

Reading Guide #5

George Berkeley, from *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*
George Berkeley, from *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*

These questions are provided to assist you in your reading. I encourage you first to read the material through, then go back to answer the questions. You are not expected to hand in written answers. You are expected to have responses ready for class discussion. Page numbers refer to the Ariew and Watkins collection.

Principles, Part I, §1-33 (AW 447-453)

1. What are the three types of ideas?
2. What is an object, like an apple, for Berkeley?
3. What exists, besides ideas?
4. How does Berkeley argue that the essence of unthinking things is their being perceived?
5. What contradiction arises from the belief that sensible objects have an independent existence?
6. How does the notion of the independent existence of material objects depend on the doctrine of abstract ideas?
7. What kind of abstraction does Berkeley say we can perform? What can't we do, as regards abstraction?
8. Can an object which I don't perceive exist? Explain.
9. How does Berkeley argue that there can be no material substratum for our ideas?
10. Why can't our ideas of objects resemble material substance? How does this show the primary/secondary distinction to be unhelpful?
11. "In short, extension, figure, and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable" (§10, AW 449a). Explain. What does this show?
12. How does Berkeley argue that number does not exist without the mind?
13. Explain Berkeley's argument against the primary qualities from the relativity of perceptions.
14. What problem does Berkeley find in the argument that matter supports extension?
15. How is the supposition of external bodies unnecessary?
16. "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" (§20, AW 451a). Explain.
17. Why doesn't thinking of an unperceived object refute Berkeley?
18. How are ideas passive? How does Berkeley show this? What does this demonstrate? What, then, causes ideas and their changes?
19. Describe the differences among will, understanding, and spirit. How does Berkeley argue that there are no ideas of spirits? (See also §135 et seq.)
20. Explain the argument for the existence of a higher power in §29 (AW 453a).
21. What are laws of nature, according to Berkeley? Be specific. How do we learn them? Why are they useful?
22. Distinguish real things and images.

Three Dialogues, Dialogue 1 (AW 454-474)

23. What does Philonous claim does not exist?
24. How does Hylas first define 'skeptical'? Why does Philonous claim to be no skeptic?
25. How do Hylas and Philonous define 'sensible things'? How are they different from their causes?
26. How is material substance senseless? Why can't pain be a property of material substance?
27. How does Philonous argue that heat and cold can not be properties of a material substance?
28. Explain Hylas's distinction between qualities as they appear to us and qualities as they exist in external objects. Why does Philonous reply, "I say it is nothing to the purpose" (AW 460b)?
29. Why isn't sugar sweet?
30. What are Hylas's two senses of 'sound'. Why does Philonous respond that real sounds are never heard?
31. How does a microscope help Philonous show that colors are not in external objects?
32. "Colors, sounds, tastes, in a word, all those termed 'secondary qualities,' have certainly no existence without the mind. But by this acknowledgment I must not be supposed to derogate anything from the reality of matter or external objects..." (AW 464b). Explain. Who, besides Hylas, holds this view?
33. How does Philonous plan to argue against the primary qualities?
34. How does the example of the mite show the relativity of extension?
35. What happens as we approach or recede from an object? What does this show, for Philonous?
36. How does a microscope serve to show that the appearance of figure can change?
37. What is the relation between motion and time? How is time measured? What does this mean for motion?
38. How does Philonous argue for the relativity of solidity?
39. Why does Philonous suppose that it is harder to believe that the primary qualities lack real existence?
40. Distinguish visible extension from absolute extension. Does this distinction save the primary qualities?
41. Why does Philonous agree to concede to Hylas if we can form abstract ideas of extension and motion?
42. In what way do mathematicians abstract? Does this process get us to Locke's abstract ideas?
43. "Consequently, the very same arguments which you admitted as conclusive against the secondary qualities are... against the primary, too" (AW 468a). Explain.
44. Explain Hylas's distinction between object and sensation. How does Philonous show that Hylas's notion of a sensation is incoherent?
45. What does Hylas mean by 'material substratum'? Why does he conclude that it exists?
46. What is wrong with supposing that corporeal substance is the substratum of extension? (Consider the spreading argument.)
47. "My arguments... nowhere tended to prove that the secondary qualities did not subsist each alone by itself, but that they were not *at all* without the mind" (AW 471b). Explain.
48. How does Philonous convince Hylas that he can not conceive of a tree existing without any minds?
49. How does Philonous show that distance is not suggested by sight?
50. Explain Hylas's Julius Caesar example. How does Philonous show that it leads to the claim that real things are not perceivable?
51. Why, according to Philonous, is it implausible that our ideas could be resemblances of stable, permanent material objects?
52. How does Philonous argue that materialism leads to skepticism?

