

Excerpts from *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* by George Berkeley

It is evident to any one 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--either compounding, dividing, or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways. By sight I have the ideas of light and colours, with their several degrees and variations. By touch I perceive hard and soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance, and of all these more and less either as to quantity or degree. 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.

But, besides all that endless variety of ideas or objects of knowledge, there is likewise something which knows or perceives them, and exercises divers 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.

That neither our thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by the imagination, exist WITHOUT the mind, is what EVERYBODY WILL ALLOW. And it seems 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 any one 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 was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. There was an odour, that is, it was smelt; there was a sound, that is, it was heard; a colour or figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch. This is all that I can understand by these and the like expressions. For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems 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.

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 fore-mentioned 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?...

Some truths there are so near and obvious to the mind that a man need only open his eyes to see them. Such I take this important one to be, viz., that all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind, that their BEING (ESSE) is to be perceived or known; that 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, and involving all the absurdity of abstraction, to attribute to any single part of them an existence independent of a 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.

From what has been said it follows there is NOT ANY OTHER SUBSTANCE THAN SPIRIT, or that which perceives. But, for the fuller proof of this point, let it be considered the sensible qualities are colour, figure, motion, smell, taste, etc., i.e. the ideas perceived by sense. Now, for an idea to exist in an unperceiving thing is a manifest contradiction, for TO HAVE AN IDEA IS ALL ONE AS TO PERCEIVE; that therefore wherein colour, figure, and the like qualities exist must perceive them; hence it is clear there can be no UNTHINKING substance or SUBSTRATUM of those ideas.

But, say you, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things LIKE them, whereof they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind in an unthinking substance. I ANSWER, an idea can be like nothing but an idea; a colour or figure can be like nothing but another colour or figure. If we look but never so little into our thoughts, we shall find it impossible for us to conceive a likeness except only between our ideas. Again, I ask whether those supposed originals or external things, of which our ideas are the pictures or representations, be themselves perceivable or no? If they are, THEN THEY ARE IDEAS and we have gained our point; but if you say they are not, I appeal to any one whether it be sense to assert a colour is like something which is invisible; hard or soft, like something which is intangible; and so of the rest.

Some there are who make a DISTINCTION betwixt PRIMARY and SECONDARY qualities. By the former they mean extension, figure, motion, rest, solidity or impenetrability, and number; by the latter they denote all other sensible qualities, as colours, sounds, tastes, and so forth. The ideas we have of these they acknowledge not to be the resemblances of anything existing without the mind, or unperceived, but they will have our ideas of the primary qualities to be patterns or images of things which exist without the mind, in an unthinking substance which they call MATTER. By MATTER, therefore, we are to understand an inert, senseless substance, in which extension, figure, and motion DO ACTUALLY SUBSIST. But it is evident from what we have already shown, that extension, figure, and motion are ONLY IDEAS EXISTING IN THE MIND, and that an idea can be like nothing but another idea, and that consequently neither they nor their archetypes can exist in an UNPERCEIVING substance. Hence, it is plain that that the very notion of what is called MATTER or CORPOREAL SUBSTANCE, involves a contradiction in it.

They who assert that figure, motion, and the rest of the primary or original qualities do exist without the mind in unthinking substances, do at the same time acknowledge that colours, sounds, heat cold, and suchlike secondary qualities, do not--which they tell us are sensations existing IN THE MIND ALONE, that depend on and are occasioned by the different size, texture, and motion of the minute particles of matter. This they take for an undoubted truth, which they can demonstrate beyond all exception. Now, if it be certain that those original qualities ARE INSEPARABLY UNITED WITH THE OTHER SENSIBLE QUALITIES, and not, even in

thought, capable of being abstracted from them, it plainly follows that they exist only in the mind. But I desire any one to reflect and try whether he can, by any abstraction of thought, conceive the extension and motion of a body without all other sensible qualities. For my own part, I see evidently that it is not in my power to frame an idea of a body extended and moving, but I must withal give it some colour or other sensible quality which is ACKNOWLEDGED to exist only in the mind. In short, extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable. Where therefore the other sensible qualities are, there must these be also, to wit, in the mind and nowhere else.

