

# Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous in opposition to Sceptics and Atheists

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.

First launched: July 2004

Last amended: November 2007

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## The Second Dialogue

**Hylas:** I beg your pardon, Philonous, for not meeting you sooner. All this morning my head was so filled with our recent conversation that I didn't notice the time of the day, or indeed anything else!

**Philonous:** I am glad you were so focussed on it. I hope that if there were any mistakes in your concessions, or fallacies in my reasonings from them, you will now show them to me.

**Hyl:** I assure you, ever since I saw you I have done nothing but search for mistakes and fallacies, and with that in mind I have examined in detail the whole course of yesterday's conversation. But it has all been useless; for the views I was led into in the conversation seemed even clearer and more obvious when I reviewed them today; and the more I think about them the more irresistibly they force my assent to them.

**Phil:** Don't you think that this is a sign that they are genuine, and that they proceed from nature and are in accordance with right reason? Truth and beauty have this in common: they both show to advantage when looked at closely and carefully. The false glitter of error and heavy make-up can't endure being looked at for too long or from too close up!

**Hyl:** I admit there is a great deal in what you say. And I am as convinced as anyone could be of the truth of those strange consequences that you argued for yesterday, so long as I keep in mind the reasonings that lead to them. But when those arguments are out of my thoughts, my mind goes the other way; there seems to be something so satisfactory, natural and intelligible in the modern way of explaining things that I confess that I don't know how to reject it.

**Phil:** I don't know what way you mean.

**Hyl:** I mean the modern way of accounting for our sensations or ideas.

**Phil:** How does it do that?

**Hyl:** It is supposed that the mind resides in some part of the brain, from which the nerves originate, spreading out from there to all parts of the body; that outer objects act in different ways on the sense-organs, starting up certain vibrations in the nerves; that the nerves pass these vibrations along to the brain (where the mind is located); and that the mind is variously affected with ideas according to the various impressions or traces the vibrations make in the brain.

**Phil:** And call you this an explanation of how we are affected with ideas?

**Hyl:** Why not, Philonous? Have you any objection to it?

**Phil:** I need to know first whether I have rightly understood your modern hypothesis. According to it, certain traces in the brain are the causes or occasions of our ideas. [The special meaning of 'occasion' that is at work here will be explained on page 35; it doesn't matter in the mean time.] Tell me, please, do you mean by 'the brain' a sensible thing?

**Hyl:** What else do you think I could possibly mean?

**Phil:** Sensible things are all immediately perceivable; and things that are immediately perceivable are ideas; and these exist only in the mind. This much, if I am not mistaken, you have long since agreed to.

**Hyl:** I don't deny it.

**Phil:** So the brain that you speak of, being a sensible thing, exists only in the mind! I would like to know whether you think it reasonable to suppose that one idea or thing existing in the mind occasions all the other ideas. And if you do think this, how do you account for the origin of that primary idea or 'brain' itself?

**Hyl:** I don't explain the origin of our ideas by the brain which is perceivable to •sense, because it is ·as you say· only a combination of sensible ideas. I am talking about another brain, which I •imagine.

**Phil:** But aren't imagined things just as much in the mind as perceived things are?

**Hyl:** I must admit that they are.

**Phil:** So the difference ·between perceiving and imagining· isn't important. You have been accounting for ideas by certain motions or impressions in the brain, that is, by some alterations in an *idea*—and it doesn't matter whether it is •sensible or •imaginable.

**Hyl:** I begin to suspect my hypothesis.

**Phil:** Apart from spirits, our own ideas are the only things we know or conceive. So when you say that all ideas are occasioned by impressions in the brain, do you conceive this brain or not? If you do, then you talk of ideas imprinted on an idea, causing that same idea, which is absurd. If you don't conceive it, you talk unintelligibly instead of forming a reasonable hypothesis.

**Hyl:** I can now see clearly that it was a mere dream. There is nothing in it.

**Phil:** It's no great loss; for, after all, this way of 'explaining' things (as you called it) could never have satisfied any reasonable man. What connection is there between a •vibration

in the nerves and •sensations of sound or colour in the mind? How could one possibly cause the other?

**Hyl:** But I could never have seen it as being so empty as it now seems to be!

**Phil:** Well, then, are you finally satisfied that no sensible things have a real existence, and that you are in truth a complete sceptic?

