

**A TREATISE CONCERNING
THE PRINCIPLES OF
HUMAN KNOWLEDGE**

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A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge by George Berkeley

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The Principles of Human Knowledge

BY
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EDITOR'S PREFACE.

BERKELEY'S *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, of which a reprint is here produced as the fourth of the series of Philosophical Classics of the Religion of Science Library, was first published in Dublin in 1710. The second edition, the last of the author's life-time, appeared in London in 1734, in the same volume with the third edition of the *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous*, a reprint of which has also been issued in this series as a companion-piece to the *Principles*. The text of both reprints embodies all the essential matter of the editions of Berkeley's life-time.

The *Principles*, published when the author was only twenty-six, is the most systematic of all of Berkeley's expositions of his theory of knowledge: it was the direct outgrowth of the *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709), which sought to banish the metaphysical abstractions of Absolute Space and Extension from philosophy, and was itself mainly concerned with the abolition of Abstract Matter and of the ontological and theological corollaries of that concept. The *Dialogues* treat of substantially the same subjects, but are more familiar and elegant in form and are devoted in the main to the refutation of the most plausible popular and philosophical objections to the new doctrine. The two books mark a distinctively new epoch in philosophy and science, and together afford a comprehensive survey of Berkeley's doctrines, placing within the reach of every reader in remarkably brief compass opinions which have profoundly influenced the course of intellectual history. Works of this kind have been almost invariably distinguished by their brevity. "I had no inclination," is Berkeley's characteristic remark, "to trouble the world with large volumes. What I have done was rather with the view of giving hints to thinking men, who have leisure and curiosity to go to the bottom of things, and pursue them in their own minds, Two or three times reading these small tracts, and making what is read the occasion of thinking, would, I believe, render the whole

familiar and easy to the mind, and take off that shocking appearance which hath often been observed to attend speculative truths."

Berkeley's philosophy having been the victim of much popular, and even professional, misapprehension, it shall be our endeavor in these prefatory remarks to give by appropriate quotations and digests a synthesis of current philosophical opinion concerning his doctrines, to point out his relation to his predecessors, to indicate certain peculiarities of terminology and thought necessary to the understanding of his theory, and to show finally wherein certain of his analyses have been rendered antiquated by modern scientific inquiry. We shall begin by reproducing the sketch of his life and aims given in Lewes's *Biographical History of Philosophy* (1845), a work which, though on technical points partisan and not always trustworthy, has at least the merit of a vivacious style.

LIFE OF BERKELEY.

"There are few men of whom England has better reason to be proud than of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne; for to extraordinary merits as a thinker and writer he united the most exquisite purity and generosity of character; and it is still a moot point whether he was greater in head or heart.

"He was born on the 12th of March, 1685, at Kilkerrin, in the county of Kilkenny, Ireland. He was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and was in 1707 admitted as a fellow. In 1709 he published his *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision*, which made an epoch in science;* and the year after, his *Principles of Human Knowledge*, which made an epoch in metaphysics. After this he came to London, where he was received with open arms. Ancient learning, exact science, polished society, modern literature, and the fine arts, contributed to adorn and enrich the mind

*This statement is hardly exact. The *Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* was a psychological rather than a scientific treatise. The work has been well characterised by Prof. A. C. Fraser in his edition of the collected works of Berkeley, Vol. I., page 5, as follows: "The treatise is a professed account of the facts, the whole facts, and nothing but the facts of which we are visually conscious, as distinguished from pretended facts and metaphysical abstractions, which confused thought, an irregular exercise of imagination, or an abuse of words had substituted for them. It is a contribution to the psychological analysis of the fact of vision, and not a deduction from merely physical experiments in optics or the physiology of the eye."—*Editor*.

of this accomplished man. All his contemporaries agreed with the Satirist in ascribing

To Berkeley every virtue under heaven.

Adverse factions and hostile wits concurred only in loving, admiring, and contributing to advance him. The severe sense of Swift endured his visions; the modest Addison endeavored to reconcile Clarke to his ambitious speculations. His character converted the satire of Pope into fervid praise. Even the discerning, fastidious, and turbulent Atterbury said, after an interview with him, "so much learning, so much knowledge, so much innocence, and such humility, I did not think had been the portion of any but angels, till I saw this gentleman."*

"His acquaintance with the wits led to his contributing to the *Guardian*. He became chaplain and afterwards secretary to the Earl of Peterborough, whom he accompanied on his embassy to Sicily. He subsequently made the tour of Europe with Mr. Ashe; and at Paris met Malebranche, with whom he had an animated discussion on the ideal theory. In 1724 he was made dean of Derry. This was worth eleven hundred pounds a year to him; but he resigned it in order to dedicate his life to the conversion of the North American savages, stipulating only with the Government for a salary of one hundred pounds a year. On this romantic and generous expedition he was accompanied by his young wife. He set sail for Rhode Island, carrying with him a valuable library of books and the bulk of his property. But, to the shame of the Government, be it said, the promises made him were not fulfilled, and after seven years of single-handed endeavour he was forced to return to England, having spent the greater part of his fortune in vain.