Again, GREAT and SMALL, SWIFT and SLOW, ARE ALLOWED TO EXIST NOWHERE WITHOUT THE MIND, being entirely RELATIVE, and changing as the frame or position of the organs of sense varies. The extension therefore which exists without the mind is neither great nor small, the motion neither swift nor slow, that is, they are nothing at all. But, say you, they are extension in general, and motion in general: thus we see how much the tenet of extended movable substances existing without the mind depends on the strange doctrine of ABSTRACT IDEAS. And here I cannot but remark how nearly the vague and indeterminate description of Matter or corporeal substance, which the modern philosophers are run into by their own principles, resembles that antiquated and so much ridiculed notion of MATERIA PRIMA, to be met with in Aristotle and his followers. Without extension solidity cannot be conceived; since therefore it has been shown that extension exists not in an unthinking substance, the same must also be true of solidity...

I shall farther add, that, after the same manner as modern philosophers prove certain sensible qualities to have no existence in Matter, or without the mind, the same thing may be likewise proved of all other sensible qualities whatsoever. Thus, for instance, it is said that heat and cold are affections only of the mind, and not at all patterns of real beings, existing in the corporeal substances which excite them, for that the same body which appears cold to one hand seems warm to another. Now, why may we not as well argue that figure and extension are not patterns or resemblances of qualities existing in Matter, because to the same eye at different stations, or eyes of a different texture at the same station, they appear various, and cannot therefore be the images of anything SETTLED AND DETERMINATE WITHOUT THE MIND? Again, it is proved that SWEETNESS is not really in the sapid thing, because the thing remaining unaltered the sweetness is changed into bitter, as in case of a fever or otherwise vitiated palate. Is it not as reasonable to say that MOTION is not without the mind, since if the succession of ideas in the mind become swifter, the motion, it is acknowledged, shall appear slower without any alteration in any external object?

In short, let any one consider those arguments which are thought manifestly to prove that colours and taste exist only in the mind, and he shall find they may with equal force be brought to prove the same thing of extension, figure, and motion. Though it must be confessed this method of arguing does not so much prove that there is no extension or colour in an outward object, as that we do not know by SENSE which is the TRUE extension or colour of the object. But the arguments foregoing plainly show it to be impossible that any colour or extension at all, or other sensible quality whatsoever, should exist in an UNTHINKING subject without the mind, or in truth, that there should be any such thing as an outward object.

But let us examine a little the received opinion.--It is said EXTENSION is a MODE or accident OF MATTER, and that Matter is the SUBSTRATUM that supports it. Now I desire that you would explain to me what is meant by Matter's SUPPORTING extension. Say you, I have no idea of Matter and therefore cannot explain it. I answer, though you have no positive, yet, if you have

any meaning at all, you must at least have a relative idea of Matter; though you know not what it is, yet you must be supposed to know what relation it bears to accidents, and what is meant by its supporting them. It is evident SUPPORT cannot here be taken in its usual or literal sense--as when we say that pillars support a building; in what sense therefore must it be taken?...

But, though it were possible that solid, figured, movable substances may exist without the mind, corresponding to the ideas we have of bodies, yet HOW IS IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO KNOW THIS? Either we must know it by sense or by reason. As for our senses, by them we have the knowledge ONLY OF OUR SENSATIONS, ideas, or those things that are immediately perceived by sense, call them what you will: but they do not inform us that things exist without the mind, or unperceived, like to those which are perceived. This the materialists themselves acknowledge. It remains therefore that if we have any knowledge at all of external things, it must be by REASON, inferring their existence from what is immediately perceived by sense. But what reason can induce us to believe the existence of bodies without the mind, from what we perceive, since the very patrons of Matter themselves do not pretend there is ANY NECESSARY CONNEXION BETWIXT THEM AND OUR IDEAS? I say it is granted on all hands (and what happens in dreams, phrensies, and the like, puts it beyond dispute) that IT IS POSSIBLE WE MIGHT BE AFFECTED WITH ALL THE IDEAS WE HAVE NOW, THOUGH THERE WERE NO BODIES EXISTING WITHOUT RESEMBLING THEM. Hence, it is evident the supposition of external bodies is not necessary for the producing our ideas; since it is granted they are produced sometimes, and might possibly be produced always in the same order, we see them in at present, without their concurrence.

But, though we might possibly have all our sensations without them, yet perhaps it may be thought EASIER to conceive and explain the MANNER of their production, by supposing external bodies in their likeness rather than otherwise; and so it might be at least probable there are such things as bodies that excite their ideas in our minds. But neither can this be said; for, though we give the materialists their external bodies, they by their own confession are never the nearer knowing how our ideas are produced; since they own themselves unable to comprehend in what manner BODY CAN ACT UPON SPIRIT, or how it is possible it should imprint any idea in the mind. Hence it is evident the production of ideas or sensations in our minds can be no reason why we should suppose Matter or corporeal substances, SINCE THAT IS ACKNOWLEDGED TO REMAIN EQUALLY INEXPLICABLE WITH OR WITHOUT THIS SUPPOSITION. If therefore it were possible for bodies to exist without the mind, yet to hold they do so, must needs be a very precarious opinion; since it is to suppose, without any reason at all, that God has created innumerable beings THAT ARE ENTIRELY USELESS, AND SERVE TO NO MANNER OF PURPOSE.

