

Berkeley's Principles and Dialogues

background source materials

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Introduction

The selections in Part One of this book have been chosen either because they are from works that had some influence on George Berkeley during the period he was forming the views he presented in his **Principles of Human Knowledge** (1710) and **Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous** (1713), or because they illustrate the philosophical climate in which his views developed. The selections in Part Two, with one exception, exemplify the reception, positive and negative, given to those views during the eighteenth century – a reception that helped shape some of the ways of viewing Berkeley’s philosophy that are still prevalent. As the selections are accompanied by individual commentaries, this introduction aims only to give an overview of the book.

Like every philosopher, Berkeley arrived at his views in a particular intellectual context. The assumptions he made, the problems he grappled with, and the doctrines he developed cannot be fully understood unless that context is taken into account. Many of his central doctrines – that we cannot form abstract ideas, that matter does not exist, that spirits are the only true causes, that God immediately produces our sensations – have a history that antedates Berkeley, and in Part One we have presented selections that are part of that history. Among the most extensive are those from Descartes’ **Meditations**, Malebranche’s **Search after Truth**, and Locke’s **Essay concerning Human Understanding**, works we know, from his notebooks, Berkeley had studied when working out his chief doctrines, and from Bayle’s **Dictionary**, which is widely thought to have had a strong impact on Berkeley, though he mentions Bayle only twice in his notebooks. The selections from Antoine Arnauld, Henry Lee, and John Norris are from works we think it likely Berkeley either had read or had some knowledge of. We also include selections from works by Henricus Regius, Pierre de Lanion, and Jean Brunet. While it is unlikely

that Berkeley had read these works, they illustrate some phases in the seventeenth-century debate about whether, or how, we can know that there is an external world. The last selections in Part One are from Arthur Collier's *Clavis Universalis*, in which Collier defends a view strikingly close to Berkeley's. Collier belongs in Part One because, although he did not publish his views until 1713, three years after Berkeley's *Principles*, he appears to have arrived at them quite independently of, and indeed before, Berkeley.

Selections in this book are arranged by author, not by topic, but the same topic is often taken up by several authors. The following are probably the most important topics in Part One.

1. The existence of the external or material world. A recurring theme in Part One is whether, or how, we can know that the material world exists.¹ The question will first be met in Descartes, who made it a central problem but who claimed to prove that bodies exist. A number of his successors were not convinced by his proof. Thus Regius and Malebranche grant that it is highly probable that there are bodies but deny that, apart from revelation, we can establish beyond doubt that there are, while Lanion questions whether philosophy can show it even **probable** that bodies exist. In Arnauld we find a new defense of the Cartesian proof of the existence of bodies. Bayle, however, plumbing the depths of skepticism, argues that Cartesianism has itself undermined belief in the existence of bodies, a belief that he tries to undermine even further. Locke claims that our senses themselves make the existence of bodies known to us, but Norris argues that neither the senses nor reason nor revelation can establish their existence with certainty. Finally, Collier, strongly influenced by Malebranche and Norris, concludes – apparently independently of Berkeley – that there is no external world. For Collier, “all matter, body, extension, &c. exists **in**, or in dependence on, mind.”

2. Abstract ideas. Berkeley held that belief in abstract ideas was a central source of philosophical error in his predecessors, and in several selections we meet some of their views about this topic. Malebranche, although himself committed to what, for Berkeley, were illegitimate abstractions, will be found decrying certain “disordered abstractions” of the mind that he traces back to the idea of “being in general”. This idea, according to Malebranche, is indeed always present to our minds – yet, precisely because of this, philosophers have been able, he thinks, to suppose that they are talking sensibly even if the words they use stand for no particular things at all. An example he gives is the Schoolmen's talk of **matter** as something from which they imagine **every** property,

even extension, might be “stripped away”. In Arnauld we meet an account of abstraction close to one that Berkeley himself will later regard as acceptable – namely, abstraction as selective attention. We also include substantial extracts from Locke on abstract ideas, for Berkeley’s attack focused on that account, and criticisms of Locke’s account offered by Henry Lee in a work published eight years before the **Principles**. Some of Lee’s objections are similar to Berkeley’s, and we think that they may have influenced Berkeley.

3. Primary and secondary qualities. Berkeley was highly critical of this distinction, which is the topic of several selections in Part One. Descartes, in particular, contrasts our supposedly clear understanding of what came to be known as the “primary” qualities with our obscure understanding of the “secondary”; while Locke, offering what is generally regarded as the classic defense of the distinction, urges that our ideas of the primary qualities **resemble** qualities in the objects, but that our ideas of qualities such as colors, sounds, and odors do not. Even before Berkeley, however, the distinction was under pressure. Malebranche had embraced it, but had held that our senses mislead us about **both** kinds of quality, for how both primary and secondary qualities appear varies from perceiver to perceiver; and Bayle had found in this consideration grounds for denying that **any** qualities exist independently of perceivers. This was an argument that Berkeley would take up and use.

