

THREE
DIALOGUES
BETWEEN

Hylas and Philonous.

The Design of which
Is plainly to demonstrate the Reality and
Perfection of Humane Knowledge, the In-
corporeal Nature of the Soul, and the Im-
mediate Providence of a DEITY:

In Opposition to
SCEPTICS and ATHEISTS.

ALSO,
To open a METHOD for rendering the
SCIENCES more easy, useful, and
compendious.

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L O N D O N:

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Berkeley's way with the sceptic

The sceptic maintains that we can only know appearances, not things as they are in themselves

But what is the difference?

The sceptic supposes that things in themselves are "material substances"

that exist outside of us

and that continue to exist whether or not they are perceived by us

and that (maybe) cause our perceptions, which are mere "appearances" of the reality that is these material substances

All the sceptical arguments go to show that we know no such things

None of them go to show (nor could they) that we don't know what they call "the way things appear to us"

Berkeley's way with the sceptic, cont.'d

But there is no good reason to accept this distinction between things in themselves and appearances

there is no good reason to think that there is any such thing as "mind-independent material substance"

Bodies are really nothing more than collections of ideas in minds

and as such, things that exist only insofar as they are perceived

(Ironically, Berkeley employed arguments used by the sceptics themselves to prove this)

Once this is realized, all the arguments of the sceptics come crashing down (so their own arguments undo them)

because they accept that ideas exist and are exactly what they are perceived to be

Berkeley's way with the atheist

Once we realize that there are no material substances, we are confronted with a question of what causes our ideas

and what causes all of us to have compatible ideas

and what makes those ideas as well-ordered in their manner of occurrence as they are, not withstanding their incredible variety

In the absence of material substances (which can't explain the occurrence of ideas in minds in any case) there is only one thing we can turn to as a cause of ideas

minds

notably, minds powerful enough to cause the incredibly various, yet perfectly coherent ideas we obtain from sensory experience

This forces us to conclude that there must be a divine mind that causes our ideas

We must also infer that this divine mind is so far from being “hidden” that it is constantly speaking to all of us

[this may be why Malebranche characterized Berkeley as an “enthusiast”]

Vision, in particular, is “God’s language”

it is a language of “visual ideas” that signify “tangible ideas” (which can cause pleasure or pain)

God is constantly speaking to us in this “language” in order to inform us about what will happen to us next, supposing we will particular body motions

God is ineliminable, and so atheism is impossible

God is the only “force” in nature

e.g., bodies do not “gravitate” towards one another, because there are no bodies in external space existing independently of being perceived

instead, God creates our ideas in us in accord with the law of gravitation, which he has set for himself as a constant principle of his operation

Three Dialogues

Berkeley's original publication of his views in PHK (*The Principles of Human Knowledge*) was received with widespread derision and scorn

Samuel Johnson, on hearing of them, responded "I refute him thus" and proceeded to kick a stone

(as if this were all it would take to prove that the stone is not a collection of ideas)

Berkeley's initial reaction was to subject the views of his opponents to a more painstaking attack in 3D (*Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*).

A subsequent reaction to the failure even of that effort was to give up on Europeans, whom he decided had been too "corrupted" by philosophy

Convinced that people of "plain ordinary common sense" naturally accept his views, he resolved to found a university in Bermuda

where he would educate indigenous north Americans, better able to appreciate his views

The Plan of the *Dialogues*

The *Dialogues* occur between “Hylas” (matter) and “Philonous” (the lover of the mind=Berkeley)

Philonous defends the position that bodies are just collections of ideas in minds