"He was made Bishop of Cloyne in 1734. When he wished to resign, the King would not permit him; and being keenly alive to the evils of non-residence, he made an arrangement before leaving Cloyne whereby he settled 200*l.* a year during his absence on the poor. In 1752 he removed to Oxford, where, on the evening of the 14th January, in 1753, he was suddenly seized, while reading, with palsy of the heart, and died almost instantaneously.

"Of his numerous writings we cannot here speak; two only belong to our subject; the *Principles of Knowledge*, and the *Dialogues of Hylas and Philonous*. [His other most important

* Sir James Mackintosh.

philosophical work was *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher* (1733)]. We hope to remove some of the errors and prejudices with which his name is encrusted. We hope to show that, even in what are called his wildest moods, Berkeley was a plain, sincere, deep-thinking man, not a sophist playing with paradoxes to display his skill.

THE TRADITIONAL MISCONCEPTION OF BERKELEY'S
IDEALISM.

"All the world has heard of Berkeley's Idealism, and innumerable 'coxcombs' have vanquished it 'with a grin.'* Ridicule has not been sparing of it. Argument has not been wanting. It has been laughed at, written at, talked at, shrieked at. That it has been *understood* is not so apparent. Few writers seem to have honestly read and appreciated his works; and those few are certainly not among his antagonists.† In reading the criticisms upon his theory it is quite ludicrous to notice the constant iteration of trivial objections which, trivial as they are, Berkeley had often anticipated. In fact, the critics misunderstood him, and then reproached him for his inconsistency—inconsistency, not with *his* principles, but with *theirs*. They force a meaning upon his words which he had expressly rejected; and then triumph over him because he did not pursue their principles to the extravagances which would have resulted from them.

"When Berkeley denied the existence of matter, he simply denied the existence of that unknown *substratum*, the existence of which Locke had declared to be a necessary *inference* from our knowledge of qualities, but the nature of which must ever be altogether hidden from us. Philosophers had assumed the existence of substance, i. e., of a *noumenon* lying underneath all *phenomena*—a substratum supporting all qualities—a *something* in which all accidents *inhere*. This unknown substance Berkeley denies. It is a mere abstraction, he says. If it is unknown, unknowable, it

*"And coxcombs vanquish Berkeley with a grin."—*Popo*.

† These words were written in 1845-1846. Since then Prof. A. Campbell Fraser's magnificent edition of Berkeley's collected works (4 vols. Clarendon Press, 1871) and his exhaustive dissertations on Berkeley's doctrines, together with the many excellent histories of philosophy of the last half century, have rendered such misunderstanding, at least on the part of the philosophical public, almost impossible.—*Editor*.

is a figment, and I will none of it; for it is a figment worse than useless; it is pernicious, as the basis of all Atheism. If by matter you understand *that* which is seen, felt, tasted, and touched, then I say matter exists: I am as firm a believer in its existence as any one can be, and *herein I agree with the vulgar*. If, on the contrary, you understand by matter that occult *substratum* which is *not* seen, *not* felt, *not* tasted, and *not* touched—that of which the senses do not, cannot, inform you—then I say I believe not in the existence of matter, and *herein I differ with the philosophers and agree with the vulgar*.

"I am not changing things into ideas," he says, "but rather ideas into things; since those *immediate objects of perception*, which according to you (Berkeley might have said, according to philosophers) are only *appearances of things*, I take to be the real things themselves.

"*Hylas*: Things! you may pretend what you please; but it is certain you leave us nothing but the empty forms of things, the *outside of which only strikes the senses*.

"*Philonous*: What you call the empty forms and outside of things seem to me the very things themselves. . . . We both therefore agree in this, that we perceive only sensible forms; but herein we differ: you will have them to be empty appearances; I, real beings. In short, *you do not trust your senses; I do*."

"Berkeley is always accused of having propounded a theory which contradicts the evidence of the senses. That a man who should thus disregard the senses must be out of his, was a ready answer; ridicule was not slow in retort: declamation gave itself elbow-room, and exhibited itself in a triumphant attitude. It was easy to declare (Reid, *Inquiry*) that 'the man who seriously entertains this belief, though in other respects he may be a very good man, as a man may be who believes he is made of glass; yet surely he hath a soft place in his understanding, and hath been hurt by much thinking.'

"Unfortunately for the critics, Berkeley did *not* contradict the evidence of the senses; did *not* propound a theory at variance in this point with the ordinary belief of mankind. His peculiarity is, that he confined himself exclusively to the evidence of the senses. What the senses informed him of, that, and *that only*, would he accept. He held fast to the facts of consciousness; he placed himself resolutely in the centre of the instinctive belief of