

The Principles of Human Knowledge

George Berkeley

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.

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Sections 1–50

1. Anyone who surveys the objects of human knowledge will easily see that they are all *ideas* that are either •actually imprinted on the senses or •perceived by attending to one’s own emotions and mental activities or •formed out of ideas of the first two types, with the help of memory and imagination, by compounding or dividing or simply reproducing ideas of those other two kinds. By sight I have the ideas of light and colours with their different degrees and variations. By touch I perceive hard and soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance, and so on; and each of these also admits of differences of quantity or degree. Smelling supplies me with odours; the palate with tastes; and hearing conveys sounds to the mind in all their variety of tone and composition. And when a number of these are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name and thus to be thought of as one thing. Thus, for example, a certain colour, taste, smell, shape and consistency having been observed to go together, they are taken to be one distinct thing, called an ‘apple’. Other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and similar perceptible things; and these can arouse the emotions of love, hate, joy, grief, and so on, depending on whether they please or displease us.

2. As well as all that endless variety of ideas, or objects of knowledge, there is also something that knows or *perceives* them, and *acts* on them in various ways such as willing, imagining, and remembering. This perceiving, active entity is what I call ‘mind’, ‘spirit’, ‘soul’, or ‘myself’. These words don’t refer to any one of my ideas, but rather to something entirely distinct from them, something *in* which they *exist*, or *by* which they *are perceived*. Those two are equivalent, because the existence of an idea consists in its being perceived.

3. Everyone will agree that our thoughts, emotions, and ideas of the imagination exist only in the mind. It seems to me equally obvious that the various sensations or ideas that are imprinted on our senses cannot exist except in a mind that perceives them—no matter how they are blended or combined together (that is, no matter what objects they constitute). You can know this intuitively [= ‘you can see this as immediately self-evident’] by attending to what is meant by the term ‘exist’ when it is applied to perceptible things. The table that I am writing on *exists*, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I would still say that it existed, meaning that •if I were in my study I would perceive it, or that •some other spirit actually does perceive it. Similarly,

‘there was an odour’—i.e. it was smelled;

‘there was a sound’—it was heard;

‘there was a colour or shape’—it was seen or felt.

This is all that I can understand by such expressions as these. There are those who speak of things that ·unlike spirits· do not think and ·unlike ideas· exist whether or not they are perceived; but that seems to be perfectly unintelligible. For unthinking things, *to exist* is *to be perceived*; so they couldn’t possibly exist out of the minds or thinking things that perceive them.

4. It is indeed widely believed that all perceptible objects—houses, mountains, rivers, and so on—really exist independently of being perceived by the understanding. But however widely and confidently this belief may be held, anyone who has the courage to challenge it will—if I’m not mistaken—see that it involves an obvious contradiction. For what are houses, mountains, rivers etc. but things we perceive by sense? And what do we perceive besides our own ideas or

sensations? And isn't it plainly contradictory that *these*, either singly or in combination, should exist unperceived?

5. If we thoroughly examine this belief in things existing independently of the mind it will, perhaps, be found to depend basically on the doctrine of abstract ideas. For can there be a more delicate and precise strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of perceptible things from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived? Light and colours, heat and cold, extension and shapes, in a word the things we see and feel—what are they but so many sensations, notions, ideas, or sense impressions? And can any of *these* be separated, even in thought, from perception? Speaking for myself, I would find it no easier to do that than to divide a thing from itself! I don't deny that I can abstract (if indeed this is properly called abstraction) by *conceiving* separately objects that *can exist* separately, even if I have never experienced them apart from one another. I can for example imagine a human torso without the limbs, or conceive the smell of a rose without thinking of the rose itself. But my power of conceiving or imagining goes no further than that: it doesn't extend beyond the limits of what can actually exist or be perceived. Therefore, because I can't possibly *see or feel a thing* without having an actual sensation of it, I also can't possibly *conceive of a perceptible thing* distinct from the sensation or perception of it.

6. Some truths are so close to the mind, and so obvious, that as soon as you open your eyes you will see them. Here is an important truth of that kind:

All the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies that compose the mighty structure of the world, have no existence outside a mind; for them to exist is for them to be perceived or known; consequently so long as they aren't actually

perceived by (i.e. don't exist in the mind of) myself or any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all or else exist in the mind of some eternal spirit; because it makes no sense—and involves all the absurdity of abstraction—to attribute to any such thing an existence independent of a spirit.

To be convinced of this, you need only to reflect and try to separate in your own thoughts the existence of a perceptible thing from its being perceived—you'll find that you can't.

7. From what I have said it follows that the only *substances* are *spirits*—things that perceive. Another argument for the same conclusion is the following down to the end of the section. The perceptible qualities are colour, shape, motion, smell, taste and so on, and these are ideas perceived by sense. Now it is plainly self-contradictory to suppose that an idea might exist in an unperceiving thing, for *to have an idea* is just the same as *to perceive*: so whatever *has* colour, shape and so on must *perceive* these qualities; from which it clearly follows that there can be no unthinking substance or substratum of those ideas.

