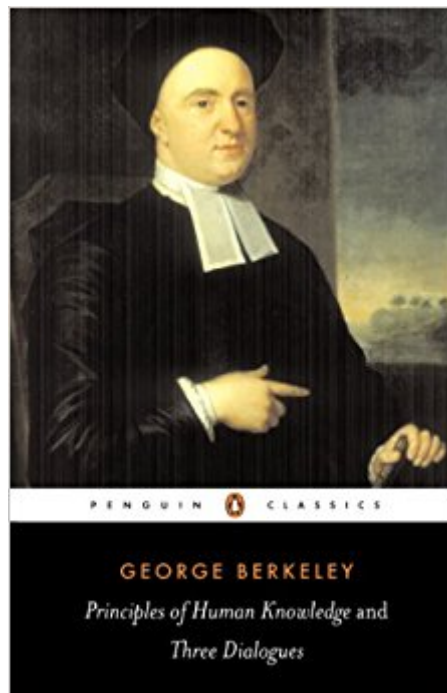




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# Principles Of Human Knowledge And Three Dialogues Between Hylas And Philonous (Penguin Classics)



## Synopsis

Whether viewed as extreme skepticism or enlightened common sense, the writings of Berkeley are a major influence on modern philosophy. Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753) was one of the great British empirical philosophers. He believed that the existence of material objects depends on their being perceived and *The Principles of Human Knowledge* sets out this denial of non-mental material reality. At first his views were unfavorably received by the London intelligentsia, and the entertaining *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* are a clarification of the Realist argument and a response to accusations of atheism and skepticism. In the nineteenth century John Stuart Mill wrote that he considered Berkeley's work to be of "greatest philosophic genius," and it is true to say that its Immaterialism has influenced many recent philosophers.

## Book Information

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"There is something beautiful about the design of this series: their portability, even their tendency to become dog-eared. And this is a welcome reprint, sensitively edited." --Nicholas Lezard, *The Guardian* 22/07/1996 "the editions deserve great credit for the enthusiasm of their approach ... The introductions by eminent scholars put the thoughts of the author and the history of the time into clear perspective. Oxford should be given credit for making the classics accessible for all rather than just cribnotes for students." --Jonathan Copeland, *Lincolnshire Echo* 03/09/1996 --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Bishop Berkeley (1685-1753) was one of the greatest British philosophers. Roger Woolhouse is a Professor in the Philosophy Department at York University. He has written extensively about philosophy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries - mainly focusing on metaphysics and the philosophy of science. He is currently working on Leibniz and on Spinoza.

This is a good foundation book for anyone who is a Non Dual seeker.

Quantum physicists are starting to discover that Bishop Berkeley's radical idealism was essentially correct. Well, in the sense that matter is the ultimate occult substratum at least.

I may have paid too much for a used book but it is in good condition; and how often will I be able to find a copy of a lesser-known 18th century philosopher's work?

George Berkeley's early 18th century treatise "Of the Principles of Human Knowledge" was written in response to the current popular philosophical leanings of Locke, Descartes, Hobbes, Malebranche, and others. Berkeley's major problem with the philosophy of his age was in its materialist leanings. Berkeley at base had issues with the indefinite nature of philosophical terminology, and the ways in which the foundations of knowledge seemed to be centered on unknowable concepts like 'abstract truths,' 'matter,' and 'absolute' entities. The solution? Berkeley reasons that philosophy has gotten away from common sense, and that the way to make philosophy and natural science more accessible is to use the vocabulary and understanding of the 'vulgar' masses. Berkeley's philosophy is called Immaterialism. He holds that the only things that can properly be said to exist are 'ideas' and 'spirits.' Ideas are all objects perceived by our five senses or by logic and inference from those objects. Spirits are our minds or souls, those things that perceive, think, and exercise will. He says that all other philosophical terminology only tends to confuse us. We cannot doubt the real existence of anything in the world, because we see, feel, hear, touch, and taste these things every day. What we can doubt are philosophical quandaries like abstract ideas - for existence, while we can think of a particular person in motion, we can neither conceive of a person in abstract nor of motion in general. This, Berkeley contends, is all that common sense gives to the plainest of people. Ordinary people do not doubt the existence of trees or gloves, nor do they conjecture about matter or substrata underlying the things they interact with everyday. The 'Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous' serve to support the philosophical arguments that Berkeley made in the 'Principles.' Hylas is a materialist, while Philonous represents Berkeley's

