than ideas.

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51. Seventhly, from what I have said you will want to protest:

It seems absurd to take away natural causes, and attribute everything to the immediate operation of spir-

its! According to your principles, we must no longer say that fire heats or water cools, but that a spirit heats, and so forth. If someone actually talked like that, wouldn't he be laughed at, and rightly so? Yes, he would. In matters like this we ought to think with the learned and speak with the vulgar [= with the common people]. There is nothing disreputable about this; learned people already do speak with the vulgar in many respects. People who are perfectly convinced of the truth of the Copernican system in astronomy still say that the sun rises, the sun sets, the sun is high in the sky; and it would surely seem ridiculous to speak in any other way. Think about this a little and you will see that the acceptance of my doctrines wouldn't even slightly disturb or alter the common use of language.

52. In the ordinary affairs of life, we can go on using any turns of phrase even ones that are false when taken in a really strict sense so long as they arouse in us appropriate thoughts or feelings or dispositions to act in ways that are good for us. Indeed, this is unavoidable, because the standards for proper speech are set by what is customary, so that language has to be shaped by commonly held opinions, which are not always the truest. So even in the strictest philosophic reasonings we cannot alter the outlines of the English language so completely that we never provide fault-finders with an opportunity to accuse us of difficulties and inconsistencies in what we say. But a fair and honest reader will gather what is meant by a discourse from its over-all

58. Tenthly, this will be objected: The views you advance are inconsistent with various sound truths in science and mathematics. For example, the motion of the earth is now universally accepted by astronomers as a truth

grounded in the clearest and most convincing reasons; but on your principles there can be no such motion. For motion is only an idea; so it doesn't exist except as perceived; but the motion of the earth is not perceived by sense. I answer that the doctrine that the earth moves, if rightly understood, will be found to agree with my principles. The question Does the earth move? amounts in reality to just this:

Do we have reason to conclude from what astronomers have observed that if we were placed in such and such circumstances, at such or such a position and distance both from the earth and sun, we would see the earth moving among the choir of the planets and appearing in all respects like one of them?

The answer is Yes. This is a conclusion we can reasonably draw from the phenomena through the established rules of nature, which we have no reason to mistrust.

59. From the experience we have had of the order and succession of ideas in our minds, we can often make something better than uncertain conjectures indeed, sure and well-grounded predictions concerning the ideas we shall have if we do engage in this or that complex sequence of actions; and these predictions enable us to judge correctly what would have appeared to us if things had been in such and such specific ways very different from those we are in at present. That is what the knowledge of nature consists in an account that preserves the usefulness and certainty of such knowledge without conflicting with what I have said. It will be easy to re-apply this line of thought to any other objections

of the same sort concerning the size of the stars or any other discoveries in astronomy or nature.