**Hyl:** It is too plain to be denied.

**Phil:** Look! aren't the fields covered with a delightful green? Isn't there something in the woods and groves, in the rivers and clear springs, that soothes, delights, *transports* the soul? At the view of the wide and deep ocean, or some huge mountain whose top is lost in the clouds, or of an old gloomy forest, aren't our minds filled with a pleasing horror? Even in rocks and deserts, isn't there an agreeable wildness? It is such a sincere pleasure to see earth's natural beauties! Doesn't she preserve and renew our enjoyment of them by intermittently drawing the veil of over her face, and doesn't she change her dress with the seasons? How aptly the elements are disposed! What variety and usefulness even in the lowest things that nature produces! What delicacy, what beauty, what complexity of organization in the bodies of animals and plants! How finely all things are suited to their particular ends and also to their roles as appropriate parts of the whole! And while they mutually aid and support, don't they also display each other in a better light? Raise now your thoughts from this globe of earth to all those glorious glittering objects that adorn the high arch of heaven. The motion and situation of the planets—aren't they admirably orderly? Have those globes ever been known to *stray* in their repeated journeys through pathless space? Doesn't each of them sweep out the same area between itself and the sun

in any two equal periods of time? So fixed and unchanging are the laws by which the unseen Author of nature runs the universe. How vivid and radiant is the shine of the fixed stars! How magnificent and rich the careless profusion with which they seem to be scattered throughout the whole vault of the sky! Yet the telescope brings into view a new host of stars that escape the naked eye. Here they seem to be nearby and small, but a closer view through a telescope shows them to be immense orbs of light at various distances, sunk deep in the abyss of space. Now you must call imagination to your aid so as to get some imaginative picture of things you can't actually see. Our feeble limited senses can't pick out innumerable worlds (planets) revolving round the central fires (suns), in each of which the energy of an all-perfect mind is displayed in endless forms; so those are things you must simply imagine. But neither sense nor imagination is big enough to take in the boundless extent of the universe with all its glittering furniture. With all the hard work that we give to those two faculties, exerting and straining each of them to its utmost reach, there's always a vast surplus left ungrasped. Yet all the vast bodies that make up this mighty universe, however distant they may be, are by some secret mechanism—some divine power and artifice—linked in a mutual dependence and interconnection with each other, and with *this earth* (which almost slipped out of my thoughts, getting lost in the crowd of worlds!). Isn't the whole system immense, beautiful, more glorious than we can say or think? Then how should we treat those philosophers who want to deprive these noble and delightful scenes of all reality? How should we think of principles implying that all the visible beauty of the creation is a false imaginary glare? To put it bluntly, can you expect this scepticism of yours not to be thought extravagantly absurd by all reasonable people?

**Hyl:** Other men may think as they please, but *you* have nothing to reproach me with. My comfort is that you are as much a sceptic as I am.

**Phil:** There, Hylas, I beg leave to differ from you.

**Hyl:** What? Having along agreed to the premises, are you now denying the conclusion and leaving me to maintain by myself these paradoxes that you led me into? This surely isn't fair.

**Phil:** I deny that I agreed with you in those views that led to scepticism. You indeed said that the reality of sensible things consisted in an absolute existence out of the minds of spirits, or distinct from their being perceived. And under the guidance of this notion of reality you are obliged to deny that sensible things have any real existence; that is, according to your own definition [on page 3] you declare yourself to be a sceptic. But I didn't say and didn't think that the reality of sensible things should be defined in that manner. To me it is evident, for the reasons you agree to, that sensible things can't exist except in a mind or spirit. From this I conclude not that they have no real existence but that—seeing they don't depend on my thought, and have an existence distinct from being perceived by me—there must be some other mind in which they exist. As sure as the sensible world really exists, therefore, so sure is there an infinite, omnipresent Spirit who contains and supports it.

**Hyl:** What? This is no more than I and all Christians hold—and indeed all non-Christians who believe there is a God and that he knows and understands everything.

**Phil:** Yes, but here's the difference. Men commonly believe that all things are known or perceived by God because they believe in the existence of a God, whereas for me the order of reasons is reversed; I immediately and necessarily

conclude •the existence of a God because •all sensible things must be perceived by him.

**Hyl:** As long as we all believe the same thing, what does it matter how we come by that belief?

**Phil:** But we *don't* believe the same thing. Philosophers hold that God perceives all corporeal things, but they attribute to such things an absolute existence independently of their being perceived by any mind whatever; and I don't. Besides, isn't there a difference between saying

There is a God, therefore he perceives all things  
and saying

Sensible things do really exist; if they really exist they must be perceived by an infinite mind; therefore there is an infinite mind, or God?

