

## Did Berkeley misunderstand Locke?

By Andrew Peasgood

### A Fourth Dialogue between Hylas and Philonous

**Hylas:** Is that you, Philonous? How fortuitous we should meet again, as I have had cause to reflect upon the discussions we have recently had, and I wish to make more clear various reasonings of mine which I feel you may have not fully comprehended.

**Philonous:** I am confident both of us plainly understood each other's thoughts, Hylas, and had considered discourse between us to be complete, to our mutual agreement. I allow, though, it is only fair I grant you this opportunity. What have you then to say to me?

**Hyl:** Let us begin with our discussion of the ideas that we form in our minds, of objects that are without us. By the end of our debates you would have me allow that an idea can resemble nothing more than another idea. That is correct?

**Phil:** Indeed so.

**Hyl:** And furthermore you claim my assent to your proposition, that as an idea can resemble nothing more than another idea, all we can be sure of in objects is the ideas they present our minds: and that, accordingly, an object itself can be no more than an idea.

**Phil:** You capture the essence of my thoughts well, Hylas. It is right to put to rest notions of *matter*: this 'realism' of which some men speak is folly. As you will recall me proclaiming, to 'be' is to be perceived. Accordingly, no object can exist independently of the mind.

**Hyl:** It follows, then, that for there to be an object in our minds we must have ideas of it. And those ideas present themselves in our minds by indicating properties, or qualities, of this 'object' such as extension and figure, and also colour, texture, and smell.

**Phil:** Yes, that is so: a range of various qualities, individual, but importantly, inseparable. For how can one conceive of only the size and shape of a desk, without appraising it also in respect of its colour?

**Hyl:** I must resist at this juncture, Philonous. If we are to agree with others that, say, porphyre has no colour in the dark, that statement does not mean the porphyre has no size or shape, that it does not exist; we can say only that the conditions whereunder we may determine that particular quality, of colour, are lacking. You cannot make an essential unity of the two types of quality: that is, those like colour and smell which, I allow, excite only the senses and are not resident within the object themselves - that are 'secondary' in nature - and those of extension, figure, and solidity that are unvarying, of a 'primary' nature.

**Phil:** I allow that I may have been unfair to you, Hylas, to suggest that your thoughts were in accord with mine, that those qualities of insensible parts that are invisible are like our ideas of colours. But do we not remain in agreement that these qualities you seek to differentiate as 'primary' and 'secondary' are of the same nature? Indeed I expressed my concurrence with your explanations concerning how water can feel both hot and cold at the same time, demonstrating therein, that the quality of temperature cannot therefore be in the water - the object - and instead that it is, all too clearly, only in our minds.

**Hyl:** Sir, you did.

**Phil:** And I proceeded to show that extension too can be regarded in this fashion. We discussed, did we not, how the limbs of an animal such as a mite will be perceived as large to it, but to you and me, scarcely discernible? You will recollect that you agreed it absurd to imagine that one and the same thing can be at the same time in itself of different dimensions.

**Hyl:** Again, I grant that discussion. Certainly, as we approach to, or recede from, an object, the extension varies. You must acknowledge, however, that it is the visible extension of the object that varies as we walk towards and around an object, not the physical extension thereof. But to what aspect of your thesis does this knowledge give value? You and I do little more than jointly accept the variance that our position relative to the object under perception offers. That this phenomenon is common to both types of quality proves nothing. You would present my assent as significant when it carries no such weight.

Were you to claim otherwise you would be no better than the fairground charlatan who, with his distorting glass, tricks coins from our purse by offering as real those abhorrent deceptions of our own forms.

**Phil:** That is an unkind comparison you draw, but I am beginning to think that you have me at a disadvantage over these matters.

**Hyl:** Well, Philonous, then let us seek accord in our beliefs. Was it not the esteemed Monsieur Descartes who said "... when we say we perceive colours in objects, this is really just the same as saying that we perceive something in the objects whose nature we do not know, but which produces in us a very clear and vivid sensation we call sensation of colour."?

**Phil:** I recognise the thoughts of that philosopher.

**Hyl:** So for the 'idea' of colour we can say 'sensation'?

**Phil:** I will grant that. But though you may change your sentence to say perceiving or sensing, to me they are the same.

**Hyl:** Maybe that is so: but I adapt my expression to reveal but one nature of 'idea'. I contend that not all ideas are sensations. Do you have an idea of our Monarch, even though you have not had the fortune to have been granted an audience? In such situation you have no personal sensation of the Monarch.

**Phil:** As a true Royalist, indeed I do carry that idea.

**Hyl:** But from where does it emanate? I am of the firm belief that neither of us holds with the notion of ideas being innate.

**Phil:** We are of like mind in that respect. But ideas such as you describe will have been granted to my understanding by God.

**Hyl:** Maybe so: but that is an idea that has been obtained not from sensation, from perceiving; but drawn from memory, from understanding. You must accept, therefore, that not all ideas are the same? Furthermore, by having me agree that an idea can resemble nothing but an idea you are presenting me as ensnared by your line of reason: but I would slip free of such an unwelcome embrace. To present me as acceding to your fanciful 'immaterialism' is to present a false illustration.

**Phil:** You lay serious charges against me.

**Hyl:** I remain unclear in my own thinking, Philonous, whether you have misunderstood me, or if instead you have misrepresented me.

**Phil:** If I have done you wrong, Hylas, I crave your indulgence. My intent has only been to guide people to a clearer understanding of the world within which our almighty God has situated us.

**Hyl:** A noble aspiration, but one with many hurdles in our path. Perhaps we are restricted in our capacities by the limitations of our language. Even as small a thing as punctuation can create confusion: if, when it is said of colours, tastes and smells that they "are in truth nothing in the Objects themselves, but Powers to produce various sensations in us ...", I concede that alternate interpretations of the intended attitudes are permitted. Some may think that it is meant that those secondary qualities are not something within the objects, but are instead discrete powers ...; others may claim the true meaning to be instead that they are nothing other than powers to produce sensations.

**Phil:** You are generous to allow misinterpretation as possible cause of our disagreement. Perhaps also we are trapped by the limitations of our own faculties. No doubt the minds of others will find ways to enrich the understanding of mankind and provide new insights. Perhaps there will be those that may view our difficult quest to make our knowledge conform to objects with misgiving, and who may feel that we will have more success in the tasks of metaphysics if we were to suppose instead that objects must conform to our knowledge.

**Hyl:** Let us not part on ill terms, but instead think that we have merely laid down the rough tracks of a path to knowledge that others will develop and extend.

**Phil:** My friend, we should be pleased if – forgive my boldness – we may yet be shoulders upon which others may stand.

---

## Bibliography

Berkeley, G. (1710); *'A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge'*

Berkeley, G. (1713); *'Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous in opposition to Sceptics and Atheists'*

Locke, J. (1689); *'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding'*

Russell, B. (1912); *'The Problems of Philosophy'*; Oxford, OUP

Guttenplan, S; Hornsby, J; Janaway, C (2003); *'Reading Philosophy'*; Oxford, Blackwell