4. Ideas. The concept of “idea” is of central importance for Berkeley, as it had been for several thinkers he had studied, including Descartes, Malebranche, and Locke. A. A. Luce, a leading Berkeley scholar, held that Berkeley started out with a Lockean notion of “idea”, but that from his study of Malebranche he “learned to idealize the thing and to spiritualize the idea.”² Selections from Malebranche and Locke illustrate their uses of “idea”, while, in other selections, Arnauld criticizes Malebranche’s use of “idea” and Henry Lee criticizes Locke’s use of that term.

5. The nature of the mind. This topic was widely debated in the seventeenth century. Theories of the mind ranged from Descartes’ doctrine that the mind is an incorporeal substance to Hobbes’s view that the notion of an incorporeal substance is unintelligible and that the mind is really just certain motions in the body, with Locke occupying an intermediate position according to which we cannot determine, with certainty, whether the mind is an immaterial substance or whether God has “given to some systems of matter, fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think.”³ Berkeley took a definite position here, agreeing with Des-

cartes, against Locke, both that we can **know** that the human mind is an incorporeal substance and that it always thinks. On the other hand, like Malebranche, Berkeley held that we have no “idea” of the mind. At one stage, this had even led him to suppose that the mind is unknowable (PC 576a, 701), although he soon decided that it can be known, but not by way of idea. Selections from Descartes and Malebranche provide some of the background to Berkeley’s doctrine of the mind.

Other topics met with in Part One include Malebranche’s Occasionalism (a doctrine Berkeley in part agreed with, for, like Malebranche, he rejected **corporeal** causes, yet in part disagreed with, for he held that **finite** spirits as well as God are true causes), and Locke’s observations on the “**idea** of the **substance** of matter.” To Berkeley’s mind, if material substances are never the true cause of anything, God would have had no **reason** to create them “since God might have done every thing as well without them” (PHK §53); while Locke’s recognition that “of **substance**, we have no **idea** of what it is” clearly played a role in encouraging Berkeley to drop the notion of “material substance” altogether.

The selections in Part Two have been chosen because they represent notable reactions to Berkeley’s philosophy. All but the last come from the eighteenth century. The earliest are opinions communicated to Berkeley in private correspondence soon after the **Principles** first appeared. They are followed by early reviews of the **Principles** and **Dialogues**. There are selections from a wide range of eighteenth-century figures, some of them well known in their day but now largely forgotten, like Andrew Baxter, Pierre-Louis Maupertuis, and Samuel Johnson of Connecticut, others – Hume and Reid, Voltaire and Diderot, Kant and Herder – among the foremost philosophers of that century.

In Part Two we see Berkeley’s reputation in the making and meet various ways of viewing him. Many in his own day regarded him as a follower of Malebranche, who – with a consistency that Malebranche lacked – drew the immaterialist conclusion from Malebranche’s own principles. Some took him to be an “egoist”, that is, a solipsist – or at least someone whose doctrine leads inexorably to egoism. He was also sometimes viewed as a skeptic pretending to oppose skepticism, or else as one who embraced a position that entailed skepticism but who failed to see that it did. Although, with the passage of time, it became rare to classify Berkeley as a Malebranchean, an egoist, or a skeptic, some of the thinking behind these ways of viewing him has found more recent defenders. For example, the importance of Malebranche’s influence on Berkeley has been widely recognized in recent decades, as scholars have

become increasingly unhappy with the notion that philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries can be neatly divided into “Rationalists” and “Empiricists”. And the notion that Berkeley’s principles **should** have led him to solipsism, or at least to the view that he was alone in the universe with God, has also met with some more recent support.