This provides you with a direct and immediate proof, from a most evident premise, of the existence of a God. Theologians and philosophers had proved beyond all controversy, from the beauty and usefulness of the various parts of the creation, that it was the workmanship of God. But some of us have the advantage that we can prove the existence of an infinite mind from •the bare existence of the sensible world, without getting help from astronomy and natural philosophy and without bringing in facts about •how wonderfully the parts of the world relate to one another. What gives us this advantage is just the simple thought that the sensible world is what we perceive by our various senses, that nothing is perceived by the senses except ideas, and that no idea and no thing of which an idea is a copy can exist otherwise than in a mind. •With that at your disposal• you can now oppose and baffle the most strenuous advocate for atheism, without any laborious search into the sciences, without any sophisticated reasoning, and without tediously long arguments. This single reflection on impossibility that the visible world or

any part of it—even the most low-grade and shapeless part of it—should exist outside a mind is enough to overthrow the whole system of atheism. It destroys those miserable refuges •of the atheist•, the eternal succession of unthinking causes and effects, or the chance coming together of atoms—those wild fantasies of Vanini, Hobbes, and Spinoza. Let any one of those supporters of impiety look into his own thoughts, and see if he can conceive how so much as a rock, a desert, a chaos, or a confused jumble of atoms—how *anything at all*, either sensible or imaginable—can exist independently of a mind; and he need go no further to be convinced of his folly. Can anything be fairer than to let the disagreement be settled by the outcome of such a test, leaving it to the atheist himself to see if he can conceive, even •in thought, the state of affairs that he holds to be true •in fact?

**Hyl:** It is undeniable that there is something highly serviceable to religion in the position you are taking. But don't you think it looks very like the view of some eminent recent philosophers—•notably Malebranche•—that we 'see all things in God'?

**Phil:** I would gladly know about that; please explain it to me.

**Hyl:** They think that because the soul (•or mind•) is immaterial, it can't be united with material things so as to perceive them in themselves, but that it perceives them through its union with the substance of God. Because that is a spiritual substance, it is purely intelligible, that is, capable of being the immediate object of a •human• mind's thought. Furthermore, God's essence contains perfections corresponding to each created thing, and this correspondence enables those perfections to represent created things to the •human• mind.

**Phil:** I don't understand how our ideas, which are entirely passive and inert, can be (or be like) any part of the essence

of God, who is indivisible, never passive, always active. This hypothesis is open to many other obvious objections, but I shall only add that in making a created world exist otherwise than in the mind of a spirit, the hypothesis of Malebranche is liable to all the absurdities of the more usual views. Added to which it has a special absurdity all its own, namely that it makes the material world serve no purpose. If it is valid to argue against other hypotheses in the sciences that they suppose nature or the Divine Wisdom to make something for no purpose, or to employ tedious round-about methods to get a result which could have been achieved much more easily and swiftly, what are we to think of this hypothesis which supposes that the whole world was made for no purpose?

**Hyl:** But don't you also hold that we see all things in God? If I'm not mistaken, your thesis comes near to that.

**Phil:** Few men think, but all insist on having opinions, which is why men's opinions are superficial and confused. It isn't surprising that doctrines which in themselves are ever so different should nevertheless be confused with one another by people who don't think hard about them. So I shan't be surprised if some men imagine that I run into the wild fantasies of Malebranche, though in truth I am very remote from them. He builds on the most abstract general ideas, which I entirely disclaim. He asserts an absolute external world, which I deny. He maintains that we are deceived by our senses, and don't know the real natures or the true forms and shapes of extended things; of all which I hold the direct contrary! So that over-all there are no principles more fundamentally opposite than his and mine. I have to say that I entirely agree with what the Holy Scripture says, that 'in God we live and move and have our being'. But I am far from believing that we 'see things in his essence' in the manner you have presented. Here is my view, in a nutshell:

It is evident that the things I perceive are my own ideas, and that no idea can exist except in a mind. It is equally obvious that these ideas, or things perceived by me—or things of which they are copies—exist independently of my mind, because I know that I am not their author, it being out of my power to choose what particular ideas I shall experience when I open my eyes or ears. So they must exist in some other mind, who wills that they be exhibited to me.

