

Reality Consists of Ideas

by George Berkeley

An excerpt from *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710)

1. It is evident to any one who takes a survey of the *objects of human knowledge*, that they are either *ideas* actually imprinted on the senses; or else such as are perceived by attending to the passions and operations of the mind; or lastly, *ideas* formed by help of memory and imagination -- either compounding, dividing, or barely representing those originally perceived in the aforesaid ways. By sight I have the ideas of light and colours, with their several degrees and variations. By touch I perceive hard and soft, heat and cold, motion and resistance, and of all these more and less either as to quantity or degree. Smelling furnishes me with odours; the palate with tastes; and hearing conveys sounds to the mind in all their variety of tone and composition.

And as several of these are observed to accompany each other, they come to be marked by one name, and so to be reputed as one *thing*. Thus, for example a certain colour, taste, smell, figure and consistency having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing, signified by the name apple. Other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and the like sensible things -- which as they are pleasing or disagreeable excite the passions of love, hatred, joy, grief, and so forth. . . .

2. But, besides all that endless variety of ideas or objects of knowledge, there is likewise something which knows or perceives them, and exercises divers operations, as willing, imagining, remembering, about them. This perceiving, active being is what I call *mind, spirit, soul, or myself*. By which words I do not denote any one of my ideas, but a thing entirely distinct from them, wherein they exist, or, which is the same thing, whereby they are perceived--for the existence of an idea consists in being perceived.

3. That neither our thoughts, nor passions, nor ideas formed by the imagination, exist without the mind, is what everybody will allow. And it seems no less evident that the various sensations or ideas imprinted on the sense, however blended or combined together (that is, whatever objects they compose), cannot exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving them. I think an intuitive knowledge may be obtained of this by any one that shall attend to what is meant by the term *exist*, when applied to sensible things. The table I write on I say exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed -- meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it, or that some other spirit actually does perceive it. There was an odour, that is, it was smelt; there was a sound, that is, it was heard; a colour or figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch. This is all that I can understand by these and the like expressions. For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.

4. It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects, have an existence, natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the

36 understanding. But, with how great an assurance and acquiescence soever this principle may be enter-
37 tained in the world, yet whoever shall find in his heart to call it in question may, if I mistake not, perce-
38 ive it to involve a manifest contradiction. For, what are the fore-mentioned objects but the things we
39 perceive by sense? and what do we perceive besides our own ideas or sensations? and is it not plainly
40 repugnant that any one of these, or any combination of them, should exist unperceived?

41 5. If we thoroughly examine this tenet it will, perhaps, be found at bottom to depend on the doctrine
42 of *abstract ideas*. For can there be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sens-
43 ible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived? Light and colours,
44 heat and cold, extension and figures -- in a word the things we see and feel -- what are they but so many
45 sensations, notions, ideas, or impressions on the sense? and is it possible to separate, even in thought,
46 any of these from perception? For my part, I might as easily divide a thing from itself. I may, indeed, di-
47 vide in my thoughts, or conceive apart from each other, those things which, perhaps I never perceived
48 by sense so divided. Thus, I imagine the trunk of a human body without the limbs, or conceive the smell
49 of a rose without thinking on the rose itself. So far, I will not deny, I can abstract -- if that may properly
50 be called *abstraction* which extends only to the conceiving separately such objects as it is possible may
51 really exist or be actually perceived asunder. But my conceiving or imagining power does not extend
52 beyond the possibility of real existence or perception. Hence, as it is impossible for me to see or feel an-
53 ything without an actual sensation of that thing, so is it impossible for me to conceive in my thoughts
54 any sensible thing or object distinct from the sensation or perception of it. [In truth the object and the
55 sensation are the same thing, and cannot therefore be abstracted from each other.]

56 6. Some truths there are so near and obvious to the mind that a man need only open his eyes to see
57 them. Such I take this important one to be, viz., that all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in
58 a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence with-
59 out a mind, that their *being* is to be perceived or known; that consequently so long as they are not ac-
60 tually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either
61 have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some Eternal Spirit -- it being perfectly unintelligi-
62 ble, and involving all the absurdity of abstraction, to attribute to any single part of them an existence
63 independent of a spirit. [To be convinced of which, the reader need only reflect, and try to separate in
64 his own thoughts the being of a sensible thing from its *being perceived*.]

