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

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

6. Some truths there are so near and obvious to the mind that a man need only open his eyes to see them. Such I take this important one to be, viz., that all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth, in a word all those bodies which compose the mighty frame of the world, have not any subsistence without a mind, that their being is to be perceived or known; that consequently so long as they are not actually perceived by me, or do not exist in my mind or that of any other created spirit, they must either have no existence at all, or else subsist in the mind of some Eternal Spirit -- it being perfectly unintelligible, and involving all the absurdity of abstraction, to attribute to any single part of them an existence independent of a spirit. [To be convinced of which, the reader need only reflect, and try to separate in his own thoughts the being of a sensible thing from its being perceived.]

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

8. But, say you, though the ideas themselves do not exist without the mind, yet there may be things like them, whereof they are copies or resemblances, which things exist without the mind in an unthinking substance. I answer, an idea can be like nothing but an idea; a colour or figure can be like nothing but
another colour or figure. If we look but never so little into our thoughts, we shall find it impossible for us
to conceive a likeness except only between our ideas. Again, I ask whether those supposed originals or
external things, of which our ideas are the pictures or representations, be themselves perceivable or no?
If they are, then they are ideas and we have gained our point; but if you say they are not, I appeal to any
one whether it be sense to assert a colour is like something which is invisible; hard or soft, like some-
thing which is intangible; and so of the rest.

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

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

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

27. A Spirit is one simple, undivided, active being -- as it perceives ideas it is called the understanding,
and as it produces or otherwise operates about them it is called the will. Hence there can be no idea
formed of a soul or spirit; for all ideas whatever, being passive and inert (vide sect. 25), they cannot
represent unto us, by way of image or likeness, that which acts. A little attention will make it plain to any
one, that to have an idea which shall be like that active principle of motion and change of ideas is abso-
lutely impossible. Such is the nature of spirit, or that which acts, that it cannot be of itself perceived, but
only by the effects which it produceth. If any man shall doubt of the truth of what is here delivered, let
him but reflect and try if he can frame the idea of any power or active being, and whether he has ideas
of two principal powers, marked by the names will and understanding, distinct from each other as well as
from a third idea of Substance or Being in general, with a relative notion of its supporting or being the
subject of the aforesaid powers -- which is signified by the name soul or spirit. This is what some hold;
but, so far as I can see, the words will[Understanding, mind,] soul, spirit do not stand for different ideas,
or, in truth, for any idea at all, but for something which is very different from ideas, and which, being an
agent, cannot be like unto, or represented by, any idea whatsoever. [Though it must be owned at the
same time that we have somenotion of soul, spirit, and the operations of the mind: such as willing, lov-
ing, hating -- inasmuch as we know or understand the meaning of these words.]

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
no more than willing, and straightway this or that idea arises in my fancy; and by the same power it is
obliterated and makes way for another. This making and unmaking of ideas doth very properly denomi-
nate the mind active. Thus much is certain and grounded on experience; but when we think of unthin-
k ing agents or of exciting ideas exclusive of volition, we only amuse ourselves with words.

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

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

31. This gives us a sort of foresight which enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life. And
without this we should be eternally at a loss; we could not know how to act anything that might procure
us the least pleasure, or remove the least pain of sense. That food nourishes, sleep refreshes, and fire
warms us; that to sow in the seed-time is the way to reap in the harvest; and in general that to obtain
such or such ends, such or such means are conducive -- all this we know, not by discovering any neces-
sary connexion between our ideas, but only by the observation of the settled laws of nature, without
which we should be all in uncertainty and confusion, and a grown man no more know how to manage
himself in the affairs of life than an infant just born.
32. And yet this consistent uniform working, which so evidently displays the goodness and wisdom of that Governing Spirit whose Will constitutes the laws of nature, is so far from leading our thoughts to Him, that it rather sends them a wandering after second causes. For, when we perceive certain ideas of Sense constantly followed by other ideas and we know this is not of our own doing, we forthwith 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 do from thence conclude the sun to be the cause of heat. And in like manner perceiving the motion and collision of bodies to be attended with sound, we are inclined to think the latter the effect of the former.

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