The things I immediately perceive, I repeat, are ideas or sensations, call them what you will. But how can any idea or sensation exist in or be produced by anything other than a mind or spirit? That really is inconceivable; and to assert something that is inconceivable is to talk nonsense, isn't it?

**Hyl:** Without doubt.

**Phil:** On the other side, it is *very* conceivable that ideas or sensations should exist in, and be produced by, a spirit; because this is just what I experience daily in myself, when I perceive countless ideas, and by an act of my will can form a great variety of them, raising them up in my imagination. (Though I have to say that these creatures of my imagination are not as distinct, strong, vivid, and permanent as are the ones I perceive through my senses, which latter are called 'real things'.) From all this I conclude that there is a mind that affects me every moment with all the sensible impressions I perceive. And from the variety, order, and manner of these impressions I conclude that the author of them is wise, powerful, and good, beyond anything I can comprehend. Please get this straight: I do *not* say—as Malebranche does—that I see things by perceiving something that represents them in the intelligible essence of God. I don't even understand that. What I say is this: the things I perceive are known by the understanding, and produced

by the will, of an infinite Spirit. Isn't all this very plain and evident? Is there anything more in it than what a little observation of our own minds and what happens in them not only enables us to conceive but also obliges us to assent to?

**Hyl:** I think I understand you very clearly; and I admit that the proof you give of a Deity is as convincing as it is surprising. But granting that God is the supreme and universal cause of all things, mightn't there be a third kind of thing besides spirits and ideas? May we not admit a subordinate and limited cause of our ideas? In a word, may there not for all that be *matter*?

**Phil:** How often must I teach you the same thing? You agree that the things immediately perceived by sense exist nowhere outside the mind; but everything that is perceived by sense is perceived immediately; therefore there is nothing sensible ·or perceivable· that exists outside the mind. So the *matter* that you still insist on is presumably ·meant to be· something intelligible—something that can be discovered by reason and not by the senses.

**Hyl:** You are in the right.

**Phil:** Pray let me know what reasoning your belief in matter is based on; and what this 'matter' is, in your present sense of the word.

**Hyl:** I find myself affected with various ideas which I know I haven't caused. And they couldn't cause themselves or cause one another, nor could they exist on their own, because they are wholly inactive, transient, dependent beings. So they have some cause other than me and other than themselves; all I claim to know about this is *that it is the cause of my ideas*. And this thing, whatever it is, I call 'matter'.

**Phil:** Tell me, Hylas, is everyone free to change the current proper meaning of a common word in any language? For example, suppose a traveller told you that in a certain country men can 'pass unhurt through the fire'; and when he explained himself you found that he meant by 'fire' what others call 'water'; or suppose he said that there are trees that walk on two legs, meaning *men* by the term 'trees'. Would you think this reasonable?

**Hyl:** No; I should think it very absurd. Common custom is the standard of correctness in language. And deliberately to speak improperly is to pervert the use of speech, and can't achieve anything except to prolong and multiply disputes when there is no real difference of opinion.

**Phil:** And doesn't 'matter', in the common current meaning of the word, signify an extended, solid, movable, unthinking, inactive substance?

**Hyl:** It does.

**Phil:** And hasn't it been made evident that no such substance can possibly exist? And even if it did exist, how can something *inactive* be a *cause*? and how can something *unthinking* be a *cause of thought*? You are free to give the word 'matter' a meaning that is contrary to its ordinary one, and to tell me that you understand by 'matter' an unextended, thinking, active being, which is the cause of our ideas. But this is just playing with words, committing the very fault that you have just now rightly condemned. I don't find fault with your reasoning, in that you infer a cause from the phenomena; but I deny that the cause that reason allows you to infer can properly be called 'matter'.

**Hyl:** There is indeed something in what you say. But I am afraid you don't properly grasp what I mean. I wouldn't want you to take me to be denying that God, or an infinite spirit,

is the supreme cause of all things. All I am arguing is that *subordinate* to the supreme agent or cause there is a cause of a *limited and lower* kind, which concurs in [= 'goes along with'] the production of our ideas, not by the action proper to spirits (namely acts of will) but by the action proper to matter (namely motion).

**Phil:** You keep relapsing into your old exploded notion of a movable (and consequently extended) substance existing outside the mind. What! have you already forgotten what you were convinced of? Do you want me to repeat everything I have said about this? Really, this isn't arguing fairly, still to assume the existence of something that you have so often admitted not to exist. But letting that go, I ask Aren't all your ideas perfectly passive and inert, including no kind of action in them?