8. 'But', you say, 'though the ideas don't exist outside the mind, still there may be things like them of which they are copies or resemblances, and *these* things may exist outside the mind in an unthinking substance.' I answer that *the only thing an idea can resemble is another idea*; a colour or shape can't be like anything but another colour or shape. Attend a little to your own thoughts and you will find that you can't conceive of any likeness except between your ideas. Also: tell me about those supposed originals or external things of which our ideas are the pictures or representations—are *they* perceivable or not? If they are, then they are ideas, and I have won the argument; but if you say they are not, I appeal to anyone whether it makes sense to assert that a colour

is like something that is invisible; that hard or soft is like something intangible; and similarly for the other qualities.

9. Some philosophers distinguish ‘primary qualities’ from ‘secondary’ qualities: they use the former term to stand for extension, shape, motion, rest, solidity and number; by the latter term they denote all other perceptible qualities, such as colours, sounds, tastes, and so on. Our ideas of secondary qualities don’t resemble anything existing outside the mind or unperceived, they admit; but they insist that our ideas of primary qualities are patterns or images of things that exist outside the mind in an unthinking substance that they call ‘matter’. By ‘matter’, therefore, we are to understand an inert, senseless substance in which extension, shape and motion actually exist. But I have already shown that extension, shape, and motion are quite clearly nothing but ideas existing in the mind, and that an idea can’t be like anything but another idea, and that consequently neither they nor things from which they are copied can exist in an unperceiving substance. So the very notion of so-called ‘matter’, or corporeal substance, clearly involves a contradiction.

10. Those who assert that shape, motion and the other primary qualities exist outside the mind in unthinking substances say in the same breath that colours, sounds, heat, cold, and other secondary qualities do not. These, they tell us, are sensations that exist in the mind alone, and depend on the different size, texture, and motion of the minute particles of matter. They offer this as an undoubted truth that they can prove conclusively. Now if it is certain that **(1)** primary qualities are inseparably united with secondary ones, and can’t be abstracted from them even in thought, it clearly follows that **(2)** primary qualities exist only in the mind, just as the secondary ones do. I now defend **(1)**. Look in on yourself, and see whether you can perform a mental

abstraction that enables you to conceive of a body’s being *extended* and *moving* without having any other perceptible qualities. Speaking for myself, I see quite clearly that I can’t form an idea of an extended, moving body unless I also give it some colour or other perceptible quality which is admitted by the philosophers I have been discussing to exist only in the mind. In short, extension, shape and motion, abstracted from all other qualities, are inconceivable. It follows that these primary qualities must be where the secondary ones are—namely in the mind and nowhere else.

11. Here’s a further point about extension and motion. Large and small, and fast and slow, are generally agreed to exist only in the mind. That is because they are entirely relative: whether something is large or small, and whether it moves quickly or slowly, depends on the condition or location of the sense-organs of the perceiver. [See the end of **14** for a little light on the quick/slow part of this point.] So if there is extension outside the mind, it must be neither large nor small, and extra-mental motion must be neither fast nor slow. I conclude that there is no such extension or motion. (If you reply ‘They do exist; they are extension *in general* and motion *in general*’, that will be further evidence of how greatly the doctrine about extended, movable substances existing outside the mind depends on that strange theory of abstract ideas.) . . . So unthinking substances can’t be extended; and that implies that they can’t be solid either, because it makes no sense to suppose that something is solid but not extended.

12. Even if we grant that the other primary qualities exist outside the mind, it must be conceded that *number* is entirely created by the mind. This will be obvious to anyone who notices that the same thing can be assigned different numbers depending on how the mind views it. Thus, the

same distance is •one or •three or •thirty-six, depending on whether the mind considers it in terms of •yards, •feet or •inches. Number is so obviously relative and dependent on men's understanding that I find it surprising that anyone should ever have credited it with an absolute existence outside the mind. We say one book, one page, one line; all these are equally units—that is, each is *one* something—yet the book contains many pages and the page contains many lines. In each case, obviously, what we are saying there is *one* of is a particular combination of ideas arbitrarily put together by the mind, for example, the arbitrary combination of ideas that we choose to call 'a book'.

13. Some philosophers, I realize, hold that *unity* is a simple or uncompounded idea that accompanies every other idea into the mind. I don't find that I have any such idea corresponding to the word 'unity'. I could hardly overlook it if it were there in my mind: it ought to be the most familiar to me of all my ideas, since it is said to accompany all my other ideas and to be perceived by all the ways of sensation and reflection. In short, it is an abstract idea!

