

# Berkeley's *Principles and Dialogues*

BACKGROUND SOURCE MATERIALS

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## René Descartes

The influence of Descartes can be seen in the work of virtually every important philosopher from the middle of the seventeenth to the middle of the eighteenth century. Berkeley was no exception. Descartes' name, it is true, is not mentioned until far into the second of the young Berkeley's philosophical notebooks (the *Philosophical Commentaries*), when in a flurry of entries he recorded some of his reflections about Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy* and Hobbes's *Objections* to the *Meditations*.<sup>1</sup> It is also true that Berkeley does not seem to have formed a high opinion of the *Meditations*. In a letter to Molyneux of 1709 he noted two inconsistencies that he had found in it, adding that "it would take up too much Time to observe to You all the like Blunders that appear'd to Me when I formerly read that Treatise."<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it was Descartes who had focused the attention of subsequent thinkers on the issue of whether we can know that there is a material world, and it was Descartes who had been the leading defender of the doctrine that the mind is an incorporeal substance whose nature consists in thinking, both issues of central importance in the development of Berkeley's metaphysics. Without Descartes, the philosophical climate in which that metaphysics developed would have been very different. It is with Descartes, therefore, that we begin.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Descartes on the Existence of Bodies

Berkeley was to deny that there is a material world, but, among modern philosophers, it was Descartes who first made the existence of such a world an issue.<sup>4</sup> Descartes granted that it was not an issue

to be taken seriously in ordinary life, but he stressed that it *must* be taken seriously *by the metaphysician* if the sum of human knowledge, including what we now call physics, is to be set on a sure foundation. Consequently, in the following passage, from the first of his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641), Descartes engages in a dialogue with himself in which he considers a series of arguments that become increasingly powerful, leading us, in stages, from the thought that the senses sometimes mislead us to the radical conclusion that they provide no firm ground for supposing that there is an external world. For Descartes, this results in a *temporary* acceptance of a skeptical position from which he will eventually escape. However, as we shall see later, many were unimpressed by his answer to the challenge he himself had so forcefully raised.

Whatever I have up till now accepted as most true I have acquired either from the senses or through the senses. But from time to time I have found that the senses deceive, and it is prudent never to trust completely those who have deceived us even once.

Yet although the senses occasionally deceive us with respect to objects which are very small or in the distance, there are many other beliefs about which doubt is quite impossible, even though they are derived from the senses – for example, that I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on. Again, how could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass. But such people are insane, and I would be thought equally mad if I took anything from them as a model for myself.

A brilliant piece of reasoning! As if I were not a man who sleeps at night, and regularly has all the same experiences while asleep as madmen do when awake – indeed sometimes even more improbable ones. How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events – that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed! Yet at the moment my eyes are certainly wide awake when I look at this piece of paper; I shake my head and it is not asleep; as I stretch out and feel my hand I do so deliberately, and I know what I am doing. All this would not happen with such distinctness to

someone asleep. Indeed! As if I did not remember other occasions when I have been tricked by exactly similar thoughts while asleep! As I think about this more carefully, I see plainly that there are never any sure signs by means of which being awake can be distinguished from being asleep. The result is that I begin to feel dazed, and this very feeling only reinforces the notion that I may be asleep.

Suppose then that I am dreaming, and that these particulars – that my eyes are open, that I am moving my head and stretching out my hands – are not true. Perhaps, indeed, I do not even have such hands or such a body at all. Nonetheless, it must surely be admitted that the visions which come in sleep are like paintings, which must have been fashioned in the likeness of things that are real, and hence that at least these general kinds of things – eyes, head, hands and the body as a whole – are things which are not imaginary but are real and exist. For even when painters try to create sirens and satyrs with the most extraordinary bodies, they cannot give them natures which are new in all respects; they simply jumble up the limbs of different animals. Or if perhaps they manage to think up something so new that nothing remotely similar has ever been seen before – something which is therefore completely fictitious and unreal – at least the colours used in the composition must be real. By similar reasoning, although these general kinds of things – eyes, head, hands and so on – could be imaginary, it must at least be admitted that certain other even simpler and more universal things are real. These are as it were the real colours from which we form all the images of things, whether true or false, that occur in our thought.

This class appears to include corporeal nature in general, and its extension; the shape of extended things; the quantity, or size and number of these things; the place in which they may exist, the time through which they may endure, and so on.