and that there are no unthinking substances

Hylas maintains that material substances exist

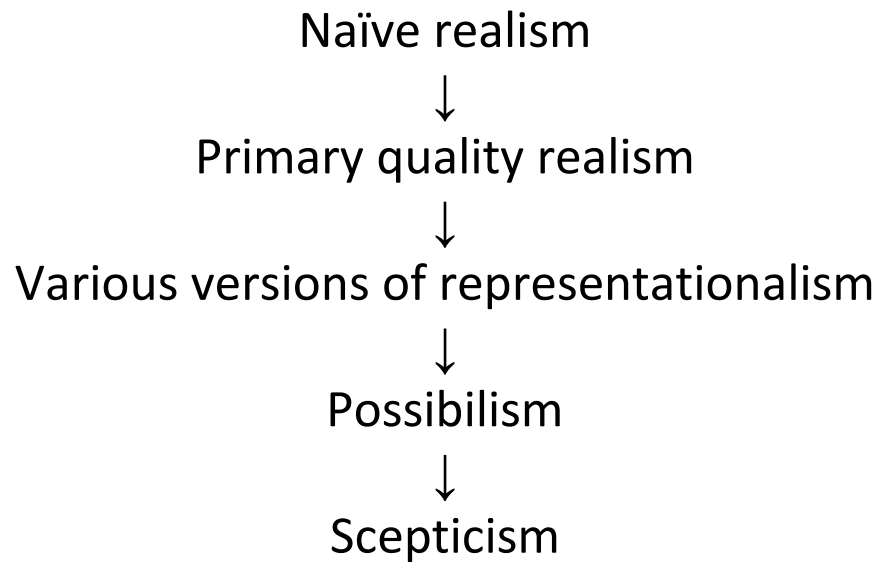
The dialogue opens with Hylas taking a very strong, “naïve realist” position, like that of Johnson

there are unthinking material substances that exist outside of all minds and independently of being perceived

these substances are directly and immediately perceived by us, and they are normally exactly as our senses reveal them to be

Over the course of the dialogue, Hylas is forced by Philonous’s objections to adopt increasingly more modest positions

Hylas's retreat



The dialogue opens with Hylas charging Philonous with being a sceptic of the most extravagant sort

one who has adopted opinions totally at variance with common sense

It closes with Hylas being driven into a sceptical position and with Philonous being put in the position of the one who can claim to be defending common sense and affirm the reality of things

The opening exchange

Philonous is charged with being a “negative sceptic”

not a sceptic who suspends all belief concerning non-evident things

but one who “denies the reality and truth” of the most evident things

According to Hylas, our sensory experience makes us directly and immediately aware of the existence of mind-independent material things, existing in space outside us

and it by and large informs us accurately about the nature of those things, setting aside the odd case of misperception, illusion, hallucination, or dreaming

Philonous denies this (as indeed he does)

so for Hylas, that makes him “one who maintained the most extravagant opinion that ever entered into the mind of man, to wit, that there is no such thing as *material* substance in the world”

Hylas's principal theses

1. We directly and immediately perceive sensible things
2. We perceive these things as they really are

so whatever qualities we perceive them to have, they really have, including the sensible qualities: colours, figures, sounds, tastes, odours, tangible qualities
3. These things exist independently of being perceived by us

Philonous accepts (1) and (2) but denies (3)

he thinks we directly and immediately perceive bundles of sensible qualities

but that these qualities do not inhere in mind-independent material substances outside us but are only ideas in us that exist only when perceived by us

Hylas's principal theses

1. We directly and immediately perceive sensible things
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so whatever qualities we perceive them to have, they really have, including the sensible qualities: colours, figures, sounds, tastes, odours, tangible qualities
3. These things exist independently of being perceived by us

Hylas insists on (3)

his insistence on (3) in the face of Philonous's arguments eventually drives him to reject (1)

so, to abandon direct realism in favour of representationalism

and then reject (2)

so, to turn "sceptic" and deny common sense

Philonous's arguments

1. The heat/pain identification argument

A very great degree of heat is just a kind of pain

but pain only exists in sentient creatures, not in inanimate material things

fire does not feel burning pain any more than a sword or a needle feels the pain of a cut or a prick

So very great heat can't exist outside of us in material things and independently of being perceived by us

it can only exist as a sensation or idea in our minds

The same would have to hold of great cold

and since less intense degrees of heat and cold are pleasant or unpleasant to greater or lesser degrees, the same would have to hold of them as well

Hylas's first retreat

Hylas initially tries to block Philonous's conclusion by claiming that the feeling of pain is distinct from the feeling of a great degree of heat and a consequence of it

but this proves too hard to support introspectively

So he retreats to the view that great degrees of heat and pain are not "real"