14. Here is a further point. Some modern philosophers argue that certain perceptible qualities have no existence in matter or outside the mind; their arguments can be used to prove the same thing of all perceptible qualities whatsoever. They point out for instance that a body that appears cold to one hand seems warm to the other, from which they infer that •heat and cold are only states of the mind and don't resemble anything in the corporeal substances that cause them. If that argument is good, then why can't we re-apply it to prove that •shape and extension don't resemble any fixed and determinate qualities existing in matter, because they appear differently to the same eye in different positions, or eyes in different states in the same position? Again,

they argue that •sweetness isn't really in the thing that is described as 'sweet', because sweetness can be changed into bitterness without there being any alteration in the thing itself—because the person's palate has been affected by a fever or some other harm. Is it not equally reasonable to argue that •motion isn't outside the mind because a thing will appear to move more or less quickly—without any change in the thing itself—depending on whether the succession of ideas in the observer's mind is slow or fast?

15. In short, the arguments that are thought to prove that colours and tastes exist only in the mind have as much force to prove the same thing of extension, shape and motion. Really, though, these arguments *don't* prove that there is no extension or colour in an outward object, but only that our senses don't tell us what an object's true extension or colour is. My own previous arguments do better: they clearly show it to be impossible that any colour or extension or other perceptible quality should exist in an unthinking thing outside the mind, or indeed that there should be any such thing as an object outside the mind.

16. But let us examine the usual opinion a little further. It is said that extension is a quality of matter, and that matter is the substratum that supports it. Please explain to me what is meant by matter's 'supporting' extension. You reply: 'I have no idea of matter; so I can't explain it.' I answer: Even if you have no *positive* meaning for 'matter'—that is, have no idea of what matter is like in itself—you must at least have a *relative* idea of it, so that you know how matter relates to qualities, and what it means to say that it 'supports' them. If you don't even know *that*, you have no meaning at all in what you are saying. Explain 'support', then! Obviously it cannot be meant here in its usual or literal sense, as when we say that pillars support a building: in what sense, then,

are we to understand it?

17. When we attend to what the most carefully precise philosophers say they mean by ‘material substance’, we find them admitting that the only meaning they can give to those sounds is the idea of *being in general*, together with the relative notion of its *supporting qualities*. The general idea of *being* seems to me the most abstract and incomprehensible of all. As for its ‘supporting qualities’: since this cannot be understood in the ordinary sense of those words (as I have just pointed out), it must be taken in some other sense; but we aren’t told what that other sense is. I am sure, therefore, that there is no clear meaning in either of the two parts or strands that are supposed to make up the meaning of the words ‘material substance’. Anyway, why should we trouble ourselves any further in discussing this material substratum or support of shape and motion and other perceptible qualities? ‘Whatever we make of its details—the notions of being in general, and of support—it is clearly being said that shape and motion and the rest exist outside the mind. Isn’t this a direct contradiction, and altogether inconceivable?’

18. Suppose it were possible for solid, figured, movable substances to exist outside the mind, corresponding to the ideas we have of bodies—how could we possibly know that there are any such things? We must know it either by *sense* or by *reason*. Our senses give us knowledge only of our sensations—ideas—things that are immediately perceived by sense—call them what you will! They don’t inform us that outside the mind (that is, unperceived) there exist things that resemble the items that are perceived. The materialists themselves admit this. So if we are to have any knowledge of external things, it must be by reason, *inferring* their existence from what is immediately perceived by sense. But

what reasons can lead us •from the ideas that we perceive •to a belief in the existence of bodies outside the mind? The supporters of matter themselves don’t claim that there is any necessary connection between material things and our ideas. We could have all the ideas that we now have without there being any bodies existing outside us that resemble them; everyone admits this, and what happens in dreams, hallucinations and so on puts it beyond dispute. Evidently, then, we aren’t compelled to suppose that there are external bodies as causes of our ideas. Those ideas are *sometimes*, so they could be *always*, produced without help from bodies yet falling into the patterns that they do in fact exhibit.

19. ‘Even though external bodies aren’t absolutely needed to explain our sensations,’ you might think, ‘the course of our experience is easier to explain on the supposition of external bodies than it is without that supposition. So it is at least *probable* there are bodies that cause our minds to have ideas of them.’ But this is not tenable either. The materialists admit that they cannot understand *how* body can act upon spirit, or *how* it is possible for a body to imprint any idea in a mind; and that is tantamount to admitting that they don’t know how our ideas are produced. So the production of ideas or sensations in our minds can’t be a reason for supposing the existence of matter or corporeal substances, because it admittedly remains a mystery with or without that supposition. So even if it were possible for bodies to exist outside the mind, the belief that they actually do so must be a very shaky one; since it involves supposing, without any reason at all, that God has created countless things that are entirely useless and serve no purpose.

20. In short, if there were external bodies, we couldn’t possibly come to know this; and if there weren’t, we might have the very same reasons to think there were that we

have now. No-one can deny the following to be possible: A thinking being might, without the help of external bodies, be affected with the same series of sensations or ideas that you have, imprinted in the same order and with similar vividness in his mind. If that happened, wouldn't that thinking being have all the reason to believe 'There are corporeal substances that are represented by my ideas and cause them in my mind' that you can possibly have for believing the same thing? Of course he would; and that consideration is enough, all on its own, to make any reasonable person suspect the strength of whatever arguments he may think he has for the existence of bodies outside the mind.