**Hyl:** They are.

**Phil:** And are sensible qualities anything else but ideas?

**Hyl:** How often have I agreed that they are not?

**Phil:** But isn't motion a sensible quality?

**Hyl:** It is.

**Phil:** Consequently it is no action.

**Hyl:** I agree with you. And indeed it is obvious that when I move my finger it remains passive; but my will that produced the motion is active.

**Phil:** Now I want to know in the first place •whether, given that motion is not action, you can conceive any action other than volition; in the second place •whether to *say something and conceive nothing* is not to talk nonsense; and lastly, •whether having considered the premises, you don't see that it is highly absurd and unreasonable to suppose that our ideas have any efficient or active cause other than spirit.

**Hyl:** I give up the point entirely. But although matter may not be a *cause*, what blocks it from being an *instrument* subservient to the supreme agent in the production of our ideas?

**Phil:** An instrument, you say. Please tell me about the shape, springs, wheels, and motions of that instrument?

**Hyl:** I don't claim to be able to do that, because both this substance and its qualities are entirely unknown to me.

**Phil:** What? So you think it is made up of unknown parts, and has unknown motions and an unknown shape.

**Hyl:** I don't think it has any shape or motion at all, because you have convinced me that no sensible qualities can exist in an unperceiving substance.

**Phil:** But what notion can we possibly have of an instrument that has no sensible qualities, not even extension?

**Hyl:** I don't claim to have any notion of it.

**Phil:** And what reason do you have to think that this unknown and inconceivable something does exist? Is it that you think God cannot act as well without it, or that you find by experience that some such thing is at work when you form ideas in your own mind?

**Hyl:** You are always nagging me for reasons for what I believe. What reasons do *you* have for *not* believing it?

**Phil:** For me, seeing no reason for believing something is a sufficient reason for not believing it. But, setting aside reasons for believing, you will not so much as let me know *what* it is you want me to believe, since you say you have no sort of notion of it. I beg you to consider whether it is like a philosopher, or even like a man of common sense, to claim to believe you know not what and you know not why.



**Hyl:** Hold on, Philonous! When I tell you that matter is an 'instrument', I don't mean absolutely nothing. Admittedly I don't know what the particular kind of instrument it is; but still I have some notion of *instrument in general*, which I apply to it.

**Phil:** But what if it should turn out that even the most general notion of *instrument*, understood as meaning something distinct from *cause*, contains something that makes the use of an instrument inconsistent with the divine attributes?

**Hyl:** Show me that and I shall give up the point.

**Phil:** I shall now do so. What do you mean by the general nature or notion of instrument?

**Hyl:** The general notion is made up of what is common to all particular instruments.

**Phil:** Don't all instruments have this in common: they are used only in doing things that can't be performed by the mere act of our wills? Thus, for instance, I never use an instrument to move my finger, because it is done by a volition. But I would use an instrument if I wanted to remove part of a rock or tear up a tree by the roots. Do you agree with this? Or can you show any example where an instrument is used in producing an effect which immediately depends on the will of the agent?

**Hyl:** I admit that I can't.

**Phil:** Well, then, how can you suppose that an all-perfect Spirit, on whose will all things absolutely and immediately depend, would need an instrument in his operations, or that he would use one if he didn't need it? Thus, it seems to me, you have to admit that it would be incompatible with the infinite perfection of God for him to use a lifeless inactive

instrument such as *matter* is supposed to be. That is, your own statements oblige you to give up the point.

**Hyl:** No answer to that comes readily to mind.

**Phil:** There is an answer that *should* come to your mind. You should be ready to admit to the truth when it has been fairly proved to you. I shall state the proof again. We beings whose powers are finite are forced to make use of instruments. And the use of an instrument shows that the agent is limited by rules that were prescribed by someone else and not by him, and that he cannot get what he wants except in such-and-such a way and in such-and-such conditions. This seems clearly to imply that the supreme unlimited agent uses no tool or instrument at all. An omnipotent Spirit has only to *will* that something happen and it happens, straight off, without the use of any *means*. When means are employed by inferior agents like you and me, it isn't because of any real causal power that is in them, any necessary fitness to produce the desired effect. Rather, it is to comply with the laws of nature, or those conditions prescribed to us by God, the first cause, who is himself above all limitation or prescription whatsoever.

**Hyl:** I will no longer maintain that matter is an instrument. But don't take me to be giving up on its existence, because, despite everything you have said, it may still be an *occasion*.

