

QUESTIONS ON THE READING

1. Why can one idea not be the cause of another?
2. How many different kinds of substance are there?
3. What does our freedom of will strictly allow us to do, according to Berkeley?
4. What made Berkeley think that our ideas of sense are not produced by ourselves?
5. How did Berkeley distinguish ideas of sense from other ideas?
6. Berkeley did not believe that the law of universal gravitation is a description of a force in bodies that makes them move towards one another. What did he think this law, and the laws of nature in general are descriptions of? What is the only “force” in nature, as far as he was concerned?
7. Did Berkeley follow Locke in believing that the existence of other finite minds must be accepted on faith?
8. In what sense do we see God?

NOTES ON THE READING

The distinction between reality and illusion. Though Berkeley maintained that sensible objects are just collections of ideas existing only in the minds of sentient beings, and only when they are perceived, he did not deny that these objects are real. There is a difference, Berkeley observed, between those ideas we cook up in imagination, and those ideas that are given to us in sensation. While the former are figments that we cause to come and go as we will, we cannot make the latter come and go simply by willing it. If we feel cold, we may imagine warmth all we want, but that will not produce sensations of warmth. We find that we can only get sensations by acting in just the way we would act if there were an external world containing objects that cause those sensations in us. Getting sensations of warmth means willing to move our bodies and getting ideas of our body parts moving relative to our ideas of sources of heat. Only after ideas of sensation have been produced in us in that order do we start to experience sensations of warmth. That makes our sensations of heat and cold, of our body parts, and of sources of heat real things and not just figments of our imaginations. The same holds for all other ideas of sensation.

So for Berkeley, to distinguish between reality and illusion is to distinguish between sensing and imagining. That is something we can do in a number of ways, just by inspecting our ideas, and without needing to invoke any supposition the causes of our ideas. Not only do ideas of sense occur independently of the will, they feel different from ideas of imagination — they are more strong, vivid, and lively — and they occur in a regular sequence or order that conforms to what we call the laws of nature (e.g., our ideas of sense always exhibit bodies as moving in accord with the laws of gravitation and collision). We do occasionally run into problem cases where just some of the criteria for distinguishing between reality and illusion are satisfied. Our sensations of the motions of our bodies are produced by our wills, though they are vivid, strong and lively, and governed by laws of nature. Experiences of miracles violate laws of nature but are vivid, strong and lively and occur independently of our wills. Ideas produced in dreams appear to occur independently of our wills and to be strong, vivid, and lively, but they often contain events that occur contrary to laws of nature. And so on. But all that this goes to show is that the distinction



between reality and illusion is not always easy to draw, not that there is no such distinction or that we need to appeal to mind-independent material objects to draw the distinction. It *is* sometimes hard to distinguish reality from illusion. We *do* sometimes mistake dreams for reality or miraculous events for dreams. It is a strength, rather than a weakness of Berkeley's account that it does not make the distinction between reality and illusion more clear cut than it in fact is. An account of the difference between reality and illusion that drew a clear-cut distinction between the two would fail to explain how it is that we can sometimes be confused or mistaken about where to draw the line.

The existence of the self. Sensible objects are not the only real things for Berkeley. Other things exist that are not sensible and that are known in other ways than by having ideas. These things are spirits. Chief among them are the self, God, and other minds.

Like Descartes and Locke, Berkeley believed that the existence of the self is intuitively obvious, as is the existence of all of its acts and thoughts. I know by a kind of extra-sensory intuition that I exist and that I perform acts like sensing, willing and imagining.

This intuition has to be extra-sensory because it is in principle impossible to know the self by having an idea. Berkeley had already declared in *Principles 2* that it is impossible for ideas to exist on their own. Ideas cannot exist apart from being perceived, which means that there must be perceivers. These perceivers could not themselves be ideas on pain of causing a vicious regress. So while sensible things are mere collections of ideas, minds cannot be ideas or collections of ideas.

But simply because the self could not *be* an idea or a collection of ideas, why should it follow that it could not *be known* by having an idea or collection of ideas? Berkeley seems to have supposed that ideas are like pictures or images of the objects they represent — or more radically that they just are the objects they represent. For that reason, they must be like those objects. We have already seen this presupposition at work in Berkeley's rejection of the possibility of abstract ideas. It surfaces here again in another way. Berkeley observed that ideas are passive and inert. They don't act in any way, even to the extent of appearing or disappearing. Instead they just are, and something else makes them come and go. But Berkeley claimed to be aware of himself as a thing that acts. From this he drew the conclusion that he could not possibly have an idea of himself, since that idea would fail to represent one of his most quintessential features. But this only follows if we accept that ideas represent objects by resembling or being those objects. It seems that Berkeley did accept that supposition, and that this is why he declared that we can have no idea of ourselves.