21. If, even after what has been said, more arguments were needed against the existence of matter, I could cite many errors and difficulties (not to mention impieties) that have sprung from that doctrine. It has led to countless controversies and disputes in philosophy, and many even more important ones in religion. But I shan't go into the details of them here, because I think arguments about 'materialism's' bad consequences are unnecessary for confirming what has, I think, been well enough proved *a priori* regarding its intrinsic defects, and the lack of good reasons to support it. [The word 'materialism' doesn't occur in the *Principles*. It is used in this version, in editorial notes and interventions, with the meaning that Berkeley gives it in other works, naming the doctrine that •there is such a thing as mind-independent matter, not the stronger doctrine that •there is nothing but matter.]

22. I am afraid I have given you cause to think me needlessly long-winded in handling this subject. For what is the point of hammering away at something that can be proved in a line or two, convincing anyone who is capable of the least reflection? Look into your own thoughts, and *try* to conceive it possible for a sound or shape or motion or colour to exist

outside the mind, or unperceived. Can you do it? This simple thought-experiment may make you see that what you have been defending is a downright contradiction. I am willing to stake my whole position on this: if you can so much as conceive it *possible* for one extended movable substance—or in general for any one idea or anything like an idea—to exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it, I shall cheerfully give up my opposition to matter; and as for all that great apparatus of external bodies that you argue for, I shall admit its existence, even though you cannot either give me any reason why you believe it exists, or assign any use to it when it is supposed to exist. I repeat: the bare possibility of your being right will count as an argument that you are right.

23. 'But', you say, 'surely there is nothing easier than to imagine trees in a park, for instance, or books on a shelf, with nobody there to perceive them.' I reply that this is indeed easy to imagine; but let us look into what happens when you imagine it. You form in your mind certain ideas that you call 'books' and 'trees', and at the same time you omit to form the idea of anyone who might perceive them. But while you are doing this, *you* perceive or think of them! So your thought-experiment misses the point; it shows only that you have the power of imagining or forming ideas in your mind; but it doesn't show that you can conceive it possible for the objects of your thought to exist outside the mind. To show that, you would have to *conceive* them existing *unconceived* or unthought-of, which is an obvious contradiction. However hard we try to conceive the existence of external bodies, all we achieve is to contemplate our own ideas. The mind is misled into thinking that it can and does conceive bodies existing outside the mind or unthought-of because it *pays no attention to itself*, and so doesn't notice that *it* contains or thinks of the things that it conceives. Think about it a little and you will see that what I am saying is plainly true;

there is really no need for any of the other disproofs of the existence of material substance.

24. It takes very little enquiry into our own thoughts to know for sure whether we can understand what is meant by ‘the absolute existence of perceptible objects outside the mind’. To me it is clear that those words mark out either a direct contradiction or else nothing at all. To convince you of this, I know no easier or fairer way than to urge you to attend calmly to your own thoughts: if that attention reveals to you the emptiness or inconsistency of those words, that is surely all you need to be convinced. So that is what I insist on: the phrase ‘the absolute existence of unthinking things’ has either no meaning or a self-contradictory one. This is what I repeat and teach, and urge you to think about carefully.

25. All our ideas—sensations, things we perceive, call them what you will—are visibly inactive; there is no power or agency in them. One idea or object of thought, therefore, cannot produce or affect another. To be convinced of this we need only to attend to our ideas. They are wholly contained within the mind, so whatever is in them must be perceived. Now, if you attend to your ideas, whether of sense or reflection, you will not *perceive* any power or activity in them; so *there is* no power or activity in them. Think about it a little and you’ll realize that passiveness and inertness are of the essence of an idea, so that an idea can’t *do* anything or be the *cause* (strictly speaking) of anything; nor can it resemble anything that is active, as is evident from **8**. From this it clearly follows that extension, shape and motion can’t be the cause of our sensations. So it must be false to say that our sensations result from powers that things have because of the arrangement, number, motion, and size of the corpuscles in them.

26. We perceive a continual stream of ideas: new ones

appear, others are changed or totally disappear. These ideas must have a cause—something they depend on, something that produces and changes them. It is clear from **25** that this cause cannot be any quality or idea or combination of ideas, because that section shows that ideas are inactive, i.e. have no causal powers; and thus qualities have no powers either, because qualities *are* ideas. So the cause must be a substance, because reality consists of nothing but substances and their qualities. It cannot be a corporeal or material substance, because I have shown that there is no such thing. We must therefore conclude that the cause of ideas is an incorporeal active substance—a spirit.