immaterialist argument. Their three dialogues are extremely entertaining and informative. They compliment the technical philosophy by providing concrete examples, which are many times missing from Berkeley's treatise. While the treatise and the dialogues can be read and understood on their own, the fullest appreciation of Berkeley comes from reading both. One limitation of Berkeley is that his 'vulgar' notions are almost too simplistic. He takes Occom's razor almost to the point of absurdity, which causes him to dispute notions like gravity, which these days one may well frown upon. Other than matters of advanced mathematical or scientific complexity, however, Berkeley's immaterialism seems, on the surface, to make great sense. Another interesting facet of these two works is their religious component. An Anglican bishop, Berkeley makes use of his belief in God both to support his arguments, and uses immaterialist arguments to simply (far more simply than Descartes) prove the existence of God. Not quite an enthralling read, but, who reads philosophy to be enthralled? The arguments are interesting, the arguments well-supported, and possible objections deftly handled.

On paper, this book should be a zero star for someone like me. As people know, I'm a militant atheist, materialist, Marxist, and I wear my politics and philosophy on my sleeve - sometimes even on other peoples' sleeves. And Berkeley is basically the stark opposite of me: a Christian, immaterialists, who undoubtedly held conservative views. Nonetheless, Berkeley was unequivocally a philosophical gangster in the streets, and a freak in the bed. Seriously though, Berkeley gives every materialist, in his time, hitherto, a run for their money. As the introduction essays remarks, Lenin, and Engels, recognized Berkeley's philosophy was not easy to transcend. And anyone who has read Engels's attempt to transcend it (I have not read Lenin's), knows he failed. According to my friend, Lenin failed too. For Berkeley only two things exist, minds/spirits, and ideas. Well God too, but his argument in favor of God's existence ultimately boils down to: atheist are repugnant, hallelujah. Despite the extreme advances made in the cognitive sciences, and philosophy overall, returning to the empiricist tradition is always a treat. The writing is clear, the philosophy is simple, and their epistemological system is completely summarizable. Berkeley is no exception. He sets out to rid the world of abstractions, and abstract ideas, especially Platonic forms. Moreover, he wants to make necessary advancements upon Locke's philosophy of primary qualities (i.e., substance, extension, etc), and secondary qualities. Locke believed when we perceived an object, we perceived secondary qualities, that is qualities that only exist for our mind, such as colors, sounds, tasted, etc.; and primary qualities, which existed independent of observation (e.g., extension, substance). Thus, a table tastes oaky to the human, but delicious to the termite. But to both creatures, the table is

extended, and contains substance (the metaphysical glue holding the table together), or matter for the materialist. Berkeley points out that for an empiricist this is a complete contradiction. The empiricist never observes primary qualities, and it is impossible for these qualities to exist outside perception, because how could someone perceive of something existing outside perception? This is a complete contradiction. If things only exist when they're being perceived, we are left flummoxed. Why is it that things always seem to be where we left them, and that there is consistency and order in the universe? Berkeley believes that there are natural laws, laws that unlike our perception have a will or volition of their own. Moreover, these objects remain consistent because there is one all eternal perceiver: GOD. In the first essay there is no serious argument for why God exists; only that atheists are repugnant beings, worthy of contempt. But isn't Berkeley's philosophy all the more fun when a God doesn't exist? I mean really, the fact that things don't exist when I don't perceive them, and I bring things into existence by viewing them, is substantially more interesting. Moreover, despite the fact that Berkeley says we perceive God in his work, he is essentially using God as the primary quality he rejects. Overall, great book.

The main text of any edition of *Principles/Three Dialogues* will be virtually the same, but this one is especially good for its superb introduction, by Roger Woolhouse. I can't imagine that there is anywhere a better short introduction to Berkeley's thought, the issues that motivated his work, and where he fits into the history of philosophy both before and after his time. Berkeley really was a radical thinker, following the premises of others, like Descartes and Locke, to their logical, and deeply troubling, implications. He was out to defeat skepticism, which he saw as corrosive of religion, yet ended up a primary representative of the skeptical view. As Woolhouse points out, modern phenomenism can find roots in Berkeley, and perhaps even the logical empiricism of the Vienna Circle. If someone were just starting out reading Western philosophy and wondered where to begin, I would recommend Berkeley as the best place to start.

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