But if we do not know ourselves through having ideas, what form does our intuition of our own existence take? Berkeley claimed that we have a "notion," as opposed to an idea, of ourselves. Etymologically, a notion is a thought had by *nous* (the ancient Greek word for the pure intellect) as opposed to a thought had by means of sensory experience.

So it would seem that there are actually two kinds of thoughts that we can have: ideas, which arise from sensory experience and are repeated in memory and imagination; and notions, which involve a kind of direct understanding. At *Principles 89* Berkeley suggested that we do not just have notions of ourselves but also of other minds, including God, and of relations between things. We arrive at our notions of ourselves by "inward feeling or reflection," at our notions of other minds by reasoning, and at our notions by, presumably, intuition.



Berkeley's doctrine of notions opens a can of worms. If we can have notions of spirits, why can't we have notions of matter? Can notions exist apart from being perceived? If they can, why can't ideas? Is a spirit just a notion or a collection of notions the way a sensible object is a collection of ideas? Or is it something distinct from notions that can exist even when the notions are not being perceived? If notions are different from spirits, then how do they represent spirits? In some other way than by being or resembling them? If representation is possible without resemblance, then why shouldn't it be possible for ideas as well, so that ideas might represent objects that they do not resemble and that can exist even when the ideas are not being perceived? Berkeley struggled with these questions in another work, the third part of his *Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. A study of whether he was successfully able to address them is suggested as a research project at the close of this chapter.

Berkeley's position on the nature of spirits led him to conclude that the self could not possibly be material. Bodies are collections ideas. The collections of extended, solid particles that early modern science took bodies to be made up of are likewise collections of ideas. The thing that has the ideas could not itself be a collection of ideas. It must be something radically distinct, called a spirit or mind.

This argument was intended to address all of Locke's worries about thinking matter and the substance of the soul. It is beyond question, on Berkeley's system, that the thing that thinks is an immaterial substance.

The existence of God. Whereas we have a direct intuition of ourselves, we know the existence of God and other minds by demonstration or reasoning. These demonstrations do not lead us to have an inner awareness of other minds. We have no inner awareness of any mind other than our own. Instead, they give us reason to infer that there must be other minds. When we infer the existence of these other minds we do not perceive or intuit them the way we perceive or intuit ourselves. Instead we employ our notion of ourselves to stand in for them and represent them. We take our notion of ourselves to model what these other minds must be like. In the case of other finite spirits, we take the model to be a fairly good resemblance. In the case of God we suppose our own minds serve only as an imperfect model that gives us just some notion of what is present as the mind of God.

Here is why we feel entitled to do this where God is concerned: Like Locke and Descartes, Berkeley accepted the principle that every effect must have a cause. We know by intuitive self-consciousness that our ideas of imagination are caused by our own minds. But this is not the case with our ideas of reality. Since we are not the cause of these ideas, Berkeley reasoned that they must be due to the activity of some other spirit, who imposes them on us just as we impose our ideas of imagination on ourselves. There is simply no other alternative, since if matter does not exist and all our ideas are themselves inert and passive, then the only thing left that could possibly cause our ideas is mind or spirit.

If we compare our ideas of reality with our own effects, our ideas of imagination, we discover an immense difference in scale. The things we can imagine are few, dim and incoherent. Even the greatest poets, painters, and filmmakers working together can only produce partial views of characters and events that often seem implausible if not outright incoherent. Our ideas of reality are not like that. They are much more vivid than anything we can produce in imagination, and they are incredibly rich in both detail and extent. There are no partial views. Every scene is full from horizon to horizon and exact down to the smallest perceivable detail. And the whole is perfectly



ordered. The author of our ideas of reality never gets the time lines wrong, never attributes actions to characters that their personalities could not possibly be supposed to induce them to perform, and never describes events that could only happen through a violation of the laws of nature. (There is a small, technical exception for the case of miracles that we can ignore for present purposes.

Berkeley's discussion of the topic can be located by consulting the index to the assigned edition of the Principles.)

Berkeley thought that this means that our ideas of reality must be produced by a single, governing spirit, not a collection of spirits who might disagree and work at cross purposes to one another. And it means that this spirit must be supremely powerful and intelligent. It must be, in other words, God.