27. A spirit is an active being. It is simple, in the sense that it doesn’t have parts. When thought of as something that •perceives ideas, it is called ‘the understanding’, and when thought of as •producing ideas or doing things with them, it is called ‘the will’. •But understanding and will are different powers that a spirit has; they aren’t *parts* of it. It follows that *no-one can form an idea of a soul or spirit*. We have seen in **25** that all ideas are passive and inert, and therefore no idea can *represent* an active thing, which is what a spirit is, because no idea can *resemble* an active thing. If you think about it a little, you’ll see clearly that it is absolutely impossible to have an idea that is like an active cause of the change of ideas. The nature of spirit (i.e. that which acts) is such that it cannot itself be perceived; all we can do is to perceive the effects it produces. •To perceive a spirit would be to have an idea of it, that is, an idea that resembles it; and I have shown that no idea can resemble a spirit because ideas are passive and spirits active. If you think I may be wrong about this, you should look in on yourself and try to form the idea of a power or of an active being, that is, a thing that *has* power. To do this, you need to have ideas of two principal powers called ‘will’ and ‘understanding’, these

ideas being distinct from each other and from a third idea of substance or being in general, which is called 'soul' or 'spirit'; and you must also have a relative notion of spirit's supporting or being the subject of those two powers. Some people say that they have all that; but it seems to me that the words 'will' and 'spirit' don't stand for distinct ideas, or indeed for any idea at all, but for something very different from ideas. Because this 'something' is an agent, it cannot resemble or be represented by any *idea* whatsoever. Though it must be admitted that we have some *notion* of soul, spirit, and operations of the mind such as willing, loving and hating, in that we understand the meanings of those words.

28. I find I can arouse ideas in my mind at will, and vary and shift the mental scene whenever I want to. I need only to will, and straight away this or that idea arises in my mind; and by willing again I can obliterate it and bring on another. It is because the mind makes and unmakes ideas in this way that it can properly be called *active*. It certainly *is* active; we know this from experience. But anyone who talks of 'unthinking agents' or of 'arousing ideas without the use of volition' is merely letting himself be led astray by words.

29. Whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, however, I find that the ideas I get through my senses don't depend on my will in the same way. When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it isn't in my power to choose whether or not I shall see anything, or to choose what particular objects I shall see; and the same holds for hearing and the other senses. My will is not responsible for the ideas that come to me through any of my senses. So there must be some other will—some other spirit—that produces them.

30. The ideas of sense are stronger, livelier, and clearer than those of the imagination; and they are also steady, orderly and coherent. Ideas that people bring into their own

minds at will are often random and jumbled, but the ideas of sense aren't like that: they come in a regular series, and are inter-related in admirable ways that show us the wisdom and benevolence of the series' author. The phrase 'the laws of nature' names the set rules or established methods whereby the mind we depend on—that is, God—arouses in us the ideas of sense. We learn what they are by experience, which teaches us that such and such ideas are ordinarily accompanied or followed by such and such others.

31. This gives us a sort of foresight that enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life. Without this we would always be at a loss: we couldn't know how to do anything to bring ourselves pleasure or spare ourselves pain. That food nourishes, sleep refreshes, and fire warms us; that to sow in the spring is the way to get a harvest in the fall, and in general that such and such means are the way to achieve such and such ends—we know all this not by discovering any necessary connection between our ideas but only by observing the settled *laws of nature*. Without them we would be utterly uncertain and confused, and a grown man would have no more idea than a new-born infant does of how to manage himself in the affairs of life.

32. This consistent, uniform working obviously displays the goodness and wisdom of ·God·, the governing spirit whose will constitutes the laws of nature. And yet, far from leading our thoughts *towards* him, it sends them *away from* him· in a wandering search for second causes—that is, for causes that come between God and the effects we want to explain·. For when we perceive that certain ideas of sense are constantly followed by other ideas, and we know that this isn't our doing, we immediately attribute power and agency to the ideas themselves, and make one the cause of another—than which nothing can be more absurd and

unintelligible. Thus, for example, having observed that when we perceive by sight *a certain round luminous figure*, we at the same time perceive by touch *the idea or sensation called heat*, we infer that the sun causes heat. Similarly, when we perceive that *a collision of bodies* is accompanied by *sound*, we are inclined to think the latter an effect of the former.

33. The **(1)** ideas imprinted on the senses by the author of nature are called ‘real things’; and those **(2)** that are caused by the imagination, being less regular, vivid, and constant, are more properly called ‘ideas’ or ‘images’ of things that they copy and represent. But our **(1)** sensations, however vivid and distinct they may be, are nevertheless *ideas*; that is, they exist in the mind, or are perceived by it, as truly as **(2)** the ideas that mind itself makes. The **(1)** ideas of sense are agreed to have more reality in them—i.e. to be more strong, orderly, and coherent—than ideas made by the mind; but this doesn’t show that they exist outside the mind. They are also less dependent on the spirit or thinking substance that perceives them, for they are caused by the will of another and more powerful spirit, namely God; but still they are ideas, and certainly no idea—whether faint or strong—can exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it.