So a reasonable conclusion from this might be that physics, astronomy, medicine, and all other disciplines which depend on the study of composite things, are doubtful; while arithmetic, geometry and other subjects of this kind, which deal only with the simplest and most general things, regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not, contain something certain and indubitable. For whether I am awake or asleep, two and three added together are five, and a square has no more than four sides. It seems impossible that such transparent truths should incur any suspicion of being false.

And yet firmly rooted in my mind is the long-standing opinion that there is an omnipotent God who made me the kind of creature that I

am. How do I know that he has not brought it about that there is no earth, no sky, no extended thing, no shape, no size, no place, while at the same time ensuring that all these things appear to me to exist just as they do now? What is more, since I sometimes believe that others go astray in cases where they think they have the most perfect knowledge, may I not similarly go wrong every time I add two and three or count the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable? But perhaps God would not have allowed me to be deceived in this way, since he is said to be supremely good. But if it were inconsistent with his goodness to have created me such that I am deceived all the time, it would seem equally foreign to his goodness to allow me to be deceived even occasionally; yet this last assertion cannot be made.

Perhaps there may be some who would prefer to deny the existence of so powerful a God rather than believe that everything else is uncertain. Let us not argue with them, but grant them that everything said about God is a fiction. According to their supposition, then, I have arrived at my present state by fate or chance or a continuous chain of events, or by some other means; yet since deception and error seem to be imperfections, the less powerful they make my original cause, the more likely it is that I am so imperfect as to be deceived all the time. I have no answer to these arguments, but am finally compelled to admit that there is not one of my former beliefs about which a doubt may not properly be raised; and this is not a flippant or ill-considered conclusion, but is based on powerful and well thought-out reasons. So in future I must withhold my assent from these former beliefs just as carefully as I would from obvious falsehoods, if I want to discover any certainty.

But it is not enough merely to have noticed this; I must make an effort to remember it. My habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom. I shall never get out of the habit of confidently assenting to these opinions, so long as I suppose them to be what in fact they are, namely highly probable opinions – opinions which, despite the fact that they are in a sense doubtful, as has just been shown, it is still much more reasonable to believe than to deny. In view of this, I think it will be a good plan to turn my will in completely the opposite direction and deceive myself, by pretending for a time that these former opinions are utterly false and imaginary. I shall do this until the weight of preconceived opinion is counter-balanced and the distorting influence of habit no longer prevents my judgement from perceiving things correctly. In the meantime, I know that no danger or error will result from my plan, and

that I cannot possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude. This is because the task now in hand does not involve action but merely the acquisition of knowledge.

I will suppose therefore that not God, who is supremely good and the source of truth, but rather some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me. I shall think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds and all external things are merely the delusions of dreams which he has devised to ensnare my judgement.<sup>5</sup> I shall consider myself as not having hands or eyes, or flesh, or blood or senses, but as falsely believing that I have all these things. I shall stubbornly and firmly persist in this meditation; and, even if it is not in my power to know any truth, I shall at least do what is in my power, that is, resolutely guard against assenting to any falsehoods, so that the deceiver, however powerful and cunning he may be, will be unable to impose on me in the slightest degree. But this is an arduous undertaking, and a kind of laziness brings me back to normal life. I am like a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep; as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he dreads being woken up, and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can. In the same way, I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness of the problems I have now raised.<sup>6</sup>

In *Meditations* II to V, Descartes undertook to prove the following: that *he* exists as a mind or “thinking thing”; that God – a supremely perfect being – exists; and that *if* bodies exist, they must be extended things. He also claimed to prove that anything we clearly and distinctly perceive must be true. In *Meditation* VI he tries to establish that there is a material world. Here he argues that it is certainly *possible* that external objects exist, for God can create anything we can clearly and distinctly conceive, and (as geometry shows) we can clearly and distinctly conceive things that are ordered in three dimensions. He then argues that it is *probable* that they exist, for the most likely explanation of the fact that our imagination can form images of extended things is that our minds are united to bodies. Finally, however, he argues that it is *certain* that external objects exist, for he has a great propensity to believe that his sensations come from such objects, and God has provided him with no way of discovering this belief to be false. Since God is no deceiver, and will not allow his creatures to err if they use their faculties aright, we

can be sure that material objects exist. The initial skepticism about the existence of a material world has thus been countered, but, of course, only as a consequence of proving that there is a non-deceiving God. The most important passage reads as follows:

Now there is in me a passive faculty of sensory perception, that is, a faculty for receiving and recognizing the ideas of sensible objects; but I could not make use of it unless there was also an active faculty, either in me or in something else, which produced or brought about these ideas. But this faculty cannot be in me, since clearly it presupposes no intellectual act on my part, and the ideas in question are produced without my cooperation and often even against my will. So the only alternative is that it is in another substance distinct from me – a substance which contains either formally or eminently all the reality which exists objectively in the ideas produced by this faculty (as I have just noted). This substance is either a body, that is, a corporeal nature, in which case it will contain formally <and in fact> everything which is to be found objectively <or representatively> in the ideas; or else it is God, or some creature more noble than a body, in which case it will contain eminently whatever is to be found in the ideas. But since God is not a deceiver, it is quite clear that he does not transmit the ideas to me either directly from himself, or indirectly, via some creature which contains the objective reality of the ideas not formally but only eminently. For God has given me no faculty at all for recognizing any such source for these ideas; on the contrary, he has given me a great propensity to believe that they are produced by corporeal things. So I do not see how God could be understood to be anything but a deceiver if the ideas were transmitted from a source other than corporeal things. It follows that corporeal things exist. They may not all exist in a way that exactly corresponds with my sensory grasp of them, for in many cases the grasp of the senses is very obscure and confused. But at least they possess all the properties which I clearly and distinctly understand, that is, all those which, viewed in general terms, are comprised within the subject-matter of pure mathematics.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Descartes on the Mind as a Substance

Berkeley's account of minds ("spirits") is sketchy, but he is definite that minds are substances (*PHK* §89), and – unlike Descartes, for

whom there is also material substance – that there is no substance other than minds (*PHK* §7). Berkeley also holds that the existence of a mind consists in perceiving and willing (*PC* 429–429a), and hence that the mind always thinks (*PHK* §98), and that the mind is naturally immortal (*PHK* §141). In making these claims, Berkeley was taking a definite position about matters much debated by his seventeenth-century predecessors, a position that was close to Descartes’.

The latter-day Scholastics, under Aquinas’s influence, held that the mind and body are not two separate substances, but are instead constituents of a single substance: the mind (or soul) being the “form” of the substance, the body its “matter”, in Aristotle’s sense of “form” and “matter”. Against this view, Descartes argued that although the mind and body are united, they are two distinct substances – the mind a thinking substance, the body an extended substance. While Berkeley was wholly to reject Descartes’ claim that the body is a material substance, he shared his view that the mind is a spiritual substance and that its essence can be clearly known.

In the following passage, this time from the *Discourse on the Method* (1637), Descartes, beginning from his initial resolve to doubt all his former opinions, is led to the conclusion that he is a thinking substance.

For a long time I had observed . . . that in practical life it is sometimes necessary to act upon opinions which one knows to be quite uncertain just as if they were indubitable. But since I now wished to devote myself solely to the search for truth, I thought it necessary to do the very opposite and reject as if absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see if I was left believing anything that was entirely indubitable. . . . But immediately I noticed that while I was trying thus to think everything false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, was something. And observing that this truth ‘*I am thinking, therefore I exist*’ was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking.

Next I examined attentively what I was. I saw that while I could pretend that I had no body and that there was no world and no place for me to be in, I could not for all that pretend that I did not exist. I saw on the contrary that from the mere fact that I thought of doubting the

truth of other things, it followed quite evidently and certainly that I existed; whereas if I had merely ceased thinking, even if everything else I had ever imagined had been true, I should have had no reason to believe that I existed. From this I knew I was a substance whose whole essence or nature is simply to think, and which does not require any place, or depend on any material thing, in order to exist. Accordingly, this 'I' – that is, the soul by which I am what I am – is entirely distinct from the body, and indeed is easier to know than the body, and would not fail to be whatever it is, even if the body did not exist.<sup>8</sup>

In *Meditations* II and VI Descartes sets out more fully his argument for the claim that he (that is, his mind) is a substance, and is distinct from the body, but the argument there is more complex, and, although he does conclude in *Meditation* II that "I am . . . in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason," it is only in *Meditation* VI, after he has proved the existence of God, that he completes his proof that "I am really distinct from my body." The crucial passage reads:

I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of being created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it. Hence the fact that I can clearly and distinctly understand one thing apart from another is enough to make me certain that the two things are distinct, since they are capable of being separated, at least by God. The question of what kind of power is required to bring about such a separation does not affect the judgement that the two things are distinct. Thus, simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it.<sup>9</sup>

Descartes held that if a substance were to lose its essence, it would cease to exist. Thus, just as a body that ceased to be extended would

cease to be (since extension is the essence of body), so a mind that ceased to think would cease to be (since thought is the essence of mind). This was to provoke from Locke the rejoinder that a mind might very well exist without thinking – indeed in deep sleep it seems to do so. According to Locke, thought or the perception of ideas is “to the soul what motion is to the body: not its essence, but one of its operations.”<sup>10</sup> As for the essence of mind, Locke thought we cannot discover what it is; we cannot even be sure that God “has not given to some systems of matter, fitly disposed, a power to perceive and think.”<sup>11</sup> Berkeley here sided with Descartes, against Locke. The *esse* of mind is *percipere*, and it cannot exist without thought (*PC* 650–52 and 842, and *PHK* §98).

### 3. Ideas and Qualities

Descartes held that we are inclined to make a certain error about the properties of bodies: we suppose that our ideas of certain *sensed* qualities, such as those of color, taste, sound, and warmth, reliably inform us of features of the objects that we take to possess them. Instead, according to Descartes, the only qualities that are actually in bodies are various “modes” of extension, such as size, shape, motion, or rest. Thus, Descartes was committed, without using the terms, to the distinction between what Locke, following Robert Boyle, would later call “primary” and “secondary” qualities. The following selections from Descartes’ *Principles of Philosophy* illustrate his distinction between these two kinds of qualities. (He here speaks chiefly of color, but his view was the same about other secondary qualities.)

PART ONE, §68. HOW TO DISTINGUISH WHAT WE  
CLEARLY KNOW IN SUCH MATTERS FROM WHAT CAN  
LEAD US ASTRAY

In order to distinguish what is clear in this connection from what is obscure, we must be very careful to note that pain and colour and so on are clearly and distinctly perceived when they are regarded merely as sensations or thoughts. But when they are judged to be real things existing outside our mind, there is no way of understanding what sort of

things they are. If someone says he sees colour in a body or feels pain in a limb, this amounts to saying that he sees or feels something there of which he is wholly ignorant, or, in other words, that he does not know what he is seeing or feeling. Admittedly, if he fails to pay sufficient attention, he may easily convince himself that he has some knowledge of what he sees or feels, because he may suppose that it is something similar to the sensation of colour or pain which he experiences within himself. But if he examines the nature of what is represented by the sensation of colour or pain – what is represented as existing in the coloured body or the painful part – he will realize that he is wholly ignorant of it.

§69. WE KNOW SIZE, SHAPE AND SO FORTH IN A QUITE  
DIFFERENT WAY FROM THE WAY IN WHICH WE KNOW  
COLOURS, PAINS AND THE LIKE

This will be especially clear if we consider the wide gap between our knowledge of those features of bodies which we clearly perceive, as stated earlier [in §48], and our knowledge of those features which must be referred to the senses, as I have just pointed out. To the former class belong the size of the bodies we see, their shape, motion, position, duration, number and so on (by 'motion' I mean local motion: philosophers have imagined that there are other kinds of motion distinct from local motion, therefore only making the nature of motion less intelligible to themselves). To the latter class belong the colour in a body, as well as pain, smell, taste and so on. It is true that when we see a body we are just as certain of its existence in virtue of its having a visible colour as we are in virtue of its having a visible shape; but our knowledge of what it is for the body to have a shape is much clearer than our knowledge of what it is for it to be coloured.

§70. THERE ARE TWO WAYS OF MAKING JUDGEMENTS  
CONCERNING THE THINGS THAT CAN BE PERCEIVED BY  
THE SENSES: THE FIRST ENABLES US TO AVOID ERROR,  
WHILE THE SECOND ALLOWS US TO FALL INTO ERROR

It is clear, then, that when we say that 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 certain very clear and vivid sensation which we call the sensation of colour. But the way in which we make our judgement can vary very widely. As long as we merely judge that there is in the objects (that is, in the things, whatever they may turn out to be, which are the source of our sensations) something whose nature we do not know, then we avoid error; indeed, we are actually guarding against error, since the recognition that we are ignorant of something makes us less liable to make any rash judgement about it. But it is quite different when we suppose that we perceive colours in objects. Of course, we do not really know what it is that we are calling a colour; and we cannot find any intelligible resemblance between the colour which we suppose to be in objects and that which we experience in our sensation. But this is something we do not take account of; and, what is more, there are many other features, such as size, shape and number which we clearly perceive to be actually or at least possibly present in objects in a way exactly corresponding to our sensory perception or understanding. And so we easily fall into the error of judging that what is called colour in objects is something exactly like the colour of which we have sensory awareness; and we make the mistake of thinking that we clearly perceive what we do not perceive at all.