One early way of classifying Berkeley that was to become virtually canonical was as the quintessential idealist who reduces everything to the mind. In 1724, the influential German philosopher Christian Wolff cited Berkeley as one of the two chief “idealists” (the other was Arthur Collier), and others subsequently also applied this label to him, most notably Kant, who pronounced Berkeley’s position “dogmatic idealism”, which Kant was eager to distinguish from his own “critical idealism”. There were very few in the eighteenth century, apart from Herder, who thought that there was any sense in which Berkeley could be called a “realist”. By contrast, some twentieth-century scholars **have** argued that Berkeley was really a kind of commonsense realist.⁴

One thing readers may be surprised to find is that, while a number in the eighteenth century associated Berkeley’s position with Malebranche’s, no one in our selections except Thomas Reid suggests that Berkeley is the intellectual heir of Locke. Today, every student of the history of philosophy is familiar with the view that there was a sort of linear development involving three great “British Empiricists”, leading from Locke through Berkeley to Hume. That view had scarcely more than begun to emerge even late in the eighteenth century. Locke, Berkeley, and Hume did not call themselves “empiricists”, and they were not so described by their contemporaries. Nor does Berkeley ever explicitly mention Locke, even as an opponent, in the **Principles** or the **Dialogues**, except in the Introduction to the former for his account of abstract ideas. It should be remembered, too, that admiration for Locke was enormous at a time when Berkeley was usually regarded as an exponent of an absurd position. It is therefore perhaps hardly surprising that the view that Berkeley was working out the implications of Locke’s “way of ideas” was one that surfaced rather late. Perhaps the first to enunciate it was Reid, who observed that “Mr Locke had taught us that all the immediate objects of human knowledge are ideas in the mind. Bishop Berkeley, proceeding upon this foundation, demonstrated, very easily, that there is no material world.” Hume in turn, according to Reid, “adopts the theory of ideas in its full extent; and, in consequence, shews that there is neither matter nor mind in the universe.” It was only in a later period, however, that the notion became quite common that Berke-

ley was essentially the middle man in a Locke–Berkeley–Hume triumvirate, although early in the nineteenth century Hegel suggested something of this view. In his influential lectures on the history of philosophy (first given at Jena in 1805), Hegel claimed that the “subjective idealism” of Berkeley “has before it the standpoint of Locke, and it proceeds directly from him. For we saw that to Locke the source of truth is experience, or Being as perceived.” Hegel went on to describe Hume’s skepticism as arising out of the views of Locke and Berkeley, with the result that “Hume really completed the system of Locke.”⁵ (As already noted, the now familiar view of the history of British philosophy, which this perhaps suggests, has lately had many critics, and, arguably, it never had the universal and unqualified approbation of serious scholars.)⁶

In Berkeley’s own time, much of the reaction to the **Principles** and **Dialogues** was hostile, and relatively few took the arguments in them at all seriously. A quite common attitude was that his views were too preposterous to merit refutation. However, there were some who, while firmly rejecting Berkeley’s views, did at least undertake to argue against them. For example, an early reviewer of the **Dialogues** sought to answer Berkeley’s attempt to prove the mind–dependence of the primary qualities by objecting that one cannot infer, for instance, that solidity is mind–dependent from the fact that how hard something feels varies from perceiver to perceiver. Solidity, the reviewer urges, is not hardness, but that property in one body that prevents another from occupying the same space. Andrew Baxter, who offered the first sustained critique of the **Principles**, although sometimes misinterpreting Berkeley, also makes serious points. Thus Baxter argues, for example, that Berkeley unjustifiably conflates sensations with the **objects** of perception, that he has no more reason for supposing that the only perceivable things are things actually perceived than one would have for supposing that the only combustible things are things actually on fire, and that he has deprived himself of grounds for believing in the existence of other minds.

Berkeley was to be taken more seriously in Scotland than he was elsewhere in Britain, and three Scots – Baxter, Hume, and Reid – are represented in our volume. Hume praised Berkeley’s account of general ideas as “one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries” of the day; further, his judgment on the force of Berkeley’s allegedly skeptical arguments – they provide “the best lessons of scepticism, which are to be found either among the ancient or modern philosophers” – amounts, in its way, to praise, given that Hume was clearly some sort of skeptic himself. Thomas Reid, for his part, writing *after* Hume, looks at Berke-

ley from a very different perspective. Because Reid thinks Berkeley's denial of a material world is unanswerable if it is supposed – as, according to Reid, Berkeley's predecessors **had** indeed supposed – that the objects of human knowledge are “ideas”, and because he thinks this common assumption is false, Reid is able to combine a clear respect for Berkeley's significance as a philosopher with an almost complete rejection of his views.

It would thus be quite wrong to suppose that all eighteenth-century reactions to Berkeley were disdainful. Probably only the colonial American Samuel Johnson can be called a disciple of Berkeley, but the French philosopher Pierre-Louis Maupertuis noted that some of his own views were close to those “a celebrated man, Mr. Berkeley,” had taken pains to establish “in a considerable work, **Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous**”, while some others – Boullier and Bonnet among French speakers, Hamann and Herder among the Germans – held Berkeley in some measure of esteem, although they rejected his doctrines. Even Kant, who was eager to distance his “critical idealism” from Berkeley's “visionary idealism”, concedes that, if the choice had to be made between that and “transcendental realism”, one could not “blame the good Berkeley for degrading bodies to mere illusion.” Much earlier, Leibniz had written in his copy of the **Principles** that “much in this is right”, although that judgment he at once heavily qualified.