34. Before we move on, I have to spend some time in answering objections that are likely to be made against the principles I have laid down. I shall answer twelve of them, ending in **72**; and further objections will occupy **73–84**. My answer to the first of the twelve will run to the end of **40**. If fast-thinking readers find me too long-winded about this, I hope they will pardon me. My excuse is that people aren’t all equally quick in getting a grasp on topics such as this, and I want to be understood by everyone. **First**, then, this will be objected:

By your principles everything real and substantial in

nature is banished out of the world, and replaced by a chimerical [= ‘unreal or imaginary’] system of ideas. All things that exist do so only in the mind according to you; that is, they are purely notional. Then what becomes of the sun, moon, and stars? What must we think of houses, rivers, mountains, trees, stones—even of our own bodies, for that matter? Are all these mere illusions, creatures of the imagination?

To all this—and any other objections of the same sort—I answer that the principles I have laid down don’t deprive us of any one thing in nature. Whatever we see, feel, hear, or in any way conceive or understand remains as secure as ever, and is as real as ever. There is a real world, and the distinction between realities and chimeras retains its full force. This is evident from **29–30** and **33**, where I have shown what is meant by ‘real things’ in opposition to chimeras or ideas made by us; but by that account real things and chimeras both exist in the mind, and in that sense are alike in being ideas.

35. I don’t argue against the existence of any one thing that we can take in, either by sense or reflection. I don’t in the least question that the things I see with my eyes and touch with my hands do exist, really exist. The only thing whose existence I deny is what philosophers call ‘matter’ or ‘corporeal substance’. And in denying this I do no harm to the rest of mankind—that is, to people other than philosophers—because they will never miss it. The atheist indeed will lose the rhetorical help he gets from an empty name, ‘matter’, which he uses to support his impiety; and the philosophers may find that they have lost a great opportunity for word-spinning and disputation.

36. If you think that this detracts from the existence or reality of things, you are very far from understanding what I have said in the plainest way I could think of. Here it is again, in brief outline. There are spiritual substances, minds, or human souls, which cause •ideas in themselves through acts of the will, doing this as they please; but these ideas are faint, weak, and unsteady as compared with other •ideas that minds perceive by sense. The latter ideas, being impressed on minds according to certain rules or *laws of nature* tell us that they are the effects of a mind that is stronger and wiser than human spirits. The latter are said to have more reality in them than the former: by which is meant that they are more forceful, orderly, and distinct, and that they aren't fictions of the mind that perceives them. In this sense, the sun that I see by day is the real sun, and what I imagine by night is the idea of the former. In the sense I am here giving to 'reality', it is evident that every plant, star, rock, and in general each part of the system of the world, is as much a real thing by my principles as by any others. Whether you mean by 'reality' anything different from what I do, I beg you to look into your own thoughts and see.

37. You will want to object: 'At least it is true that you take away all corporeal substances.' I answer that if the word 'substance' is taken in the ordinary everyday sense—standing for a combination of perceptible qualities such as extension, solidity, weight, etc.—I cannot be accused of taking substance away. But if 'substance' is taken in a philosophic sense—standing for the support of qualities outside the mind—then indeed I agree that I take it away, if one may be said to 'take away' something that never had any existence, not even in the imagination.

38. 'But', you say, 'it sounds weird to say that •we eat and drink ideas, and are clothed with them.' So it does, because

the word 'idea' isn't used in ordinary talk to signify the combinations of perceptible qualities that are called *things*; and any expression that differs from the familiar use of language is bound to seem weird and ridiculous. But this doesn't concern the truth of the proposition, which in other words merely says that •we are fed and clothed with things that we perceive immediately by our senses. The hardness or softness, the colour, taste, warmth, shape and such like qualities, which combine to constitute the various sorts of food and clothing, have been shown to exist only in the mind that perceives them; and this is all I mean by calling them 'ideas'; which word, if it was as ordinarily used as 'thing', would sound no weirder or more ridiculous than 'thing' does in the statement that we eat and drink things and are clothed with them. My concern isn't with the propriety of words but with the truth of my doctrine. So if you will agree with me that what we eat, drink, and clothe ourselves with are immediate objects of sense that cannot exist unperceived or outside the mind, I will readily agree with you that it is more proper—more in line with ordinary speech—to call them 'things' rather than 'ideas'.

39. Why do I employ the word 'idea', rather than following ordinary speech and calling them 'things'? For two reasons: first, because the term 'thing', unlike 'idea', is generally supposed to stand for something existing outside the mind; and secondly, because 'thing' has a broader meaning than 'idea', because it applies to spirits, or thinking things, as well as to ideas. Since the objects of sense •exist only in the mind, and also •are unthinking and inactive which spirits are not, I choose to mark them by the word 'idea', which implies those properties.