**Phil:** How many shapes is your matter to take? How often must it be proved not to exist before you are content to let it go? By all the laws of debate I am entitled to blame you for so frequently changing the meaning of the principal term ('matter'), but I shan't press that point. Instead, I ask you this: having already denied matter to be a *cause*, what do you mean when you affirm that it is an *occasion*? And when you have shown what you mean by 'occasion', then please

show me what reason leads you to believe there is such an occasion of our ideas.

**Hyl:** As to the first point: by ‘occasion’ I mean an inactive, unthinking being, at the presence of which God causes ideas in our minds.

**Phil:** And what may be the nature of that inactive, unthinking being?

**Hyl:** I know nothing of its nature.

**Phil:** Proceed then to the second point, and give me some reason why we should believe in the existence of this inactive, unthinking, unknown thing.

**Hyl:** When we see ideas produced in our minds in an orderly and constant manner, it is natural to think they have some fixed and regular *occasions* at the presence of which they are excited.

**Phil:** You acknowledge then that God alone is the cause of our ideas, and that he causes them in the presence of those occasions.

**Hyl:** That is what I think.

**Phil:** No doubt God *perceives* the things that you say are present to him.

**Hyl:** Certainly; otherwise they couldn’t provide him with occasions of acting.

**Phil:** Without insisting now on your making sense of this hypothesis, or on your answering all the puzzling questions and difficulties that beset it, I merely ask:

•Isn’t the order and regularity found in the series of our ideas—that is, the course of nature—sufficiently explained by the wisdom and power of God?

•Doesn’t it take away from God’s wisdom and power to suppose that any unthinking substance influences or directs him concerning what to do and when to do it?

•Even if I granted you all that you contend for ‘regarding matter as God’s occasion for acting’, would you get the result you want?

•The point of the last question is that it’s hard to see how the external or absolute existence of an unthinking substance, distinct from its being perceived, can be inferred from there being certain things perceived by the mind of God which are to him the occasion of producing ideas in us.

**Hyl:** I am utterly at a loss about what to think. This notion of *occasion* now seems to be just as groundless as the rest.

**Phil:** Don’t you at last see that in all these different senses of ‘matter’ you have only been supposing you know not what, for no reason, and to no purpose?

**Hyl:** I freely admit to having become less fond of my notions, since you have examined them in such precise detail. But still, I think I have some confused •perception that there is such a thing as •matter.

**Phil:** •Either you perceive the existence of matter immediately, or you perceive it mediately. If immediately, please tell me by which of the senses you perceive it. If mediately, let me know what reasoning you employ to infer it from things that you do perceive immediately. So much for the *perception*. •Then for the *matter* itself: I ask whether it is object, substratum, cause, instrument, or occasion? You have already argued for each of these, shifting your notions and making matter appear first in one guise and then in another. And each thing you have offered has been disapproved and rejected *by yourself*. If you have anything new to advance, I would gladly hear it.

**Hyl:** I think I have already offered all I had to say on those topics. I am at a loss what more to urge.

**Phil:** And yet you're reluctant to part with your old prejudice. But to make it easier for you to drop it, I ask you to consider—as well as all my other points—the question of •how you could possibly be affected by matter if it *did* exist. And the question of •whether it would make any difference to the ideas you experience—and thus make any difference to your reasons to believe in its existence—if matter didn't exist?

**Hyl:** I agree that •it is possible we might perceive all things just as we do now without there being any matter in the world; and •in answer to your first question•, •I can't conceive how matter—if there is such a thing—could produce any idea in our minds. And I also admit that you have entirely satisfied me that it is impossible for there to be such a thing as *matter* in any of the previous senses of the term. But still I can't help supposing that there is matter in some sense or other. I don't claim to settle what sense that is.

**Phil:** I don't demand that you define *exactly* the nature of that unknown being. Just tell me whether it is a substance; and if it is, whether you can suppose a substance without qualities; and if on the other hand you suppose it to have qualities, please tell me what those qualities are, •or• at least what it means to say that matter 'supports' them.

**Hyl:** We have already argued on those points. I have no more to say about them. But to head off any further questions, let me tell you that I now understand by 'matter' neither substance nor accident, thinking nor extended being, neither cause, instrument, nor occasion, but something entirely unknown, different from all those.

**Phil:** It seems then that you include in your present notion

of matter nothing but the general abstract of idea of *entity* •or *thing*•.