The final extract in Part Two dates from much later than the others. It comes from an 1871 review of the first complete edition of Berkeley's works, written by John Stuart Mill – the foremost defender of empiricism in **nineteenth**-century Britain. The tone of this review is far different from that of the early reviews of the **Principles** and **Dialogues**, published over a century and a half earlier. Mill, who saw himself as an intellectual heir of Berkeley, even though he rejected the theological doctrines dearest to Berkeley's heart, offers us yet another perspective on him, now as the forerunner of the doctrine known as “phenomenalism”. Mill esteemed Berkeley so highly that, even after naming such philosophical giants as Plato, Descartes, and Kant, he proclaimed Berkeley “the one of greatest philosophic genius.”

Mill doubtless had an exaggerated view of Berkeley's genius, yet Berkeley is indisputably an important thinker who had a significant influence on subsequent developments in philosophy. The present volume will have served its purpose if it locates Berkeley's philosophy in its historical context, showing some of the roots from which it sprang, and considering some of the reactions that it provoked and that helped shape

subsequent perceptions of Berkeley. It has not, of course, been possible to include, in a single volume, all the texts relevant to this story. It has been necessary to omit selections from some of Berkeley's predecessors who might have been included, and it has not been possible to give every relevant text even from such thinkers as Descartes, Malebranche, Locke, and Bayle.

It has been equally impossible to include all the noteworthy eighteenth-century responses to Berkeley. We have excluded, for example, James Beattie's attack, which – although stronger on rhetoric than on logic – was widely read, Joseph Priestley's defense of Berkeley against Beattie's and Reid's strictures, and reactions to Berkeley from such notable figures as John Wesley, the Chevalier Andrew Ramsay, A. R. J. Turgot, and Henry Home (Lord Kames).⁷ Nor have we attempted to cover every topic addressed in the *Principles* and *Dialogues*. That is particularly true of Berkeley's views about mathematics and physics, for although these subjects are touched on in the *Principles*, Berkeley sets out his views about them more fully elsewhere, especially in *De Motu* and the *Analyst*, and most of the replies to his views about mathematics were aimed at the *Analyst*.⁸ Readers interested in seeing other eighteenth-century responses to Berkeley should consult the valuable collection edited by David Berman, and they will find a detailed account of the early reception of Berkeley's philosophy in an excellent monograph by Harry Bracken.⁹

Notes

1. The terms "external world", "natural world", "material world", and "bodies" were all used to pick out the subject of this discussion. Although these terms do not range over exactly the same things ("external world" is sometimes taken to include both bodies and other minds), our knowledge of the existence of material things was at the center of the debate.
2. A. A. Luce, *Berkeley and Malebranche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 70.
3. See Locke, *Essay*, Book 4, Chapter 3, §6. The considerable furor that this suggestion caused at the time is documented in John W. Yolton, *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), ch. 1 and *passim*; cf. Yolton's *Locke and French Materialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
4. See below, p. 294, note 8.
5. *Hegel's Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and F. H. Simson (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1974), vol. 3, pp. 364, 370–71.

6. For a vigorous attack on the view that Locke, Berkeley, and Hume constitute a unified movement, and in particular one that clearly separates them from the “Continental Rationalists”, see Louis E. Loeb, **From Descartes to Hume: Continental Metaphysics and the Development of Modern Philosophy** (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).
7. Wesley’s thoughtful comments on Berkeley’s **Dialogues**, which he read while still at Christ Church, Oxford, will be found in a letter to his mother dated 22nd November 1725 – see **The Works of John Wesley**, editor in chief F. Baker (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–), vol. 25, pp. 186–87. Turgot criticized Berkeley in the article “Existence” in the **Encyclopédie** and in two letters of 1750, first published in his **Oeuvres** (Paris 1808), vol. 3, pp. 136–54. Relevant material from Beattie, Priestley, Henry Home, and Ramsay is reprinted in Berman’s collection (see note 9).
8. For a list of those replies, see T. E. Jessop, **A Bibliography of George Berkeley**, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), pp. 74–75.
9. David Berman, **George Berkeley: Eighteenth-Century Responses** (New York: Garland, 1989), 2 vols.; Harry M. Bracken, **The Early Reception of Berkeley’s Immaterialism: 1710–1733**, revised edition (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965).