(because for him nothing is real unless it exists independently of being perceived)

But he maintains that intermediate degrees of heat and pain are not forms of pleasure and pain but merely "indolent" qualities that do not involve pleasure and pain

Philonous considers this to be equally inconsistent with the evidence of introspection, but rather than press the point he uses a new argument

Philonous's arguments, cont.'d

2. The perceptual relativity argument

The same bucket of water will feel warm to a cool hand and cool to a warm hand

But no sensible object can have contrary and opposed sensible qualities at the same time

so these feelings of warmth and cold must be merely in us and not in the sensible object

Hylas's second retreat

Hylas initially tries to block this by charging that there is something absurd about saying that there is no heat or even warmth in fire

but Philonous replies that there is no more reason to consider heat to exist in fire than pain to exist in a pin

So Hylas retreats to the view that heat and cold are not "real" qualities but only feelings had by minds

however, he insists, there are many other real qualities perceived to exist in bodies

Hylas's second retreat, cont.'d

Philonous then attacks tastes, using the same two arguments:

all tastes are forms of pleasure or displeasure

same objects taste differently to different tasters or to the same taster at different times

Hylas first attempts to block this by distinguishing between sweetness (and heat, cold, etc.) as it is in sugar and sweetness as it is in us

but this won't do, because the sweetness we perceive is the sweetness as it is in us

not the chemical constitution of the sugar that causes this taste in us

and Hylas had earlier claimed that sensible objects are immediately perceived by us

So Hylas gives up on the "reality" of tastes and, without much more fuss, of odours as well

Philonous's arguments, cont.'d

3. The amodal perception argument

Hylas maintains that there are two kinds of sound

sounds considered as sensations had by minds

sounds considered as undulations or vibrations in the air

But sounds considered as sensations in us exist only in us and only when perceived, and so are not “real” according to Hylas's criteria for reality

And sounds considered as undulations or vibrations in the air are motions, and our ears don't tell us how the air is moving

motion is the sort of thing that we learn about by vision or touch rather than hearing

this leads to the bizarre conclusion that if the second kind of sounds are perceived at all, they aren't heard, but only seen or felt

Problems with colour

Vision is the only sense left that can tell us about “the reality and truth of things”

By vision we see light and colours

But Hylas says that we see light and colours “in” or “on” objects

this raises the question of how we perceive the objects the colours are in or on

there are no other senses left to perceive objects with

but vision only tells us about light and colours, or perhaps as well about their size and figure

So Philonous asks whether “sensible things” are just coloured shapes (which is actually what he thinks)

But Hylas insists that coloured shapes must inhere in some material substance

Problems with colour, cont.'d

Philonous drops the question of how we come to perceive the material substance in which the colours and shapes are supposed to inhere

(it will come up again)

Instead, he presses Hylas with perceptual relativity arguments

same objects exhibit radically different colours at different distances

so, which are the real and true ones, that are really and truly on or in the objects?

it won't do to say they are the ones viewed from close up, because when you look with a microscope

or imagine tiny animals looking at them, who would have to have microscopical eyes

yet other colours appear, continually different with differences in magnification

Under this pressure, Hylas retreats to the position that there are two kinds of colour

there are the colours we see, which are visual sensations that exist only in us and only when perceived

but then there are also minute particles of some thin, fluid substance (light) that travel between the surfaces of objects and the eye to communicate motions to the optic nerves and brain that cause our sensations

The only problem with this is that these thin fluid particles are invisible

they are not what we immediately see when we see colour

If Hylas seriously wants to maintain that the red and blue are not real and true colours, and that real and true colours are invisible things, he can

but he might have a hard time convincing even himself that this is what people of plain, ordinary common sense think colours are

Hylas's third retreat

Hylas has been forced to give up on the “reality” (i.e., the mind-independent external existence) of all of the sensible qualities, one after another

Having no choice left, he abandons naïve realism, and retreats to primary quality realism:

the sensible qualities are all merely ideas in us

only the primary qualities of extension, motion, and solidity are “real”