40. You may want to say: 'Say what you like, I will still believe my senses, and will never allow any arguments,

however plausible they may be, to prevail over the certainty of my senses.’ Be it so, assert the obvious rightness of the senses as strongly as you please—I shall do the same! What I see, hear, and feel *exists*—i.e. *is perceived by me*—and I don’t doubt this any more than I doubt my own existence. But I don’t see how the testimony of the senses can be brought as proof of the existence of anything that is *not* perceived by sense. I don’t want anyone to become a sceptic, and to disbelieve his senses; on the contrary, I give the senses all the emphasis and assurance imaginable; and there are no principles more opposed to scepticism than those I have laid down, as will be clearly shown later on.

41. Secondly [of the twelve objections mentioned in **34**], it will be objected that there is a great difference between (for instance) real fire and the idea of fire, between actually being burnt and dreaming or imagining oneself to be burnt. The answer to this—and to all the similar objections that may be brought against my position—is evident from what I have already said. At this point I shall add only this: if real fire is very different from the idea of fire, so also is the real pain that comes from it very different from the idea of that pain; but nobody will maintain that real pain could possibly exist in an unperceiving thing, or outside the mind, any more than the idea of it can.

42. Thirdly, it will be objected that we see things actually outside us, at a distance from us; and these things don’t exist in the mind, for it would be absurd to suppose that things that are seen at the distance of several miles are as near to us as our own thoughts. In answer to this I ask you to consider the fact that in dreams we often perceive things as existing at a great distance off, and yet *those* things are acknowledged to exist only in the mind.

43. In order to clear up this matter more thoroughly, let us

think about *how* we perceive distance, and things placed at a distance, by sight. For if we really do see external space, and bodies actually existing in it at various distances from us, that does seem to tell against my thesis that bodies exist nowhere outside the mind. It was thinking about this difficulty that led me to write my *Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, which was published recently. In that work I show that distance or externality is not immediately of itself perceived by sight, nor is it something we grasp or believe in on the basis of lines and angles, or anything that has a necessary connection with it. Rather, it is only *suggested* to our thoughts by certain visible ideas and sensations that go with vision—ideas which in their own nature are in no way similar to or related to either •distance or •things at a distance. By a connection taught us by experience they come to signify and suggest distances and distant things to us, in the same way that the words of a language suggest the ideas they are made to stand for. ·There is nothing intrinsic to the word ‘red’ that makes it the right name for that colour; we merely learn what it names through our experience of general usage. Similarly, there is nothing intrinsic to my present visual idea that makes it an idea of a tree in the middle distance; but ideas like it have been connected with middle-distance things in my experience·. Thus, a man who was born blind, and afterwards made to see, wouldn’t at first sight think the things he saw to be outside his mind or at any distance from him ·because he wouldn’t have had any experience enabling him to make that connection·. See section 41 of the *New Theory*.

44. The ideas of *sight* and of *touch* constitute two species, entirely distinct and different from one another. The former are marks and forward-looking signs of the latter. (Even in my *New Theory* I showed—though this wasn’t its central purpose·—that the items that are perceived only by sight

don't exist outside the mind and don't resemble external things. Throughout that work I supposed that tangible objects—ones that we *feel*—do exist outside the mind. I didn't *need* that common error in order to establish the position I was developing in the book; but I let it stand because it was beside my purpose to examine and refute it in a treatment of *vision*.) Thus, the strict truth of the matter is this: when we see things at a distance from us, the ideas of sight through which we do this don't •suggest or mark out to us things actually existing at a distance, but only •warn us about what ideas of touch will be imprinted in our minds if we act in such and such ways for such and such a length of time. On the basis of what I have already said in the present work, and of **147** and other parts of the *New Theory*, it is evident that visible ideas are the *language* in which the governing spirit on whom we depend—•God—tells us what tangible ideas he is about to imprint on us if we bring about this or that movement of our own bodies. For a fuller treatment of this point, I refer you to the *New Theory* itself.

45. Fourthly, this will be objected:

It follows from your principles that things are at every moment annihilated and created anew. The objects of sense •according to you• exist only when they are perceived; so the trees are in the garden and the chairs in the parlour only as long as there is somebody there to perceive them. When I shut my eyes all the furniture in the room is reduced to nothing, and merely from my opening them it is again created.

In answer to all this, I ask you to look back at **3**, **4**, etc. and then ask yourself whether you mean by 'the actual existence' of an idea anything but *its being perceived*. For my part, after the most carefully precise enquiry I could make, I cannot discover that I mean anything else by those words. I ask you

again—as I did in **25 intro**—to examine your own thoughts, and not to allow yourself to be imposed on by words. If you can conceive it to be possible for either your ideas or things of which they are copies to exist without being perceived, then I throw in my hand; but if you can't, you will admit that it is unreasonable for you to stand up in defence of you know not what, and claim to convict me of absurdity because I don't assent to propositions that at bottom have no meaning in them.