**Hyl:** Nothing else, except that I add to this general idea •of *thing*• the negation of all those particular things, qualities, or ideas that I perceive, imagine, or in any way apprehend.

**Phil:** Where, please, do you suppose that this unknown matter exists?

**Hyl:** Oh Philonous! now you think you have entangled me; for if I say it exists in some place, you will infer that it exists in the mind, since we agree that place or extension exists only in the mind; but I am not ashamed to admit my ignorance. I don't know where it exists; but I am sure it doesn't exist in a place. There is a negative answer for you; and such answers are all you can expect to get for all your remaining questions about matter.

**Phil:** Since you won't tell me where it exists, please inform me about *how* you suppose it to exist, or what you mean by saying that it 'exists'.

**Hyl:** It neither thinks nor acts, neither perceives nor is perceived.

**Phil:** But what *positive* content is there in your abstracted notion of its existence?

**Hyl:** When I look into it carefully I don't find that I have any positive notion or meaning at all. I tell you again: I am not ashamed to admit my ignorance. I don't know what is meant by its 'existence', or how it exists.

**Phil:** Keep up this frankness, good Hylas, and tell me sincerely whether you can form a distinct idea of *entity* in general, abstracting from and excluding all thinking and corporeal beings, all particular things whatsoever.

**Hyl:** Hold on, let me think a little—I confess, Philonous, I don't find that I can. At first glance I thought I had some dilute and airy notion of pure entity in abstract; but when I focussed on it, it vanished. The more I think about it, the more am I confirmed in my wise decision to give only negative answers ·to your questions· and not to claim the slightest positive knowledge or conception of matter, its *where*, its *how*, its *entity*, or anything about it.

**Phil:** So when you speak of the 'existence of matter', you have no notion in your mind.

**Hyl:** None at all.

**Phil:** Here is where I think we have got to; please tell me if I am wrong. You attributed existence outside the mind first to

- the immediate objects ·of our perceptions· (this came from your belief in material substance); then to
- their archetypes—the things of which they are copies·; then to
- their causes; then to
- instruments; then to
- occasions; and lastly to
- something in general, which on examination turns out to be nothing.

So matter comes to nothing. What do you think, Hylas? Isn't this a fair summary of your whole proceeding?

**Hyl:** Be that as it may, yet I still insist that our not being able to conceive a thing is no argument against its existence.

**Phil:** I freely grant that the existence of a thing that is not immediately perceived may reasonably be inferred from a cause, effect, operation, sign, or other circumstance; and that it would be absurd for any man to argue against the existence of that thing, from his having no direct and positive notion of it. But where •there is nothing of all this; where

- neither reason nor revelation induces us to believe in the existence of a thing,
- we don't have even a relative notion of it,
- what is offered is so abstract that it rises above the distinction between perceiving and being perceived (between spirit and idea), and lastly
- not even the most inadequate or faint idea ·of it· is claimed to exist—

where all this is the case, I shan't indeed draw any conclusion against the reality of any notion or against the existence of anything; but I shall infer that you mean nothing at all, that you are using words to no purpose, without any design or meaning whatsoever. And I leave it to you to consider how ·such· mere jargon should be treated.

**Hyl:** To be frank, Philonous, your arguments seem in themselves unanswerable, but their effect on me has not been enough to produce that total conviction, that whole-hearted agreement, that comes with demonstration [= 'rigorous knock-down proof']. I find myself still relapsing into an obscure surmise of something-or-other that I call 'matter'.

**Phil:** But don't you realize, Hylas, that two things must co-operate to take away all doubts and produce a complete mental assent? However clear the light is in which a visible object is set, it won't be distinctly seen if there is any imperfection in the vision or if the eye is not directed towards it. And however solid and clearly presented a demonstration is, yet if there is also prejudice or wrong bias in the understanding, can it be expected all at once to see the truth clearly and adhere to it firmly? No! For that to happen, time and effort are needed; the attention must be awakened and held by frequent repetition of the same thing—often in the same light, often in different lights. I have said it already, and find I must still repeat it to get you to accept it: when

you claim to accept you don't know what, for you don't know what reason, and for you don't know what purpose, you are taking extraordinary liberties. Can this be paralleled in any art or science, any sect or profession of men? Or is there anything so shamelessly groundless and unreasonable to be met with even in the lowest of common conversation? But you persist in saying 'Matter may exist', without knowing what you mean by 'matter' or what you mean by saying that it 'exists'. What makes this especially surprising is the fact that it's something you have just *decided* to say; you aren't led to it by any reasons at all; for I challenge you to show me something in nature that needs matter to explain or account for it.