Principles, Introduction (AW 438-446)

53. Are the paradoxes and difficulties of our understanding the fault of our senses? Explain.
 54. What “abuse of language” is a chief part of philosophical confusion?
 55. How do we, supposedly, arrive at abstract ideas?
 56. “But then whatever hand or eye I imagine, it must have some particular shape and color” (§10, AW 441a). Explain. How is this an argument against abstract ideas?
 57. In what sense can we form abstract ideas? What are the limits to this capacity?
 58. Does our ability to understand and use general propositions entail an ability to form abstract ideas?
 59. How does an idea become general? What is the purpose of these general terms?
 60. How does the notion of an abstract, general idea lead to a contradiction?
 61. Do we need abstract ideas for communication or the advancement of knowledge?
 62. Do we need abstract ideas to account for geometric reasoning? Explain.
 63. How does the presupposition that each word stands for one thing lead to the doctrine of abstract ideas? What alternative account of names does Berkeley defend?
 64. How does Berkeley criticize Locke’s account of the purpose of language?
 65. How does Berkeley plan to avoid abusing language?
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Principles, §86-100 (Handout)

66. How does materialism lead to skepticism? How does idealism avoid skepticism?
 67. Do we have ideas of ourselves? Explain.
 68. Are ideas real? Explain. (See also *Second Dialogue*, AW 483.)
 69. How does materialism lead to atheism?
 70. What are the two layers of abstraction, §99, which lead to materialism?
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Three Dialogues, Dialogue 2 (AW 474-484)

71. How does Philonous argue that the brain can not be the cause, or occasion, of our ideas?
72. “Men commonly believe that all things are known or perceived by God, because they believe the being of a God; whereas I, on the other side, immediately and necessarily conclude the being of a God, because all sensible things must be perceived by him” (AW 477a). Explain. (See also *Principles* §146 et seq.)
73. Why does Philonous criticize Hylas’s definition of matter, understood as the cause of our ideas, as playing with words?
74. Can matter be an instrument? Explain. Can matter be an occasion?
75. Do we need matter to explain our perceptions? Explain.
76. Do we have ideas of matter in general? Explain.
77. Does the idea of matter lead to a contradiction? Explain.

Principles, §101-156 (Handout)

78. How does natural science lead to skepticism?
79. "I do not perceive that anything is signified [by 'gravitational attraction'] besides the effect itself" (§103). Explain.
80. How do scientists (natural philosophers) make progress?
81. Are there counter-examples to the law of gravity? Explain.
82. Describe the four conclusions Berkeley draws from his philosophy for natural science in §107.
83. How does Berkeley argue against absolute space? How does he criticize Newton's conclusions from the rotating bucket experiment?
84. According to Berkeley, are mathematical theorems true? Are there numbers? Explain.
85. How does Berkeley attempt to show that matter is not infinitely divisible? What does this mean for geometry?
86. "There is no such thing as the ten-thousandth part of an *inch*; but there is of a *mile* or *diameter of the earth*, which may be signified by that inch" (§127). Explain. How does this indicate the basic error of the notion of infinite divisibility, for Berkeley?
87. What problem arises from the supposition of infinite divisibility?
88. For Berkeley, is it a reparable defect that we can not have ideas of our selves (our spirits)? What is the self?
89. How does Berkeley argue for the immortality of the soul?
90. How do we know about the existence of other spirits (people)? How is this knowledge different from our knowledge of ideas?
91. What does uniformity in nature show? What do blemishes in nature show?