46. It would be as well to think about how far the commonly accepted principles of philosophy are themselves guilty of those alleged absurdities. It is thought to be highly absurd that when I close my eyes all the visible objects around me should be reduced to nothing; but isn't this what philosophers commonly admit when they all agree that light and colours—which are the only immediate objects of sight and only of sight—are mere sensations, and exist only while they are perceived? Again, some may find it quite incredible that things should be coming into existence at every moment; yet this very notion is commonly taught in the schools [= the Aristotelian philosophy departments]. For the schoolmen, though they acknowledge the existence of matter, and say that the whole world is made out of it, nevertheless hold that matter cannot go on existing without God's *conserving* it, which they understand to be his continually *creating* it.

47. Furthermore, a little thought will show us that even if we do admit the existence of matter or corporeal substance, it will still follow *from principles that are now generally accepted*, that no particular bodies of any kind exist while they aren't perceived. For it is evident from **11** and the following sections that the *matter* philosophers stand up for is an incomprehensible *something*, having none of those particular qualities through which the bodies falling under

our senses are distinguished one from another. To make this more plain, bear in mind that *the infinite divisibility of matter* is now accepted by all, or at least by the most approved and considerable philosophers, who have demonstrated it conclusively from principles that are generally accepted. Now consider the following line of thought, starting from the premise of the infinite divisibility of matter.

Each particle of matter contains an infinite number of parts that aren't perceived by sense because they are too small. Why, then, does any particular body seem to be of a finite magnitude, or exhibit only a finite number of parts to our senses? Not because it *has* only finitely many parts, for it contains an infinite number of parts. Rather, it is because our senses aren't acute enough to detect any more. Therefore, in proportion as any of our senses becomes more acute, it will perceive more parts in the object; that is, the object will appear larger, and its shape will be different because parts near its outer edges—ones that before were unperceivable—will appear to give it a boundary whose lines and angles are very different from those perceived by the sense before it became sharper. If the sense in question became infinitely acute, the body would go through various changes of size and shape, and would eventually seem infinite. All this would happen with no alteration in the body, only a sharpening of the sense. Each body, therefore, considered in itself, *is infinitely extended* and consequently *has no shape*.

From this it follows that even if we grant that the existence of matter is utterly certain, it is equally certain—as the materialists are forced by their own principles to admit—that the particular bodies perceived through the senses don't exist outside the mind, nor does anything like them. According

to them, each particle of matter is *infinite and shapeless*, and it is the mind that makes all that variety of bodies that compose the visible world, none of which exists any longer than it is perceived.

48. When you think about it, the objection brought in **45** turns out not to provide reasonable support for any accusation against my views. I do indeed hold that the things we perceive are nothing but ideas that can't exist unperceived, but it doesn't follow that they have no existence except when they are perceived *by us*; for there may be some other spirit that perceives them when we don't. Whenever I say that bodies have no existence outside 'the mind', I refer not to this or that particular mind but to all minds whatsoever. So it doesn't follow from my principles that bodies are annihilated and created every moment, or that they don't exist at all during the intervals between our perception of them.

49. Fifthly, it may be objected that if extension and shape exist only in the mind, it follows that the mind is extended and shaped, because extension is a quality or attribute that is predicated of the subject in which it exists. I answer that those qualities are 'in the mind' only in that they are *perceived by it*—that is, not as qualities or attributes of it but only as ideas that it has. It no more follows that the soul or mind is extended because extension exists only in it than it follows that the mind is red or blue because (as everyone agrees) those colours exist only in it. As to what philosophers say of subject and mode [= 'quality'], that seems very groundless and unintelligible. For instance, in the proposition *A die is hard, extended, and square* they hold that the word 'die' refers to a subject or substance that is distinct from the hardness, extension, and squareness that are predicated of it—a subject *in* which those qualities exist. I cannot make sense of this. To me a die seems to be nothing

over and above the things that are called its 'qualities'. And to say that a die is hard, extended, and square isn't to attribute those qualities to a subject distinct from and supporting them, but only to explain the meaning of the word 'die'.

50. Sixthly, you will object like this:

Many things have been explained in terms of *matter* and *motion*. if you take away these you will destroy the whole corpuscular philosophy [that is, the approach to physics in which the key concepts are those of matter, motion, and physical structure], and undermine those mechanical principles that have been applied with so much success to explain the phenomena. In short, whatever advances have been made in the study of nature by ancient scientists or by modern ones have all built on the supposition that *corporeal substance* or *matter*

really exists.

To this I answer that every single phenomenon that is explained on that supposition could just as well be explained without it, as I could easily show by going through them all one by one. Instead of that, however, I shall do something that takes less time, namely show that the supposition of matter *cannot* explain any phenomenon. To explain *the phenomena* is simply to show why *upon such and such occasions we are affected with such and such ideas*. But how matter should operate on a mind, or produce any idea in it, is something that no philosopher or scientist will claim to explain. So, obviously, there can be no use for the concept of *matter* in natural science. Besides, those who try explain things do it not by *corporeal substance* but by *shape, motion* and other qualities; these are merely ideas and therefore can't cause anything, as I have already shown. See **25**.