65 7. From what has been said it follows there is not any other Substance than *Spirit*, or that which perce-
66 ives. But, for the fuller proof of this point, let it be considered the sensible qualities are colour, figure,
67 motion, smell, taste, etc., i.e. the ideas perceived by sense. Now, for an idea to exist in an unperceiving
68 thing is a manifest contradiction, for to have an idea is all one as to perceive; that therefore wherein
69 colour, figure, and the like qualities exist must perceive them; hence it is clear there can be no unthink-
70 ing substance or *substratum* of those ideas.

71 8. But, say you, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like
72 them, whereof they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind in an unthinking
73 substance. I answer, an idea can be like nothing but an idea; a colour or figure can be like nothing but

74 another colour or figure. If we look but never so little into our thoughts, we shall find it impossible for us
75 to conceive a likeness except only between our ideas. Again, I ask whether those supposed originals or
76 external things, of which our ideas are the pictures or representations, be themselves perceivable or no?
77 If they are, then they are ideas and we have gained our point; but if you say they are not, I appeal to any
78 one whether it be sense to assert a colour is like something which is invisible; hard or soft, like some-
79 thing which is intangible; and so of the rest.

80 9. Some there are who make a distinction betwixt *primary* and *secondary* qualities. By the former they
81 mean extension, figure, motion, rest, solidity or impenetrability, and number; by the latter they denote
82 all other sensible qualities, as colours, sounds, tastes, and so forth. The ideas we have of these they ac-
83 knowledge not to be the resemblances of anything existing without the mind, or unperceived, but they
84 will have our ideas of the primary qualities to be patterns or images of things which exist without the
85 mind, in an unthinking substance which they call Matter. By Matter, therefore, we are to understand an
86 inert, senseless substance, in which extension, figure, and motion do actually subsist. But it is evident
87 from what we have already shown, that extension, figure, and motion are only ideas existing in the
88 mind, and that an idea can be like nothing but another idea, and that consequently neither they nor
89 their archetypes can exist in an unperceiving substance. Hence, it is plain that that the very notion of
90 what is called Matter or *corporeal substance*, involves a contradiction in it.

91 25. All our ideas, sensations, notions, or the things which we perceive, by whatsoever names they may
92 be distinguished, are visibly inactive -- there is nothing of power or agency included in them. So that one
93 idea or object of thought cannot produce or make any alteration in another. To be satisfied of the truth
94 of this, there is nothing else requisite but a bare observation of our ideas. For, since they and every part
95 of them exist only in the mind, it follows that there is nothing in them but what is perceived: but whoev-
96 er shall attend to his ideas, whether of sense or reflexion, will not perceive in them any power or activi-
97 ty; there is, therefore, no such thing contained in them. A little attention will discover to us that the very
98 being of an idea implies passiveness and inertness in it, insomuch that it is impossible for an idea to do
99 anything, or, strictly speaking, to be the cause of anything: neither can it be the resemblance or pattern
100 of any active being, as is evident from sect. 8. Whence it plainly follows that extension, figure, and mo-
101 tion cannot be the cause of our sensations. To say, therefore, that these are the effects of powers result-
102 ing from the configuration, number, motion, and size of corpuscles, must certainly be false.

103 26. We perceive a continual succession of ideas, some are anew excited, others are changed or totally
104 disappear. There is therefore some cause of these ideas, whereon they depend, and which produces and
105 changes them. That this cause cannot be any quality or idea or combination of ideas, is clear from the
106 preceding section. I must therefore be a substance; but it has been shown that there is no corporeal or
107 material substance: it remains therefore that the cause of ideas is an incorporeal active substance or
108 Spirit.

109 27. A Spirit is one simple, undivided, active being -- as it perceives ideas it is called the *understanding*,
110 and as it produces or otherwise operates about them it is called the *will*. Hence there can be no idea
111 formed of a soul or spirit; for all ideas whatever, being passive and inert (vide sect. 25), they cannot