PART TWO, §4. THE NATURE OF BODY CONSISTS NOT  
IN WEIGHT, HARDNESS, COLOUR, OR THE LIKE, BUT  
SIMPLY IN EXTENSION

If we [rely on the intellect alone, not the senses], we shall perceive that the nature of matter, or body considered in general, consists not in its being something which is hard or heavy or coloured, or which affects the senses in any way, but simply in its being something which is extended in length, breadth and depth. For as regards hardness, our sensation tells us no more than that the parts of a hard body resist the motion of our hands when they come into contact with them. If, whenever our hands moved in a given direction, all the bodies in that area were to move away at the same speed as that of our approaching hands, we should never have any sensation of hardness. And since it is quite unintelligible to suppose that, if bodies did move away in this fashion, they would thereby lose their bodily nature, it follows that this nature cannot consist in hardness. By the same reasoning it can be shown that weight, colour, and all other such qualities that are perceived by the

senses as being in corporeal matter, can be removed from it, while matter itself remains intact; it thus follows that its nature does not depend on any of these qualities.<sup>12</sup>

\* \* \*

How much influence the reading of Descartes' works had on the development of Berkeley's metaphysical position is hard to determine, but in a sense the issue is unimportant. Even if Berkeley had not read him at all – and we know that he did read him – it would remain the case that Descartes was largely responsible for setting the philosophical agenda that made Berkeley's own philosophical position possible. High on that agenda was the issue of the very existence of an external, material reality. Although Descartes thought he had resolved it, we shall see that others did not agree.

## Notes

1. See *Philosophical Commentaries*, entries 784 to 822, many of which have Descartes' or Hobbes's objections to Descartes in view. Berkeley had already commented on *Cogito ergo sum* at 738, and had mentioned the Cartesians in earlier entries. He had also referred to Descartes in two of his earliest writings, *Description of the Cave of Dunmore* and *De Ludo Algebraico*. He probably read the *Meditations* in a translation published by William Molyneux in 1680, which included Hobbes's objections.
2. *Works* VIII, p. 26. One of the supposed inconsistencies is that Descartes, as Berkeley reads him, says in *Meditation* II that the notion of a particular piece of wax is less clear than that of wax in general, *after* having observed that general conceptions are usually confused. Jean-Marie Beyssade has suggested to us that this charge (cf. *PC* 784) rests on a misreading of Descartes, based on Molyneux's translation. Arguing that the imagination does not reveal the nature of the wax, Descartes notes, "I am speaking of this particular piece of wax; the point is even clearer with regard to wax in general." In Molyneux's translation this becomes: "I speak of this particular wax, for of wax in general the notion is more clear."
3. Our selections are taken from *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–85).
4. Whether *any* philosophers before Descartes raised this question is a subject of debate among historians of philosophy. See M. F. Burnyeat, "Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed," *Philosophical Review* 91 (1982), pp. 3–40; and Leo Groarke, "Descartes' First Meditation: Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22 (1984), pp. 281–301.
5. With Berkeley the situation is interestingly different. He, in effect, gives to

God the role that Descartes at this point gives to the malicious demon. For Berkeley, it is God who produces sensations or “ideas” in our minds, without there being material objects, though (in Berkeley’s view) this does not make God a deceiver. As Edward Craig puts it, it is “somewhat as if Descartes’ demon had turned benevolent.” *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 35. For another suggestion along these lines see Louis E. Loeb, *Descartes to Hume*, p. 235n. For further discussion see I. C. Tipton, “Descartes’ Demon and Berkeley’s World” in *Philosophical Investigations* 15 (1992), pp. 111–30.

6. *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 12–15.
7. *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2, p. 55.
8. *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1, pp. 126–27.
9. *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 2, p. 54.
10. *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Book 2, Chapter 1, §10.
11. *Essay*, Book 4, Chapter 3, §6.
12. *Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1, pp. 217–18, 224.