

Berkeley on Ideas

1 The gap between ideas and objects

“I have previously admitted many things as wholly certain and evident that nevertheless I later discovered to be doubtful. What sorts of things were these? Why, the earth, the sky, the stars, and all the other things I perceived by means of the senses. But what was it about these things that I clearly perceived? Surely the fact that the ideas or thoughts of these things were hovering before my mind. But even now I do not deny that these ideas are in me. Yet there was something else I used to affirm, which, owing to my habitual tendency to believe it, I used to think was something I clearly perceived, even though I actually did not perceive it at all: namely, that certain things existed outside me, things from which those ideas proceeded and which those ideas completely resembled. But on this point I was mistaken; or, rather if my judgment was a true one, it was not the result of the force of my perception.” (Descartes [1641] 2019, 47R)

Philonous: This point then is agreed between us — that *sensible things are those only which are immediately perceived by sense*. You will further inform me whether we immediately perceive by sight anything besides light, and colors, and figures; or by hearing anything but sounds; by the palate, anything besides tastes; by the smell, besides odors; or by the touch, more than tangible qualities.

Hylas: We do not.

Philonous: It seems, therefore, that if you take away all sensible qualities, there remains nothing sensible.” (Berkeley [1713] 2019, 497–98)

2 No abstract ideas

Philonous: Can you even separate the ideas of extension and motion from the ideas of all those qualities which they who make the distinction term *secondary*?

Hylas: What! Is it not an easy matter to consider extension and motion by themselves, abstracted from all other sensible qualities? Pray how do the mathematicians treat of them?

Philonous: I acknowledge, Hylas, it is not difficult to form general propositions and reasonings about those qualities without mentioning any other and in this sense to consider or treat them abstractly. But how does it follow that because I can pronounce the word *motion* by itself, I can form the idea of it in my mind exclusive of body? Or because theorems may be made of extension and figures without any mention of *great* or *small* or any other sensible mode or quality, that therefore it is possible such an abstract idea of extension without any particular size or figure or sensible quality, should be distinctly formed and apprehended by the mind? Mathematicians treat of quantity without regarding what other sensible qualities it is attended with, as being altogether indifferent to their demonstrations. But when, laying aside the words, they contemplate the bare ideas, I believe you will find they are not the pure abstracted ideas of extension." (Berkeley [1713] 2019, 507R)

References

- Berkeley, George. (1713) 2019. "Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous in Opposition to Skeptics and Atheists." In *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, edited by Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins, 3rd ed., 494-543. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Descartes, René. (1641) 2019. "Meditations on First Philosophy." In *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, edited by Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins, translated by Donald Cress, 3rd ed., 35-68. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.