112 represent unto us, by way of image or likeness, that which acts. A little attention will make it plain to any
113 one, that to have an idea which shall be like that active principle of motion and change of ideas is abso-
114 lutely impossible. Such is the nature of *spirit*, or that which acts, that it cannot be of itself perceived, but
115 only by the effects which it produceth. If any man shall doubt of the truth of what is here delivered, let
116 him but reflect and try if he can frame the idea of any power or active being, and whether he has ideas
117 of two principal powers, marked by the names *will* and *understanding*, distinct from each other as well as
118 from a third idea of Substance or Being in general, with a relative notion of its supporting or being the
119 subject of the aforesaid powers -- which is signified by the name *soul* or *spirit*. This is what some hold;
120 but, so far as I can see, the words *will* [*Understanding, mind,*] *soul, spirit*, do not stand for different ideas,
121 or, in truth, for any idea at all, but for something which is very different from ideas, and which, being an
122 agent, cannot be like unto, or represented by, any idea whatsoever. [Though it must be owned at the
123 same time that we have some *notion* of soul, spirit, and the operations of the mind: such as willing, lov-
124 ing, hating -- inasmuch as we know or understand the meaning of these words.]

125 28. I find I can excite ideas in my mind at pleasure, and vary and shift the scene as oft as I think fit. It is
126 no more than willing, and straightway this or that idea arises in my fancy; and by the same power it is
127 obliterated and makes way for another. This making and unmaking of ideas doth very properly denomi-
128 nate the mind active. Thus much is certain and grounded on experience; but when we think of unthink-
129 ing agents or of exciting ideas exclusive of volition, we only amuse ourselves with words.

130 29. But, whatever power I may have over my own thoughts, I find the ideas actually perceived by Sense
131 have not a like dependence on my will. When in broad daylight I open my eyes, it is not in my power to
132 choose whether I shall see or no, or to determine what particular objects shall present themselves to my
133 view; and so likewise as to the hearing and other senses; the ideas imprinted on them are not creatures
134 of my will. There is therefore some *other* Will or Spirit that produces them.

135 30. The ideas of Sense are more strong, lively, and distinct than those of the imagination; they have
136 likewise a steadiness, order, and coherence, and are not excited at random, as those which are the ef-
137 fects of human wills often are, but in a regular train or series, the admirable connexion whereof suffi-
138 ciently testifies the wisdom and benevolence of its Author. Now the set rules or established methods
139 wherein the Mind we depend on excites in us the ideas of sense, are called the *laws of nature*; and these
140 we learn by experience, which teaches us that such and such ideas are attended with such and such
141 other ideas, in the ordinary course of things.

142 31. This gives us a sort of foresight which enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life. And
143 without this we should be eternally at a loss; we could not know how to act anything that might procure
144 us the least pleasure, or remove the least pain of sense. That food nourishes, sleep refreshes, and fire
145 warms us; that to sow in the seed-time is the way to reap in the harvest; and in general that to obtain
146 such or such ends, such or such means are conducive -- all this we know, not by discovering any neces-
147 sary connexion between our ideas, but only by the observation of the settled laws of nature, without
148 which we should be all in uncertainty and confusion, and a grown man no more know how to manage
149 himself in the affairs of life than an infant just born.

150 32. And yet this consistent uniform working, which so evidently displays the goodness and wisdom of
151 that Governing Spirit whose Will constitutes the laws of nature, is so far from leading our thoughts to
152 Him, that it rather sends them a wandering after second causes. For, when we perceive certain ideas of
153 Sense constantly followed by other ideas and we know this is not of our own doing, we forthwith
154 attribute power and agency to the ideas themselves, and make one the cause of another, than which
155 nothing can be more absurd and unintelligible. Thus, for example, having observed that when we perce-
156 ive by sight a certain round luminous figure we at the same time perceive by touch the idea or sensation
157 called heat, we do from thence conclude the sun to be the cause of heat. And in like manner perceiving
158 the motion and collision of bodies to be attended with sound, we are inclined to think the latter the ef-
159 fect of the former.

160 33. The ideas imprinted on the Senses by the Author of nature are called *real things*; and those excited
161 in the imagination being less regular, vivid, and constant, are more properly termed *ideas*, or *images of*
162 *things*, which they copy and represent. But then our sensations, be they never so vivid and distinct, are
163 nevertheless ideas, that is, they exist in the mind, or are perceived by it, as truly as the ideas of its own
164 framing. The ideas of Sense are allowed to have more reality in them, that is, to be more strong, orderly,
165 and coherent than the creatures of the mind; but this is no argument that they exist without the mind.
166 They are also less dependent on the spirit, or thinking substance which perceives them, in that they are
167 excited by the will of another and more powerful spirit; yet still they are *ideas*, and certainly no idea
168 whether faint or strong, can exist otherwise than in a mind perceiving it.