**Hyl:** The reality of things can't be maintained without supposing the existence of matter. Don't you think this is a good reason why I should be earnest in its defence?

**Phil:** The reality of things! What things, sensible or intelligible?

**Hyl:** Sensible things.

**Phil:** My glove, for example?

**Hyl:** That or any other thing perceived by the senses.

**Phil:** Let us fix on one particular thing. Isn't it a sufficient evidence to me of the existence of this glove that I see it and feel it and wear it? And if it isn't, how *could* I be assured of the reality of this thing, which I actually see in this place, by supposing that some unknown thing which I never did or can see exists in an unknown manner, in an unknown place, or in no place at all? How can the supposed reality of something intangible be a proof that anything tangible really exists? Or of something invisible that any visible thing really exists? Put generally: how can the supposed reality of something imperceptible be a proof of the existence of a

perceptible thing? Explain this and I shall think that nothing is too hard for you!

**Hyl:** Over-all I am content to admit that the existence of matter is highly improbable; but I don't see that it is directly and absolutely impossible.

**Phil:** Even if matter is granted to be possible, *that* doesn't give it a claim to existence, any more than a golden mountain or a centaur, which are also possible.

**Hyl:** I admit that; but still you don't deny that it is possible; and something that is possible may, for all you know, actually exist.

**Phil:** I *do* deny it to be possible; and I think I have proved that it isn't, from premises that you have conceded. In the ordinary sense of the word 'matter', is anything more implied than an extended, solid, shaped, movable substance, existing outside the mind? And haven't you admitted over and over that you've seen evident reason for denying the possibility of such a substance?

**Hyl:** True, but that is only one sense of the term 'matter'.

**Phil:** But isn't it the only proper, genuine, commonly accepted sense? And if matter in such a sense is proved impossible, may it not be thought with good grounds to be absolutely impossible? Otherwise how could *anything* be proved impossible? Indeed, how could there be any proof at all, of anything, to a man who feels free to unsettle and change the common meanings of words?

**Hyl:** I thought philosophers might be allowed to speak more accurately than common people do, and were not always confined to the common meaning of a term.

**Phil:** But the meaning I have stated is the common accepted sense *among philosophers*. Anyway, setting that point aside,

haven't I let you take 'matter' in whatever sense you pleased? And haven't you used this privilege to the utmost extent, sometimes entirely changing the meaning, at others leaving out or putting into the definition of 'matter' whatever at that moment best served your purposes, contrary to all the known rules of reason and logic? And hasn't this shifting, unfair method of yours spun out our dispute to an unnecessary length, matter having been scrutinised in each particular one of those senses and, by your own admission, refuted in each of them? And can any more be required to •prove the absolute impossibility of a thing than •to prove it to be impossible in every particular sense that you or anyone else understands it in?

**Hyl:** I am not so thoroughly satisfied that you have proved the impossibility of matter in the last most obscure, abstracted and indefinite sense.

**Phil:** When is a thing shown to be impossible?

**Hyl:** When an inconsistency is demonstrated between the ideas contained in its definition.

**Phil:** But where there are no ideas, no contradiction between ideas can be demonstrated.

**Hyl:** I agree with you.

**Phil:** Now, consider the sense of the word 'matter' that you have just called obscure and indefinite: by your own admission it is obvious that this includes no idea at all, no sense—except an unknown sense, which is the same thing as none. So you can't expect me to prove an inconsistency between ideas where there are no ideas, or to prove the impossibility of 'matter' taken in an unknown sense, that is, in no sense at all. I aimed only to show that you meant nothing; and I got you to admit that. So that in all your various senses you have been shown to mean nothing at all, or if something then an absurdity. If this isn't sufficient to prove the impossibility of a thing, I wish you would tell me what *is*.

**Hyl:** I admit that you have proved that matter is impossible; nor do I see what else can be said in defence of it. But when I give up matter I come to suspect all my other notions. For surely none could be more seemingly evident than this once was; yet it now seems as false and absurd as it previously seemed true. But I think we have discussed the point enough for the present. I would like to spend the rest of today running over in my thoughts the various parts of this morning's conversation, and I'll be glad to meet you again here tomorrow at about the same time.

**Phil:** I'll be here.