In short, if there were external bodies, it is impossible we should ever come to know it; and if there were not, we might have the very same reasons to think there were that we have now. Suppose--what no one can deny possible--an intelligence without the help of external bodies, to be affected with the same train of sensations or ideas that you are, imprinted in the same order and with like vividness in his mind. I ask whether that intelligence has not all the reason to believe the existence of corporeal substances, represented by his ideas, and exciting them in his mind, that you can possibly have for believing the same thing? Of this there can be no question--which one consideration were enough to make any reasonable person suspect the strength of whatever arguments he may think himself to have, for the existence of bodies without the mind...

But, say you, surely there is nothing easier than for me to imagine trees, for instance, in a park, or books existing in a closet, and nobody by to perceive them. I answer, you may so, there is no

difficulty in it; but what is all this, I beseech you, more than framing in your mind certain ideas which you call BOOKS and TREES, and the same time omitting to frame the idea of any one that may perceive them? BUT DO NOT YOU YOURSELF PERCEIVE OR THINK OF THEM ALL THE WHILE? This therefore is nothing to the purpose; it only shows you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind: but it does not show that you can conceive it possible the objects of your thought may exist without the mind. To make out this, IT IS NECESSARY THAT YOU CONCEIVE THEM EXISTING UNCONCEIVED OR UNTHOUGHT OF, WHICH IS A MANIFEST REPUGNANCY. When we do our utmost to conceive the existence of external bodies, we are all the while only contemplating our own ideas. But the mind taking no notice of itself, is deluded to think it can and does conceive bodies existing unthought of or without the mind, though at the same time they are apprehended by or exist in itself. A little attention will discover to any one the truth and evidence of what is here said, and make it unnecessary to insist on any other proofs against the existence of material substance...

All our ideas, sensations, notions, or the things which 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. To be satisfied of the truth of this, there is nothing else requisite but a bare observation of our ideas. For, since they and every part of them exist only in the mind, it follows that there is nothing in them but what is perceived: but whoever shall attend to his ideas, whether of sense or reflexion, will not perceive in them any power or activity; there is, therefore, no such thing contained in them. A little attention will discover to us that the very being of an idea implies passiveness and inertness in it, insomuch that it is impossible for an idea to do anything, or, strictly speaking, to be the cause of anything: neither can it be the resemblance or pattern of any active being, as is evident from sect. 8. Whence it plainly follows that extension, figure, and motion cannot be the cause of our sensations. To say, therefore, that these are the effects of powers resulting from the configuration, number, motion, and size of corpuscles, must certainly be false.

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. That this cause cannot be any quality or idea or combination of ideas, is clear from the preceding section. I 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...

I find I can excite ideas in my mind at pleasure, and vary and shift the scene as oft as I think fit. 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. This making and unmaking of ideas doth very properly denominate the mind active. Thus much is certain and grounded on experience; but when we think of unthinking agents or of exciting ideas exclusive of volition, we only amuse ourselves with words.

But, whatever power I may have over MY OWN thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by Sense have not a 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.

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 connexion 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.

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 seed-time is the way to reap in the 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.

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 A 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 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 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.

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 and 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 its own framing. The ideas of Sense are allowed to have more reality in them, that is, to be more (1)STRONG, (2)ORDERLY, and (3)COHERENT than the creatures of the mind; but this is no argument that they exist without the mind. They are also (4)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.

Before we proceed any farther it is necessary we spend some time in answering objections which may probably be made against the principles we have hitherto laid down. In doing of which, if I seem too prolix to those of quick apprehensions, I hope it may be pardoned, since all men do not equally apprehend things of this nature, and I am willing to be understood by every one.