Berkeley also thought that we can infer that God must be benevolent and concerned to provide for us. This follows from the way our ideas of reality have been ordered, so that they always occur in a certain pattern that can be described by laws (the laws we call the laws of nature, though they are really the laws in accord with which God brings about ideas in us). Even though the strict observation of laws means that God is sometimes obliged to cause us pain, God is not a cruel being who enjoys torturing us. On the contrary, by always bringing about ideas of reality in us in the same way, God has enabled us to take the ones that occur earlier as signs for those that are to come later, and so anticipate the future and act to stave off misfortune. Our ideas are in effect a language whereby God is constantly speaking to us about what is going to happen next, and so advising us how to live in comfort. Getting ideas of a precipice, we know to turn away to avoid getting ideas of pain and broken bones. Getting ideas of food on the table, we know to eat in order to avoid getting ideas of hunger. Getting ideas of a pleasant or unpleasant taste, we know whether the food is likely to be good or bad for us, and so on. God is therefore providential. God looks out for us and is constantly speaking to us and advising us what to do in order to avoid ideas of pain and obtain ideas of pleasure. All we need to do is pay heed to the language in which this advice is given.

Berkeley was particularly proud of this result. Unlike Descartes and Locke, who took our ideas of reality to be caused by material substances and who therefore opened the door to Deism, atheism and, ultimately, scepticism, Berkeley's alternative account of the cause of ideas of reality gave God a central and undeniable role to play in producing the world we see about us, indeed, in delivering an ongoing, providential message to all of us.

For Berkeley, God is not just responsible for making our ideas of reality follow upon one another in a law-like fashion, but also for giving each different finite spirit a set of ideas consistent with perceiving objects from a particular perspective. Thus, when we are sitting across the table from one another, God ensures that while I am getting visual ideas of the front side of my mug, you are getting visual ideas of the back side. This creates the effect of a number of different minds each experiencing the world from the perspective of a certain location in space peculiar to it. But, of course, the minds are not outside of one another in space at all. Being spirits, they are not the sort of things that are located in or fill space.

Obviously, were it not for God, there would be no ideas of reality, no externally imposed order or law-likeness in our sensory experiences, and no community between the experiences of one mind and another. Everything would collapse into illusion and unintelligibility. But this is just what Berkeley wanted. He wanted everyone to be convinced of a natural philosophy that places God at the center of things, playing an essential and ineliminable role. There can be no mechanical mechanism making things happen on Berkeley's system. God has to exist and be acting to impose



Early Modern Philosophy by [Lorne Falkenstein](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#).

corresponding ideas on our minds from moment to moment. Doubt about the existence of God is a sheer impossibility as long as you accept the immaterialist thesis.

The existence of other minds. Having established that God exists, Berkeley employed a second causal argument to establish that other minds exist. He noted that among our ideas of reality are ideas of human and animal bodies. While these ideas conform in many ways to the laws of nature that God has instituted, they appear to be capable of moving themselves within certain limitations (e.g., humans cannot fly and fish cannot walk, and no one can move if they are tied down). Our ideas of human bodies, in particular, often exhibit these bodies as moving in ways that are random, unpredictable, and even wicked and contrary to the otherwise benevolent intentions of God.

Taking the course of these ideas to arise from inattention or mistake on the part of God just does not square with the evidence we can see of his intelligence and power from his other works. The most reasonable explanation, Berkeley contended, is to suppose that God has created other finite minds, capable of having ideas and performing volitions. We know that when we perform volitions we are able to bring about a limited set of alterations in a particular class of our ideas: our ideas of the positions of the limbs of a particular body we call our own. Perhaps God has graciously indulged other finite minds by giving them a free will to move other human bodies, and so brought it about that whenever these other finite minds perform acts of will, both their ideas of their own bodies and our ideas of their bodies are appropriately modified to reflect those acts of will.

On this account, we do not move our bodies. We merely perform acts of will. God then moves our bodies for us. That is, he gives us ideas of the limbs of our bodies in appropriately changed positions, and gives everyone else corresponding ideas. That is all that moving a body amounts to on Berkeley's account.

ESSAY QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. As described in the notes on the reading, Berkeley's doctrine of notions raises a number of difficult questions about what it means for an idea or a notion to represent an object and about whether Berkeley is within his rights to treat our knowledge of ourselves so differently from our knowledge of sensible things. Berkeley struggled with these questions in the third part of his *Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*. Do a study of this work and of the recent secondary literature on it and assess the adequacy of his answers.
2. Berkeley's argument for the existence of an immaterial self rests on the claim that ideas cannot exist apart from being perceived, so that the existence of ideas implies the existence of a perceiver. This claim was challenged by Hume, in Book 1, Part 4, Section 6 of his *Treatise of human nature*, though Hume himself came to have misgivings about this challenge, which were laid out in his appendix to that work. Assess the cogency of Hume's reasons for rejecting Berkeley's principle, particularly in the light of his own later reservations.



Early Modern Philosophy by [Lorne Falkenstein](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](#).