FIRST, then, it will be objected that by the foregoing principles ALL THAT IS REAL AND SUBSTANTIAL IN NATURE IS BANISHED OUT OF THE WORLD, and instead thereof a chimerical scheme of ideas takes place. All things that exist, exist only in the mind, that is, they

are purely notional. What therefore becomes of the sun, moon and stars? What must we think of houses, rivers, mountains, trees, stones; nay, even of our own bodies? Are all these but so many chimeras and illusions on the fancy? To all which, and whatever else of the same sort may be objected, I ANSWER, that by the principles premised we are not deprived of any one thing in nature. Whatever we see, feel, hear, or anywise conceive or understand remains as secure as ever, and is as real as ever. There is a RERUM NATURA, and the distinction between realities and chimeras retains its full force. This is evident from sect. 29, 30, and 33, where we have shown what is meant by REAL THINGS in opposition to CHIMERAS or ideas of our own framing; but then they both equally exist in the mind, and in that sense they are alike IDEAS.

I do not argue against the existence of any one thing that we can apprehend either by sense or reflexion. That the things I see with my eyes and touch with my hands do exist, really exist, I make not the least question. The only thing whose existence we deny IS THAT WHICH PHILOSOPHERS CALL MATTER or corporeal substance. And in doing of this there is no damage done to the rest of mankind, who, I dare say, will never miss it. The Atheist indeed will want the colour of an empty name to support his impiety; and the Philosophers may possibly find they have lost a great handle for trifling and disputation...

[Secondly], you will say there have been a great many things explained by matter and motion; take away these and you destroy the whole corpuscular philosophy, and undermine those mechanical principles which have been applied with so much success to account for the PHENOMENA. In short, whatever advances have been made, either by ancient or modern philosophers, in the study of nature do all proceed on the supposition that corporeal substance or Matter doth really exist. To this I ANSWER that there is not any one PHENOMENON explained on that supposition which may not as well be explained without it, as might easily be made appear by an INDUCTION OF PARTICULARS. To explain the PHENOMENA, is all one as to show why, upon such and such occasions, we are affected with such and such ideas. But (1) how Matter should operate on a Spirit, or produce any idea in it, is what no philosopher will pretend to explain; it is therefore evident there can be no use of Matter in natural philosophy. Besides, (2) they who attempt to account for things do it not by CORPOREAL SUBSTANCE, but by figure, motion, and other qualities, which are in truth no more than mere ideas, and, therefore, cannot be the cause of anything, as has been already shown.

[Thirdly,] it will upon this be demanded whether it does not seem ABSURD TO TAKE AWAY NATURAL CAUSES, AND ASCRIBE EVERYTHING TO THE IMMEDIATE OPERATION OF SPIRITS? We must no longer say upon these principles that fire heats, or water cools, but that a Spirit heats, and so forth. Would not a man be deservedly laughed at, who should talk after this manner? I ANSWER, he would so; in such things we ought to THINK WITH THE LEARNED, AND SPEAK WITH THE VULGAR. They who to demonstration are convinced of the truth of the Copernican system do nevertheless say "the sun rises," "the sun sets," or "comes to the meridian"; and if they affected a contrary style in common talk it would without doubt appear very ridiculous. A little reflexion on what is here said will make it manifest that the common use of language would receive no manner of alteration or disturbance from the admission of our tenets...

[Fourthly,] it will be objected that the notions we advance are inconsistent with several sound truths in philosophy and mathematics. For example, the motion of the earth is now universally admitted by astronomers as a truth grounded on the clearest and most convincing reasons. But, on the foregoing principles, there can be no such thing. For, motion being only an idea, it follows that if it be not perceived it exists not; but the motion of the earth is not perceived by sense. I

answer, that tenet, if rightly understood, will be found to agree with the principles we have premised; for, the question whether the earth moves or no amounts in reality to no more than this, to wit, whether we have reason to conclude, from what has been observed by astronomers, that if we were placed in such and such circumstances, and such or such a position and distance both from the earth and sun, we should perceive the former to move among the choir of the planets, and appearing in all respects like one of them; and this, by the established rules of nature which we have no reason to mistrust, is reasonably collected from the phenomena.

We may, from the experience we have had of the train and succession of ideas in our minds, often make, I will not say uncertain conjectures, but sure and well--grounded predictions concerning the ideas we shall be affected with pursuant to a great train of actions, and be enabled to pass a right judgment of what would have appeared to us, in case we were placed in circumstances very different from those we are in at present. Herein consists the knowledge of nature, which may preserve its use and certainty very consistently with what has been said. It will be easy to apply this to whatever objections of the like sort may be drawn from the magnitude of the stars, or any other discoveries in astronomy or nature.

MLA Citation

Excerpt form George Berkeley. Bishop Ludden Library. Bishop Ludden Jr/ Sr High School. 21 Sept 2010. Web. [date of access].